



# Ancient Near Eastern Art

**G**ROWING AND STORING CROPS AND RAISING ANIMALS FOR FOOD, the signature accomplishments of Neolithic peoples, would gradually change the course of civilization. Not long before they ceased to follow wild animal herds and gather food to survive, people began to form permanent settlements. By the end of the Neolithic era, these settlements grew

beyond the bounds of the village into urban centers. In the fourth millennium bce, large-scale urban communities of as many as 40,000 people began to emerge in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The development of cities had tremendous ramifications for the development of human life and for works of art.

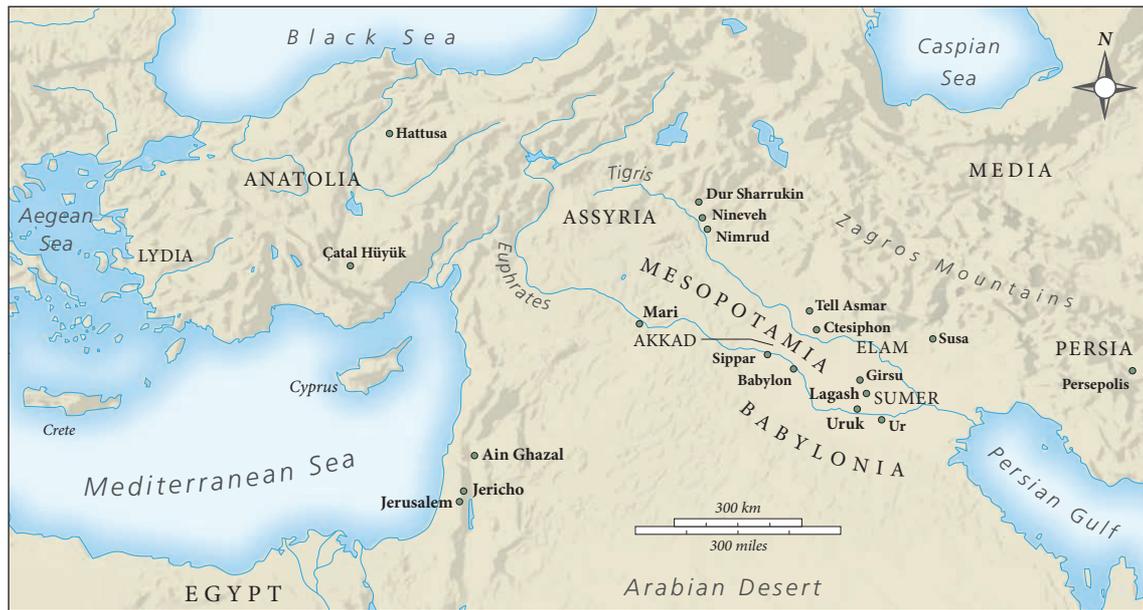
Although today the region of Mesopotamia is largely an arid plain, written, archaeological, and artistic evidence indicates that at the dawn of civilization lush vegetation covered it. By mastering irrigation techniques, populations there exploited the rivers and their tributaries to enrich the fertile soil even further. New technologies and inventions, including the wheel and the plow, and the casting of tools in copper and bronze, increased food production and facilitated trade. As communities flourished, they grew into city-states with distinct patterns of social organization to address the problems of urban life. Specialization of labor and trade, mechanisms for the resolution of disputes, and construction of defensible walls all required a central authority and government.

It was probably the efficient administration that developed in response to these needs that generated what may have been the

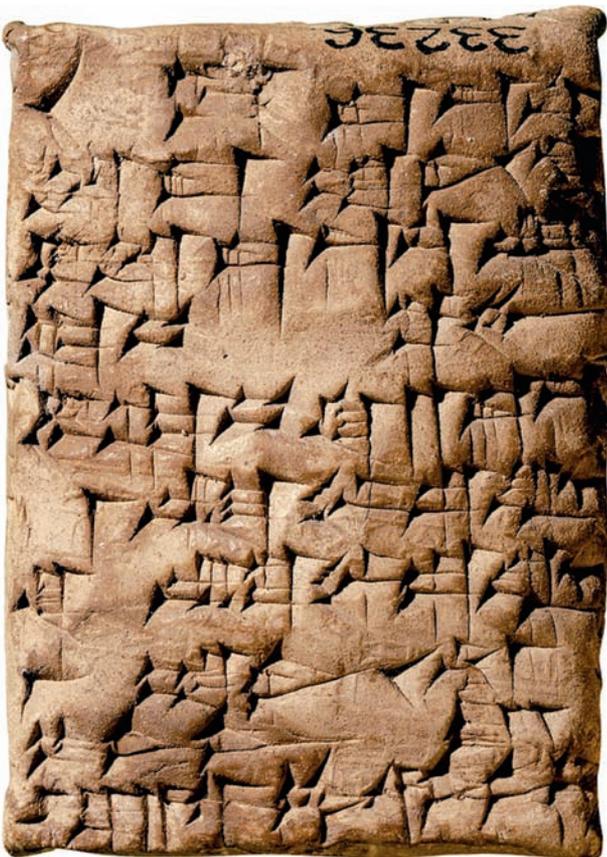
earliest writing system, beginning around 3400–3200 BCE, consisting of pictograms pressed into clay with a stylus to create inventories. By around 2900 BCE, the Mesopotamians had refined the pictograms into a series of wedge-shaped signs known as **cuneiform** (from *cuneus*, Latin for “wedge”). They used this system for administrative accounts and the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the late third millennium BCE. Cuneiform writing continued through much of the ancient era in the Near East and formed a cultural link between diverse groups who established power in the region. With the invention of writing, we enter the realm of history.

The geography of Mesopotamia had other profound effects on developing civilizations. Unlike the narrow, fertile strip of the Nile Valley in Egypt, protected by deserts on either side, where urban communities now also began to thrive, Mesopotamia is a wide, shallow trough, crisscrossed by the two rivers and their tributaries and with few natural defenses. People wanting to exploit its fertile soil constantly traversed the region, entering easily from any direction. Indeed, the history of the ancient Near East is a multicultural one; city-states were constantly at war with one another and only sometimes united under a single ruler. Still, Mesopotamian visual culture retains a surprisingly constant character. Two dominant themes emerge: Art enabled and reflected political power; and Mesopotamians used visual narrative, exploring strategies for telling stories through art.

Detail of figure 2.33, *Peroz I (457–483) or Kavad I hunting rams*.



Map 2.1 The Ancient Near East



2.1 Babylonian deed of sale. ca. 1750 BCE. This deed graphically shows the impressions made by the stylus in the soft clay. Department of Western Asiatic Antiques, No. 33236. The British Museum, London

## SUMERIAN ART

The first major civilization in Mesopotamia was in the southern region of Sumer, near the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where several city-states flourished from before 4000 BCE (map 2.1) until about 2340 BCE. Who the Sumerians were is not clear; often scholars can establish linkages between peoples through common linguistic traditions, but Sumerian is not related to any other known tongue. Archaeological excavations since the middle of the nineteenth century have unearthed many clay tablets with cuneiform writing including inventories and lists of kings, as well as poetry (fig. 2.1). Many of the earliest excavations concentrated on Sumerian cities mentioned in the Bible, such as Ur (the birthplace of Abraham) and Uruk (the biblical Erech). Along with architecture and writing, works of art in the form of sculpture, relief, and pottery inform us about Sumerian society.

For Sumerians, life itself depended on appeasing the gods, who controlled natural forces and phenomena such as weather and water, the fertility of the land, and the movement of heavenly bodies. Each city had a patron deity, to whom residents owed both devotion and sustenance. The god's earthly steward was the city's ruler, who directed an extensive administrative staff based in the temple. As the produce of the city's land belonged to the god, the temple staff took charge of supplying farmers with seed, work animals, and tools. They built irrigation systems, and stored and distributed the harvest. Centralized food production meant that much of the population could specialize in other trades. In turn, they donated a portion of the fruits of their labor to the temple. This system is known as theocratic socialism.

## Mud Brick

Mud brick was made primarily from local clay. Raw clay absorbs water, and then cracks after drying. As a binding agent and to provide elasticity and prevent cracking, Sumerian builders would add vegetable matter, such as straw, to the clay. By forcing the mud mixture into wooden frames, the brick makers obtained uniformly rectangular bricks. They then knocked the molded bricks out of the frames and placed them in the sun to bake. To erect walls, they joined the bricks together with wet clay. One disadvantage of mud brick is that it is not durable. The Sumerians would therefore seal important exterior walls with bitumen, a tarlike substance, or they would use glazed bricks. Sometimes they covered interior walls with plaster.

Mud brick is not a material that readily excites the imagination today (in the way that, for instance, marble does), and because it is so highly perishable, it has rarely survived from ancient times to indicate how Sumerian temples might once have looked. However, more recent examples of mud-brick architecture like the kasbahs (citadels) south of Morocco's Atlas mountains, at Aït Ben Haddou and elsewhere, reveal the extraordinary potential of the material. There, the easy pliability of mud brick allows for a dramatic decorative effect that is at once man-made and in total harmony with the natural colors of the earth. Notice, too, the geometric designs echoed in the woodwork of doorways and windows. First constructed in the sixteenth century CE, these buildings undergo constant maintenance (recently funded by UNESCO) to undo the weather's frequent damage. Naturally, Sumerian temples may have looked quite different, but the kasbahs serve as a useful reminder that mud-brick construction can produce magnificent results.



Mud-brick kasbahs at Aït Ben Haddou, Morocco



Mud bricks at Aït Ben Haddou, Morocco

### Temple Architecture: Linking Heaven and Earth

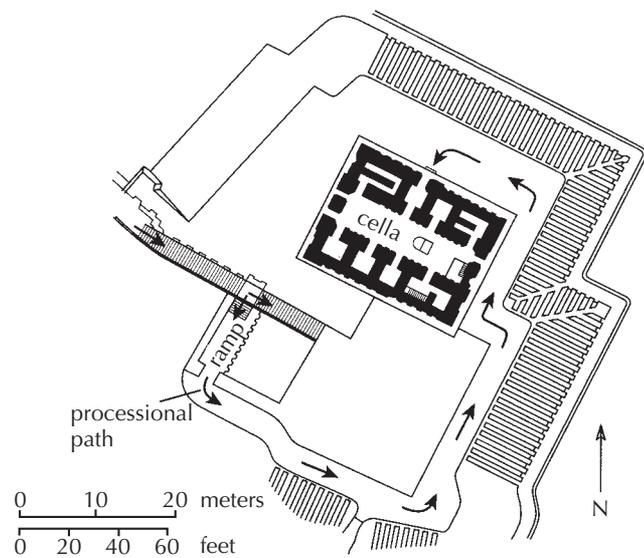
The temple was the city's architectural focus. Good stone being scarce, Sumerians built predominantly with mud brick covered with plaster. (See *Materials and Techniques*, above).

Scholars distinguish two different types of Sumerian temple. "Low" temples sat at ground level. Usually their four corners were oriented to the cardinal points of the compass. The temple was tripartite: Rooms serving as offices, priests' quarters, and storage areas lined a rectangular main room, or **cella**, on its two long sides. The essential characteristics of "high" temples were similar, except that a platform raised the building above ground level; these platforms were gradually transformed into squat, stepped pyramids known as **ziggurats**. The names of some ziggurats—such as Etemenanki at Babylon ("House temple, bond between heaven and earth")—suggest that they may have been links or portals to the heavens, where priest and god could commune.

At approximately 40 to 50 feet high (at Warka and Ur), ziggurats functioned analogously as mountains, which held a sacred status for Sumerians. A source of water flowing to the valleys, mountains were also a place of refuge during floods, and symbolized the Earth's generative power. Indeed, Sumerians knew their mother goddess as the Lady of the Mountain. Significantly, raised platforms made temples more visible. Mesopotamian texts indicate that the act of seeing was paramount: In seeing an object and finding it pleasing, a god might act favorably toward those who made it. The desired response of a human audience, in turn, was wonder. Finally, there was probably a political dimension to the high platform: It emphasized and maintained the priests' status by visually expressing their separation from the rest of the community.

Around 3500 BCE, the city of Uruk (present-day Warka and the biblical Erech) emerged as a center of Sumerian culture, flourishing from trade in its agricultural surplus. One of its temples, the White Temple, named for its whitewashed brick surfaces, probably honored the sky-god Anu, chief of the Sumerian gods

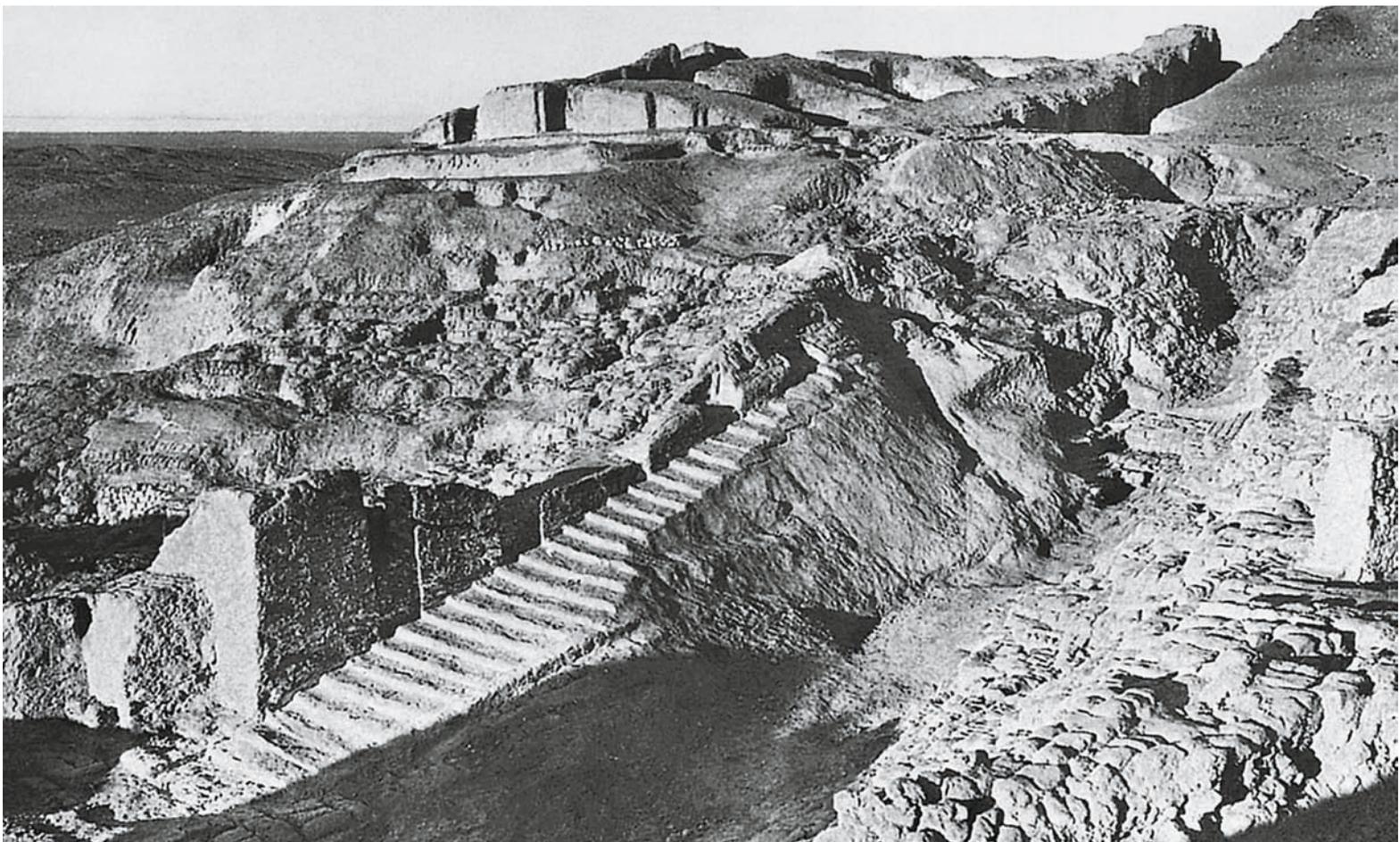
(fig. 2.2). It sits on a 40-foot mound constructed by filling in the ruins of older temples with brickwork, which suggests that the site itself was sacred (fig. 2.3). Recessed brickwork articulated its



2.2 Plan of the White Temple on its ziggurat (after H. Frankfort)

sloped sides. A system of stairs and ramps led counterclockwise around the mound, culminating at an entrance in the temple's long north side. This indirect approach is characteristic of Mesopotamian temple architecture (in contrast to the direct axial approach favored in Egypt), and the winding ascent mirrored a visitor's metaphorical ascent into a divine realm. From three sides, members of the community could also witness the ceremonial ascent of priests and leaders who had exclusive access to the temple. Enough survives of the superstructure to indicate that thick buttressed walls surrounded a central, rectangular hall (cella) housing a stepped altar. Along the long sides of the cella were smaller rooms, creating an overall tripartite layout typical of the earliest temples.

Uruk was the home of the legendary king Gilgamesh, hero of an epic poem that describes his adventures. Gilgamesh purportedly carved his tale on a stone marker—which suggests the importance of narrative in Sumerian culture. The epic credits Gilgamesh with building the city walls of Uruk and the Eanna, a temple of Inanna (goddess of love and war) or Ishtar. The poem describes the temple's gleaming walls, built with "kiln-fired brick." In the Eanna precinct, archaeologists found several temples whose walls were decorated with colored stone or painted clay cones set into plaster to form mosaic patterns. (See *Primary Source*, page 25.)



2.3 Remains of the White Temple on its ziggurat. ca. 3500–3000 BCE. Uruk (Warka), Iraq

## The Gilgamesh Epic

One of the earliest written epics, the *Gilgamesh epic* survives on cuneiform tablets. Although the earliest texts to survive come from Akkadian tablets written after 2150 BCE, the text itself dates to the Sumerian era, about 2800 BCE. The surviving parts of the epic recount the tale of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, who first battles, then befriends the wild man Enkidu. When his friend dies, Gilgamesh goes in search of a way to defeat death, but eventually returns to Uruk, accepting his own mortality. This excerpt from the beginning of the poem describes (with gaps from the sources) Gilgamesh's accomplishments as king.

Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of all.  
He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,  
he brought information of (the time) before the Flood.  
He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion,  
but then was brought to peace.  
He carved on a stone stela all of his toils,  
and built the wall of Uruk-Haven,  
the wall of the sacred Eanna Temple, the holy sanctuary.

Look at its wall which gleams like copper(?),  
inspect its inner wall, the likes of which no one can equal!  
Take hold of the threshold stone—it dates from ancient times!  
Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar,  
such as no later king or man ever equaled!  
Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,  
examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly.  
Is not (even the core of) the brick structure made of kiln-fired  
brick,  
and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?  
One square mile is devoted to city, one to palm gardens, one to  
lowlands, the open area(?) of the Ishtar Temple,  
three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it (the wall) encloses.  
Find the copper tablet box,  
open the ... of its lock of bronze,  
undo the fastening of its secret opening.  
Take out and read the lapis lazuli tablet  
how Gilgamesh went through every hardship.

Source: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. Maureen Gallery Kovacs (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989)

## Sculpture and Inlay

The cella of Uruk's White Temple would once have contained a cult statue, which is now lost. Yet a female head dating to about 3100 BCE, found in the Eanna sanctuary of Inanna at Uruk, may indicate what a cult statue looked like (fig. 2.4). The sculptor carved the face of white limestone, and added details in precious

materials: a wig, perhaps of gold or copper, secured by the ridge running down the center of the head, and eyes and eyebrows of colored materials. Despite the absence of these features, the sculpture has not lost its power to impress: The abstraction of its large eyes and dramatic brow contrasts forcefully with the delicate modeling of the cheeks. Flat on the back, the head was once attached to a body, presumably made of wood, and the full figure must have stood near life-size.



2.4 *Female Head*, from Uruk (Warka), Iraq, ca. 3200–3000 BCE. Limestone, height 8" (20.3 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad

**TELL ASMAR** A group of sculptures excavated in the 1930s at a temple at Tell Asmar illustrates a type of limestone, alabaster, and gypsum figures that artists began to make about 500 years after the carving of the Uruk head (fig. 2.5). Ranging in height from several inches to 2½ feet, these figures probably originally stood in the temple's cella. They were purposely buried near the altar along with other objects, perhaps when the temple was rebuilt or redecorated. All but one of the figures in this group stand in a static pose, with hands clasped between chest and waist level. The style is decidedly abstract: On most of the standing male figures, horizontal or zigzag ridges define long hair and a full beard; the arms hang from wide shoulders; hands are clasped around a cup; narrow chests widen to broad waists; and the legs are cylindrical. The male figures wear fringed skirts hanging from a belt in a stiff cone shape, while the women have full-length drapery. Most scholars identify the two larger figures as cult statues of Abu, god of vegetation, and his consort. The others figures probably represent priests, since the fringed skirt is the dress of the priesthood. Some statues of this kind from elsewhere are inscribed with the name of the god and of the worshiper who dedicated the statue.

The poses and the costumes represent conventions of Sumerian art that later Mesopotamians adopted. Most distinctive are the faces, dominated by wide, almost round eyes. Dark inlays



2.5 Statues from the Abu Temple, Tell Asmar, Iraq. ca. 2700–2500 BCE. Limestone, alabaster, and gypsum, height of tallest figure approx. 30" (76.3 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad, and The Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago

of lapis lazuli and shells set in bitumen accentuate the eyes, as do powerful eyebrows that meet over the bridge of the nose. As noted above, seeing was a major channel of communication with gods, and the sculptures may have been responding to the god's awe-inspiring nature with eyes wide open in admiration. Enlarged eyes were also a conventional means of warding off evil in Mesopotamia, known today as an **apotropaic device**. Several of these statues were in the Iraq Museum, and were looted during recent unrest in Baghdad (see *The Art Historian's Lens*, page 29).

**THE ROYAL CEMETERY AT UR** The Sumerian city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia first attracted archaeologists because of its biblical associations. Its extensive cemetery was well preserved under the walls of King Nebuchadnezzar II's later city, and Leonard Woolley discovered a wide variety of Sumerian objects in excavations there during the 1920s. The cemetery contained some 1,840 burials dating between 2600 and 2000 BCE. Some were humble, but others were substantial subterranean structures and contained magnificent offerings, earning them the designation

2.6 *Goat in Thicket (Ram and Tree)*, one of the pair from the Great Death Pit in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, Muqaiyir, Iraq. ca. 2600 BCE. Wood, gold, lapis lazuli, height 20" (50.8 cm). University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia





2.7 *Royal Standard of Ur*, front and back sides. ca. 2600 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, limestone, and lapis lazuli, height 8" (20.3 cm). The British Museum, London

of “royal graves,” even though it remains uncertain whether the deceased were royalty, priests, or members of another elite. So-called Death Pits accompanied the wealthiest burials. Foremost among them was the Great Death Pit, in which 74 soldiers, attendants, and musicians were interred, apparently drugged before lying down in the grave as human sacrifices. Even in death, the elite maintained the visible trappings of power and required the services of their retainers. These finds suggest that Sumerians may have believed in an afterlife.

Among the many kinds of grave goods Woolley found in the Royal Cemetery were weapons, jewelry, and vessels. Many of the objects display the great skill of Sumerian artists in representing nature. A pair of wild goats rearing up on their hind legs against a flowering tree probably functioned as stands for offerings to a deity. Gold leaf is the dominant material, used for the goat’s head, legs, and genitals, as well as for the tree and a cylindrical support strut rising from the goat’s back in the one shown here (fig. 2.6). Lapis lazuli on the horns and neck fleece complements the shell

fragments decorating the body fleece and the ears of copper. The base is an intricately crafted pattern of red limestone, shell, and lapis lazuli. Images on cylinder seals show that a bowl or saucer would have been balanced on the horns and the support cylinder. The combination of the goat (sacred to the god Tammuz) and the carefully arranged flowers (rosettes sacred to Inanna) suggests that the sculpture reflects Sumerian concerns about fertility, both of plants and animals.

### *Visual Narratives*

Two objects from the Royal Cemetery at Ur offer glimpses of the development of visual narrative in Mesopotamia. The *Royal Standard of Ur*, of about 2600 BCE, consists of four panels of red limestone, shell, and lapis lazuli inlay set in bitumen, originally attached to a wooden framework (fig. 2.7). The damaged side panels depicted animal scenes, while the two larger sections show a military victory and a celebration or ritual feast, each unfolding in



2.8 *Bull Lyre*, from the tomb of Queen Pu-abi, Ur (Muqaiyir), Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Wood with gold, lapis lazuli, bitumen, and shell, reassembled in modern wood support. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

three superposed **registers**, or horizontal bands. Reading from the bottom, the “war” panel shows charioteers advancing from the left, pulled by onagers (wild asses), and riding over enemy bodies. In the middle register, infantry soldiers do battle and escort prisoners of war, stripped of armor and clothing. At the top, soldiers present the prisoners to a central figure, whose importance the artist signals through his position and through his larger size, a device known as **hieratic scale**; his head even breaks through the register’s frame to emphasize his importance. In the “banquet” panel, figures burdened with booty accompany onagers and animals for a feast. Their dress identifies them as travelers from northern Sumer and probably Kish, the region later known as Akkad. In the top register, the banquet is already underway. Seated figures raise their cups to the sound of music from a nearby harpist and singer; a larger figure toward the left of the scene is presumably a leader or king, perhaps the same figure as on the “war” side. Together, the panels represent the dual aspects of kingship: the king as warrior, and the king as priest and mediator with the gods. Despite the action in the scenes, the images have a static quality, which the figures’ isolation emphasizes (a staccato treatment): Their descriptive forms (half frontal, half



2.9 Inlay panel from the soundbox of lyre, from Ur (Muqaiyir), Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Shell and bitumen,  $12\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ " (31.1 × 11.3 cm). University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

profile) rarely overlap. This, and the contrasting colored materials, give the narrative an easy legibility, even from a distance.

On excavating the *Royal Standard of Ur*, Woolley envisioned it held aloft on a pole as a military standard, and named it accordingly. In fact, it is unclear how the Sumerians used the object. It may have been the sounding-box for a stringed instrument, an object that was commonly deposited in burials. In one of the cemetery’s most lavish graves, the grave of “Queen” Pu-abi, Woolley discovered a lyre decorated with a bull’s head of gold gilt and lapis lazuli, dating to ca. 2600 BCE (fig. 2.8), comparable to the lyre on the *Standard*. On its sounding-box, a panel of shell inlaid in bitumen depicts a male figure in a heraldic composition, embracing two human-faced bulls and facing a viewer with a frontal glare (fig. 2.9). In the lower registers, animals perform human tasks such as carrying foodstuffs and playing music. These scenes may have evoked a myth or fable that contemporary viewers knew either in written or in oral form, and that was perhaps associated with a funerary context. In some cultures, fantastic hybrid creatures, such as the bulls or the man with a braided, snakelike body in the bottom scene, served an apotropaic function.

## Losses Through Looting

The archaeologist's greatest nemesis is the looter, who pillages ancient sites to supply the world's second largest illicit business: the illegal trade in antiquities. The problem is worldwide, but recent publicity has focused on Iraq, where thousands of archaeological sites still await proper excavation. Looters are often local people, living in impoverished conditions but supported and organized by more powerful agents; just as frequently, looters work in organized teams, arriving on site with jackhammers and bulldozers, wielding weapons to overcome whatever meager security there might be. Often employing the most sophisticated tools, such as remote-sensing and satellite photography, they move quickly and unscrupulously through a site, careless of what they destroy in their search for treasure. Loot changes hands quickly as it crosses national borders, fetching vast sums on the market. Little or none of this fortune returns to local hands.

Even more is at stake in these transactions than the loss of a nation's heritage. Only a fraction of the value of an archaeological find resides in the object itself. Much more significant is what its findspot—the place where it was found—can tell archaeologists, who use the information to construct a history of the past. An object's location within a city or building reveals how it was used. A figurine, for instance, could be a fertility object, doll, or cult image, depending on its physical context. The exact level, or stratum, at which archaeologists find an object discloses when it was in use. On some sites, stratigraphy (reading levels/strata) yields very precise dates. If an

object comes to light far from its place of manufacture, its findspot can even document interactions between cultures.

A 1970 UNESCO Convention requires member states to prohibit the importation of stolen antiquities from other member states, and offers help in protecting cultural property that is in jeopardy of pillage. To date, 115 countries are party to the convention.



Looters at the archaeological site of Isin, southern Iraq, January 2004

## Cylinder Seals

The Mesopotamians also produced vast numbers of cylinder seals, which the administration used to seal jars and secure storerooms. The seals were cylindrical objects usually made of stone, with a hole running through the center from end to end. A sculptor carved a design into the curved surface of the seal, so that when the owner impressed it in soft clay, a raised, reverse image would unfold, repeated as the cylinder rolled along. Great quantities of seals and sealings (seal impressions) have survived. Many are of modest quality, reflecting their primarily administrative purpose,

but the finest examples display a wealth of detail and a high level of sculptural expertise. With subjects ranging from divine and royal scenes to monumental architecture, animals, and daily activities, the seals provide critical information about Mesopotamian existence and values. The sealing illustrated here appears to show the feeding of the temple herd, which provided a significant portion of the temple's wealth (fig. 2.10). The human figure's distinctive costume and hat may identify him as a priest-king; some have seen the large vessels as a reference to sacred offerings, and excavators found one such vase, measuring nearly 3 feet in height, in the Eanna precinct at Uruk, dating to ca. 3200 BCE.



2.10 *Priest-King Feeding Sacred Sheep*, from vicinity of Uruk (Warka), Iraq, ca. 3300 BCE. Cylinder sealing, height 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (5.4 cm), diameter 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (4.5 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Vorderasiatisches Museum

## ART OF AKKAD

Around 2350 BCE, Sumerian city-states began to fight over access to water and fertile land. Gradually, their social organization was transformed as local “stewards of the god” positioned themselves as ruling kings. The more ambitious tried to enlarge their domains through conquest. Semitic-speaking people (those who used languages in the same family as Hebrew and Arabic) from the northern region gradually assumed positions of power in the south. Although they adopted many features of Sumerian civilization, they were less bound to the tradition of the city-state. Sargon (meaning “true king”) conquered Sumer, as well as northern Syria and Elam (to the northeast of Sumer) in about 2334 BCE (see map 2.1), basing himself in the city of Akkad (a site unknown today, but probably to the northwest of Sumer, near present-day Baghdad). Akkadian then became the language of authority in Mesopotamia. Sargon’s ambitions were both imperial



2.11 *Head of an Akkadian Ruler*, from Nineveh (Kuyunjik), Iraq, ca. 2250–2200 BCE. Copper, height 12" (30.7 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad

and dynastic. He combined Sumerian and Akkadian deities in a new pantheon, hoping to break down the traditional link between city-states and their local gods, and thereby to unite the region in loyalty to his absolute rule. Under his grandson, Naram-Sin, who ruled from 2254 to 2218 BCE, the Akkadian Empire stretched from Sumer in the south to Elam in the east, and then to Syria in the west and Nineveh in the north.

### *Sculpture: Power and Narrative*

Akkadian rulers increasingly exploited the visual arts to establish and reflect their power. A magnificent copper portrait head found in a rubbish heap at Nineveh, dated to between 2250 and 2200 BCE and sometimes identified as Naram-Sin himself (fig. 2.11), derives its extraordinary power from a number of factors: The intended view of the portrait was from the front, and this **frontality** makes it appear unchanging and eternal. The abstract treatment of beard and hair (which is arranged like a Sumerian king’s) contrasts with the smooth flesh to give the head a memorable simplicity and strong symmetry, which denote control and order. The intricate, precise patterning of hair and beard testifies to the metalworker’s expertise in hollow casting (see *Materials and Techniques*, page 128). Furthermore, at a time before many people understood the science of metallurgy, the use of cast metal for a portrait demonstrated the patron’s control of a technology that most associated primarily with weaponry. In its original form, the portrait probably had eyes inlaid with precious and semiprecious materials, as other surviving figures do. The damage to the portrait was probably incurred during the Medes’ invasion of Nineveh in 612 BCE. The enemy gouged out its eyes and hacked off its ears, nose, and lower beard, as if attacking the person represented. Many cultures, even today, practice such acts of ritualized vandalism as symbolic acts of violence or protest.

The themes of power and narrative combine in a 6½-foot **stele** (upright marker stone) erected in the Akkadian city of Sippar during the rule of Naram-Sin (fig. 2.12). The stele commemorates Naram-Sin’s victory over the Lullubi, people of the Zagros mountains in eastern Mesopotamia, in relief. This time the story does not unfold in registers; instead, ranks of soldiers, in composite view, climb the wavy contours of a wooded mountain. Their ordered march contrasts with the enemy’s chaotic rout: As the victorious soldiers trample the fallen foe underfoot, the defeated beg for mercy or lie contorted in death. Above them, the king’s large scale and central position make his identity clear. He stands isolated against the background, next to a mountain peak that suggests his proximity to the divine. His horned crown, formerly an exclusive accoutrement of the gods, marks him as the first Mesopotamian king to deify himself (an act that his people did not unanimously welcome). The bold musculature of his limbs and his powerful stance cast him as a heroic figure. Solar deities shine auspiciously overhead, as if witnessing his victory.

The stele of Naram-Sin still communicated its message of power over a thousand years later. In 1157 BCE, the Elamites of southwestern Iran invaded Mesopotamia and seized it as war



2.12 Stele of Naram-Sin.  
r. 2254–2218 BCE. Height 6'6" (2 m).  
Musée du Louvre, Paris



2.13 Great Ziggurat of King Urnammu, Ur, Muqaiyir, Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE

booty. An inscription on the stele records that they then installed it in the city of Susa (see map 2.1). By capturing the defeated city's victory monument, they symbolically stole Naram-Sin's former glory and doubly defeated their foe.

## NEO-SUMERIAN REVIVAL

The rule of the Akkadian kings came to an end when a mountain people, the Gutis, gained control of the Mesopotamian Plain in about 2230 BCE. The cities of Sumer rose up in retaliation and drove them out in 2112 BCE, under the leadership of King Urnammu of Ur (the present-day city of Muqaiyir, Iraq, and the birthplace of the biblical Abraham), who united a realm that was to last 100 years. As part of his renewal project, he returned to building on a magnificent scale.

### *Architecture: The Ziggurat of Ur*

Part of Urnammu's legacy is the Great Ziggurat at Ur of about 2100 BCE, dedicated to the moon god, Nanna (Sin in Akkadian) (fig. 2.13). Its 190-by-130-foot base soared to a height of 50 feet in three stepped stages. The base consisted of solid mud brick faced with baked bricks set in bitumen, a tarry material used here as mortar. Although not structurally functional, thick **buttresses** (vertical supporting elements) articulate the walls, giving an impression of strength. Moreover, a multitude of upward lines adds a dynamic energy to the monument's appearance. Three staircases, now reconstructed, converged high up at the fortified gateway. Each consisting of 100 steps, one stood perpendicular to the temple, the other two parallel to the base wall. From the gateway, a fourth staircase, which does not survive, once rose to the temple proper. The stairways may have provided an imposing setting for ceremonial processions.

### *Sculpture: Figures of Gudea*

Contemporary with Urnammu's rule in Ur, Gudea became ruler of neighboring Lagash (in present-day Iraq), a small Sumerian city-state that had retained independence after the collapse of Akkad. Reserving the title of king for Lagash's city-god, Ningirsu, Gudea promoted the god's cult through an ambitious reconstruction of his temple. According to inscriptions, Ningirsu appeared to Gudea in a dream after the Tigris River had failed to rise and instructed him to build the temple.



2.14 Head of Gudea, from Lagash (Telloh), Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE. Diorite, height 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (23.2 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912. 26.289

## Texts on Gudea Figures from Lagash and Surrounding Areas, ca. 2100

*Gudea, the ruler of Lagash, commissioned numerous temples and many figures of himself to be placed in the temples. Many of these figures (compare figs. 2.14 and 2.15) are inscribed with cuneiform texts that provide insight into the function of each image.*

*In this excerpt, the god Ningirsu speaks to Gudea, encouraging him to rebuild his temple:*

When, O faithful shepherd Gudea,  
Thou shalt have started work for me on Eninnu, my royal abode,

I will call up in heaven a humid wind.  
It shall bring thee abundance from on high  
And the country shall spread its hands upon riches in thy  
time.  
Prosperity shall accompany the laying of the foundations of my  
house.  
All the great fields will bear for thee;  
Dykes and canals will swell for thee;  
Where the water is not wont to rise  
To high ground it will rise for thee.  
Oil will be poured abundantly in Sumer in thy time,  
Good weight of wool will be given in thy time.

Source: H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, p. 98).

Of the building itself, nothing now remains. Yet some 20 examples of distinctive statues representing Gudea survive. He had dedicated (or given as an offering) the images at the temple and in other shrines of Lagash and vicinity (figs. 2.14 and 2.15), and they served as a mark of his piety, at the same time as they also extended the Akkadian tradition of exalting the ruler's person. Carved of diorite, a dark stone that was as rare and expensive as it

was hard to work, they testify to Gudea's great wealth. Whether standing or seated in pose, the statues are remarkably consistent in appearance: Often wearing a thick woolen cap, Gudea has a long garment draped over one shoulder, and clasps his hands across his front in a pose similar to statues from Tell Asmar of 500 years earlier. Like those figures, Gudea's eyes are wide open, in awe. The highly polished surface and precise modeling allow light to play upon the features, showcasing the sculptors' skills. Rounded forms emphasize the figures' compactness, giving them an impressive monumentality.

In the life-size seated example shown in figure 2.15, Gudea holds the ground plan of Ningirsu's temple on his lap. Inscriptions carved on the statue reveal that the king had to follow the god's instructions meticulously to ensure the temple's sanctity. The inscriptions also provide Gudea's motivation for building the temple, and his personal commitment to the project: By obeying the god, he would bring fortune to his city. (See *Primary Source*, above.) Following Ningirsu's instruction, Gudea purified the city and swept away the soil on the temple's site to expose bedrock. He then laid out the temple according to the design that Ningirsu had revealed to him, and helped manufacture and carry mud bricks.



2.15 Seated statue of Gudea holding temple plan, from Girsu (Telloh), Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE. Diorite, height approx. 29" (73.7 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

## BABYLONIAN ART

The late third and early second millennia BCE were a time of turmoil and warfare in Mesopotamia. The region was then unified for over 300 years under a Babylonian dynasty. During the reign of its most famous ruler, Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE), the city of Babylon assumed the dominant role formerly played by Akkad and Ur. Combining military prowess with respect for Sumerian tradition, Hammurabi cast himself as “the favorite shepherd” of the sun-god Shamash, stating his mission “to cause justice to prevail in the land and to destroy the wicked and evil, so that the strong might not oppress the weak nor the weak the strong.” Babylon retained its role as cultural center of Sumer for more than 1,000 years after its political power had waned.

## *The Code of Hammurabi*

Posterity remembers Hammurabi best for his law code. It survives as one of the earliest written bodies of law, engraved on a black basalt stele reaching to over 7 feet in height (fig. 2.16). The text consists of 3,500 lines of Akkadian cuneiform, and begins with an account of the temples Hammurabi restored. The largest portion concerns commercial and property law, rulings on domestic issues, and questions of physical assault, detailing penalties for noncompliers (including the renowned Hebrew Bible principle of “an eye for an eye”). (See *Primary Source*, page 35.) The text concludes with a paean to Hammurabi as peacemaker.

At the top of the stele, Hammurabi appears in relief, standing with his arm raised in greeting before the enthroned sun-god Shamash. The god’s shoulders emanate sun rays, and he extends his hand, holding the rope ring and the measuring rod of kingship; this single gesture unifies both the scene’s composition and the implied purpose of the two protagonists. The image is a variant on the “introduction scene” found on cylinder seals, where a goddess leads a human individual with his hand raised in salute before a seated godlike figure, who bestows his blessing. Hammurabi appears without the benefit—or need—of a divine intercessor, implying an especially close relationship with the sun-god. Still, the smaller scale of Hammurabi compared to the seated god expresses his status as “shepherd” rather than god himself. The symmetrical composition and smooth surfaces result in a legible image of divinely ordained power that is fully in line with Mesopotamian traditions. Like the stele of Naram-Sin, Hammurabi’s stele later became war booty, when the Elamites carried it off to Susa.

## ASSYRIAN ART

Babylon fell around 1595 BCE to the Hittites, who had established themselves in Anatolia (present-day Turkey). When they departed, they left a weakened Babylonian state vulnerable to other invaders: the Kassites from the northwest and the Elamites from the east. Although a second Babylonian dynasty rose to great heights under Nebuchadnezzar I of Isin (r. 1125–1104 BCE), the Assyrians more or less controlled southern Mesopotamia by the end of the millennium. Their home was the city-state of Assur, sited on the upper course of the Tigris and named for the god Ashur.

### *Art of Empire: Expressing Royal Power*

Under a series of able rulers, beginning with Ashur-uballit (r. 1363–1328? BCE), the Assyrian realm expanded. At its height, in the seventh century BCE, the empire stretched from the Sinai peninsula to Armenia; the Assyrians even invaded Egypt successfully in about 670 BCE (see map 2.1). They drew heavily on the artistic achievements of the Sumerians and Babylonians, but adapted them to their own purpose. The Assyrians’ was clearly an



2.16 Upper part of stele inscribed with the Law Code of Hammurabi. ca. 1760 BCE. Diorite, height of stele approx. 7' (2.1 m); height of relief 28" (71 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

art of empire: propagandistic and public, designed to proclaim and sustain the supremacy of Assyrian civilization, particularly through representations of military power. The Assyrians continued to build temples and ziggurats based on Sumerian models, but their architectural focus shifted to constructing royal palaces. These grew to unprecedented size and magnificence, blatantly expressing royal presence and domination.

## The Code of Hammurabi

Inscribed on the stele of Hammurabi in figure 2.16, the Code of Laws compiled by King Hammurabi offers a glimpse of the lives and values of Babylonians in the second millennium BCE.

### Prologue

When Anu the Sublime, King of the Anunaki, and Bel, the lord of Heaven and earth, who decreed the fate of the land, assigned to Marduk, the over-ruling son of Ea, God of righteousness, dominion over earthly man, and made him great among the Igigi, they called Babylon by his illustrious name, made it great on earth, and founded an everlasting kingdom in it, whose foundations are laid so solidly as those of heaven and earth; then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind. ...

### The Code of Laws [excerpts]

If any one bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser. ...

If any one bring an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death. ...

If any one steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death. ...

If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold; if they

belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death ...

If any one break a hole into a house (break in to steal), he shall be put to death before that hole and be buried ...

If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break occurred be sold for money, and the money shall replace the corn which he has caused to be ruined. ...

If any one be on a journey and entrust silver, gold, precious stones, or any movable property to another, and wish to recover it from him; if the latter do not bring all of the property to the appointed place, but appropriate it to his own use, then shall this man, who did not bring the property to hand it over, be convicted, and he shall pay fivefold for all that had been entrusted to him. ...

If a man wish to separate from a woman who has borne him children, or from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. When she has brought up her children, a portion of all that is given to the children, equal as that of one son, shall be given to her. She may then marry the man of her heart. ...

If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

If he break another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.

If a builder build a house for some one, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built fall in and kill its owner, then that builder shall be put to death.

If it kill the son of the owner, the son of that builder shall be put to death.

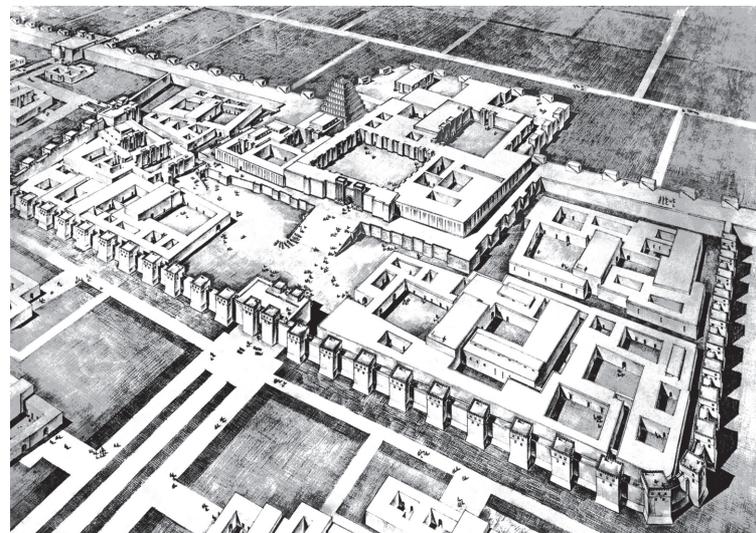
If it kill a slave of the owner, then he shall pay slave for slave to the owner of the house. ...

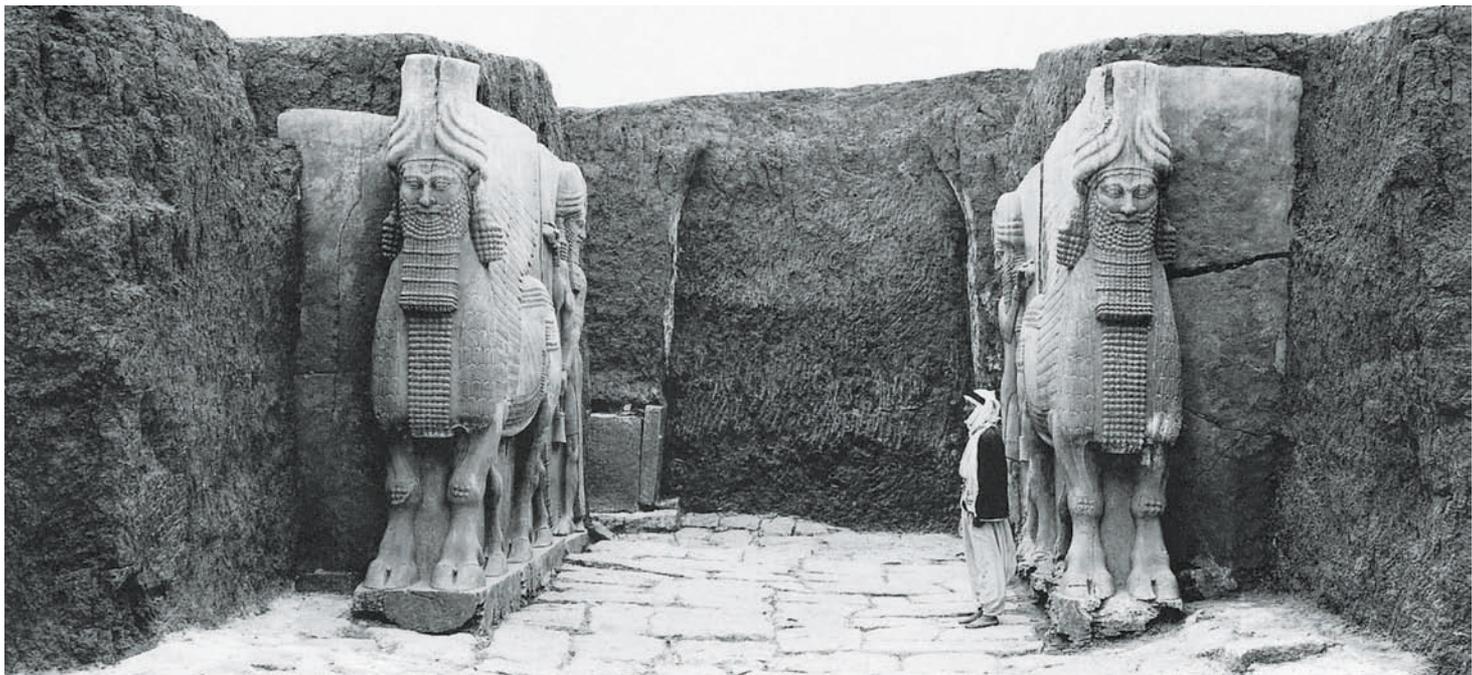
Source: *World Civilizations Online Classroom* "The Code of Hammurabi" tr. L. W. King (1910). Edited by Richard Hooker [www.wsu.edu:8080/2dee](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/2dee). © 1996.

Note: The Epilogue of *The Code of Hammurabi* appears at [www.myartslab.com](http://www.myartslab.com).

The proclamation of Assyrian royal power began well outside the palace, as is clear in the plan for the city of Dur Sharrukin (present-day Khorsabad, Iraq), where Sargon II (r. 721–705 BCE) had his royal residence (fig. 2.17). Though much of the city remains unexcavated, archaeologists estimate that it covered an area of nearly a square mile, enclosed within an imposing mud-brick fortification wall. To reach the palace, a visitor had to cross the city, traversing open plazas and climbing broad ramps. On the northwest side, a walled and turreted citadel closed the ziggurat and the palace off from the rest of the town and emphasized their dominant presence. Enclosing temple and palace, the citadel revealed the privileged relationship between the king and the gods. Both structures stood atop a mound 50 feet high, which

2.17 Reconstruction drawing of the citadel of Sargon II, Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad), Iraq, ca. 721–705 BCE (after Charles Altman)



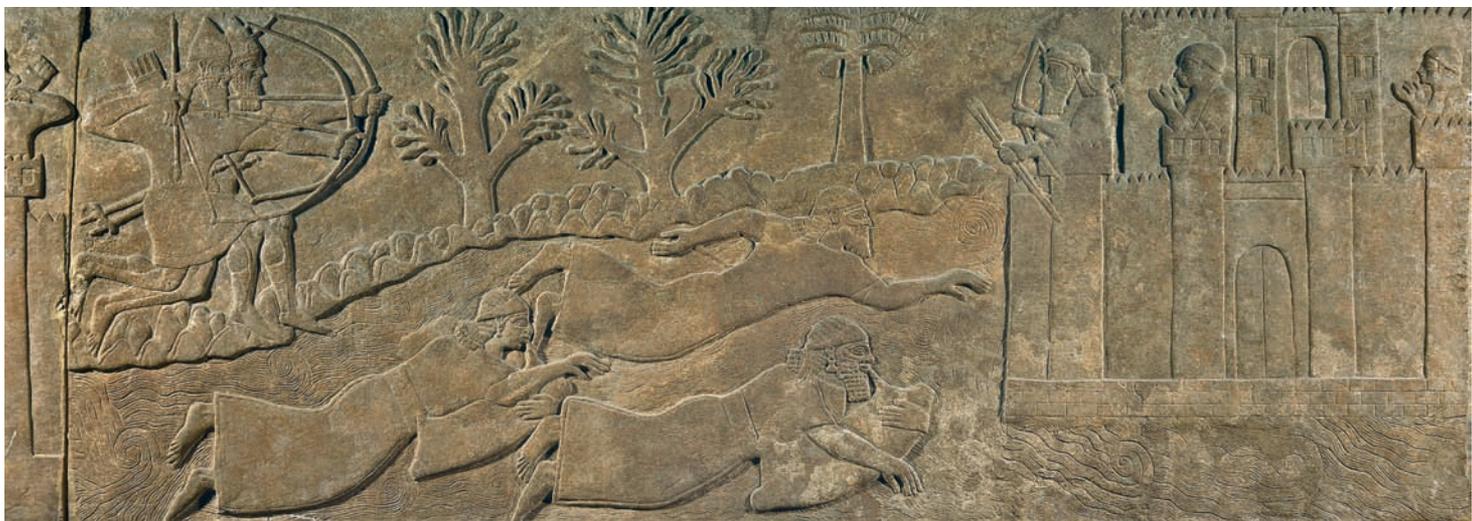


2.18 Gate of the citadel of Sargon II, Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad), Iraq (photo taken during excavation). 742–706 BCE

raised them above the flood plain and expressed the king's elevated status above the rest of society. The ziggurat had at least four stages, each about 18 feet high and of a different color, and a spiral ramp wound around it to the top.

The palace complex comprised about 30 courtyards and 200 rooms, and monumental imagery complemented this impressive scale. At the gateways stood huge, awe-inspiring guardian figures known as **lamassu**, in the shape of winged, human-headed bulls (fig. 2.18). The illustration here shows the lamassu of Khorsabad during excavation in the 1840s; masons subsequently sawed up one of the pair for transportation to the Louvre in Paris. The massive creatures are almost in the round (fully three-dimensional

and separate from the background). Carved out of the limestone of the palace wall, they are one with the building. Yet the addition of a fifth leg, visible from the side, reveals that the sculptor conceived of them as deep relief sculptures on two sides of the stone block, so that the figures are legible both frontally and in profile. From the front, the lamassu appear stationary, yet the additional leg sets them in motion when seen from the side. With their tall, horned headdresses and deep-set eyes, and the powerful muscularity of their legs and bodies, all set off by delicate patterning of the beard and feathers, they towered over any approaching visitor, embodying the king's fearful authority. The Assyrians may have believed the hybrid creatures had the power to ward off evil



2.19 *Fugitives Crossing River*, from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud (Calah), Iraq. ca. 883–859 BCE. Alabaster, height approx. 39" (98 cm). The British Museum, London



2.20 Lion Hunt relief, from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh. ca. 645 BCE. The British Museum, London

spirits. Contemporary texts indicate that sculptors also cast lamassu in bronze, but because these images were later melted down, none now survives.

Once inside a royal palace, a visitor would confront another distinctive feature of Assyrian architecture: upright gypsum slabs called **orthostats**, with which builders lined the lower walls. Structurally, the slabs protected the mud brick from moisture and wear, but they served a communicative purpose as well. On their surfaces, narrative images in low relief, painted in places for emphasis, glorified the king with detailed depictions of lion hunts and military conquests (with inscriptions giving supplementary information). In these reliefs, the Assyrian forces march indefatigably onward, meeting the enemy at the empire's frontiers, destroying his strongholds, and carrying away booty and prisoners of war. Actions take place in a continuous band, propelling a viewer from scene to scene, and repetition of key images creates the impression of an inevitable Assyrian triumph. This detail (fig. 2.19), from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BCE) at Nimrud (ancient Kalah, biblical Calah, Iraq), shows the enemy fleeing an advance party by swimming across a river on inflatable animal skins. From their fortified city, an archer—possibly the king—and two women look on with hands raised. The artist intersperses landscape elements with humans, yet shows no concern to capture relative scale, or to depict all elements from a single viewpoint. This suggests that the primary purpose of the scenes was to recount specific enemy conquests in descriptive detail; depicting them in a naturalistic way was not critical.

As in Egypt (discussed in Chapter 3), royal lion hunts were staged events that took place in palace grounds. Royal attendants released animals from cages into a square formed by troops with shields. Earlier Mesopotamian rulers hunted lions to protect their subjects, but by the time of the Assyrians, the activity had become

more symbolic, ritually showcasing the king's strength and serving as a metaphor for military prowess. On a section of Assyrian relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (r. 668–627 BCE) at Nineveh, dating to roughly 645 BCE (fig. 2.20), the king races forward in his chariot with bow drawn, leaving wounded and dead lions in his wake. A wounded lion leaps at the chariot as attendants plunge spears into its chest. Its body is hurled flat out in a clean diagonal line, its claws spread and mouth open in what appears to be pain combined with desperate ferocity. To ennoble the victims of the hunt, the sculptor contrasted the limp, contorted bodies of the slain animals with the taut leaping lion and the powerful energy of the king's party. Yet we should not conclude that the artist necessarily hoped to evoke sympathy for the creatures, or to comment on the cruelty of a staged hunt; it is more likely that by ennobling the lions the sculptor intended to glorify their vanquisher, the king, even more intensely.

## LATE BABYLONIAN ART

Perpetually under threat, the Assyrian Empire came to an end in 612 BCE, when Nineveh fell to the Medes (an Indo-European-speaking people from western Iran) and the resurgent Babylonians. Under the Chaldean dynasty, the ancient city of Babylon had a final brief flowering between 612 and 539 BCE, before the Persians conquered it. The best known of these Late Babylonian rulers was Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604–ca. 562 BCE), builder of the biblical Tower of Babel, which soared 270 feet high and came to symbolize overweening pride. He was also responsible for the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, numbered among the seven wonders of the ancient world compiled by Greek historians by the second century BCE.

## The Royal Palace

The royal palace at Babylon was on almost the same scale as Assyrian palaces, with numerous reception suites framing five huge courtyards. Instead of facing their buildings with carved stone, the Late Babylonians adopted baked and **glazed brick**, which they molded into individual shapes. Glazing brick involved putting a film of glass over the brick's surface. Late Babylonians used it both for surface ornament and for reliefs on a grand scale. Its vivid coloristic effect appears on the courtyard façade of the Throne Room and the Processional Way leading to the Ishtar Gate and the gate itself, now reassembled in Berlin (fig. 2.21). A framework of brightly colored ornamental bands contains a procession of bulls, dragons, and other animals, set off in molded brick against a deep blue background. The animals portrayed were sacred: white and yellow snake-necked dragons to Marduk, the chief Babylonian god; yellow bulls with blue hair to Adad, god of storms; and white and yellow lions to Ishtar herself, goddess of love and war. Unlike the massive muscularity of the



2.21 Ishtar Gate (restored), from Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick originally 40' high (12.2 m). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Vorderasiatisches Museum

lamassu, their forms are light and agile-looking, arrested in a processional stride that slowly accompanies ceremonial processions leading to the archway of the gate.

## REGIONAL NEAR EASTERN ART

Alongside the successive cultures of Mesopotamia, a variety of other cultures developed in areas beyond the Tigris and Euphrates. Some of them invaded or conquered contemporaneous city-states in Mesopotamia, as did the Hittites in the north and the Iranians in the east. Others, such as the seagoing Phoenicians on the Mediterranean coast to the west, traded with the people of Mesopotamia and in so doing spread Mesopotamian visual forms to Africa and Europe.

### The Hittites

The Hittites were responsible for Babylon's overthrow in 1595 BCE. An Indo-European-speaking people, they had probably entered Anatolia from southern Russia in the late third millennium BCE and settled on its rocky plateau as one of several cultures that developed independently of Mesopotamia. As they came into contact with Mesopotamian traditions, the Hittites adopted cuneiform writing for their language, and preserved details of their history on clay tablets. Emerging as a power around 1800 BCE, they rapidly expanded their territory 150 years later under Hattusilis I. Their empire extended over most of present-day Turkey and Syria, which brought them into conflict with the imperial ambitions of Egypt. The Hittite Empire reached its apogee between 1400 and 1200 BCE. Its capital was Hattusa, near the present-day Turkish village of Bogazköy. Fortification walls protected the city, constructed of huge, irregularly shaped stones that were widely available in the region. At the city gates, massive limestone lions and other guardian figures protruded from the blocks that formed the **jamb**s (fig. 2.22). The Lion Gate is 7 feet high, and though badly weathered, the figures still impress visitors with their ferocity and stark frontality. These powerful guardians probably inspired the later Assyrian lamassu (see fig. 2.18).

### The Phoenicians

The Phoenicians, too, contributed a distinctive body of work to Near Eastern art. Living on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean in the first millennium BCE in what is now Lebanon, they developed formidable seafaring skills, which led them to found settlements farther west in the Mediterranean (most notably on the North African coast and in Spain). They became a linchpin in the rapidly growing trade in objects—and ideas—between East and West. The Phoenicians were especially adept in working metal and ivory, and in making colored glass. They readily incorporated motifs from Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean coast, as seen in the open-work ivory plaque illustrated here (fig. 2.23), on which is poised an Egyptian winged sphinx. The plaque dates to the



2.22 The Lion Gate, Bogazköy, Anatolia (Turkey), ca. 1400 BCE



2.23 Phoenician ivory plaque depicting a winged sphinx, found at Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Iraq, ca. 8th century BCE. The British Museum, London



2.24 Temple of Solomon (reconstruction), Jerusalem. ca. 457–450 BCE

eighth century BCE, and came to light in Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud, the Assyrian capital where the conquering Assyrian kings had probably taken it as booty. Though the details are Egyptian—its wig and apron, the stylized plants—the carver has reduced its double crown to fit neatly within the panel, suggesting that what mattered was a general quality of “Egyptianness” rather than an accurate portrayal of Egyptian motifs. The rounded forms and profile presentation translate the Egyptian motif into a visual form more familiar to Mesopotamian eyes.

### *The Hebrews*

According to later tradition, the Akkadians expelled the Hebrews from Mesopotamia in about 2000 BCE. The latter settled in Canaan, on the eastern Mediterranean, before moving to Egypt in around 1600 BCE. There, they were bound into slavery. Moses led their flight from Egypt into the Sinai desert, where they established the principles of their religion. Unlike other Near Eastern peoples, the Hebrews were monotheistic. Their worship centered on Yahweh, who provided Moses with the Ten Commandments, a set of ethical and moral rules. After 40 years, they returned to Canaan, which they named Israel. King David, who ruled until

961 BCE, seized the city of Jerusalem from the Canaanites, and began to construct buildings there worthy of a political and religious capital for Israel, including a royal palace. His son, Solomon, completed a vast temple for worship, now known as the First Temple (fig. 2.24). The temple stood within a sacred precinct on Mount Moriah (the present-day Temple Mount), where, according to the scriptures, the patriarch Abraham had prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Archaeological evidence for the massive building is controversial, and literary descriptions are incomplete. According to the Hebrew Bible, Solomon covered the entire temple and the altar inside with gold. For the inner sanctuary, which held the Ark of the Covenant (a chest containing the Commandments), sculptors created two monumental cherubim (angels depicted as winged children) out of gilded olive wood. They also covered the walls with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. Brass pillars stood at the front of the temple, with pomegranate-shaped capitals. King Hiram of Tyre (Phoenicia) is credited with providing resources for the construction of the temple, such as materials and artisans, which is further evidence of the close connections between Near Eastern cultures.

Babylonian forces under King Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed the temple in 587/86 BCE, forcing the Israelites into exile. Upon

their return in 538, they built the temple anew, and under Herod the Great, king of Judea from 37 BCE to 4 CE, the Second Temple was raised up and substantially enlarged. Roman soldiers razed this rebuilding in the reign of the emperor Vespasian, in the first century CE. The only vestige of the vast complex Herod commissioned is the western wall, known today as the Wailing Wall.

## IRANIAN ART

Located to the east of Mesopotamia, Iran was a flourishing agricultural center in Neolithic times, starting in about 7000 BCE. During that period, Iran became a gateway for migrating tribes



2.25 Painted beaker, from Susa. ca. 4000 BCE. Height 11¼" (28.3 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

from the Asiatic steppes to the north as well as from India to the east. While it is distinctive, the art of ancient Iran still reflects its intersections with the cultures of Mesopotamia.

### *Early Iranian Art*

The early nomadic tribes left no permanent structures or records, but the items they buried with their dead reveal that they ranged over a vast area—from Siberia to central Europe, from Iran to Scandinavia. They fashioned objects of wood, bone, or metal, and these diverse works share a common decorative vocabulary, including animal motifs used in abstract and ornamental ways. They belong to a distinct kind of portable art known as **nomad's gear**, including weapons, bridles, buckles, **fibulae** (large clasps or brooches), and other articles of adornment, as well as various kinds of vessels.

The handleless beaker in figure 2.25, dating to about 4000 BCE, originates from a pottery-producing center at Susa on the Shaur River. On the surface of its thin shell of pale yellow clay, a brown glaze defines an ibex (mountain goat), whose forms the painter has reduced to a few dramatic sweeping curves. The circles of its horns reflect in two dimensions the cup's three-dimensional roundness. Racing hounds above the ibex stretch out to become horizontal streaks, and vertical lines below the vessel's rim are the elongated necks of a multitude of birds. This early example of Iranian art demonstrates the skill of the potter in both the construction of the cup and its sensitive painted design. It prefigures a later love of animal forms in the nomadic arts of Iran and Central Asia.

### *The Persian Empire: Cosmopolitan Heirs to the Mesopotamian Tradition*

During the mid-sixth century BCE, the small kingdom of Parsa to the east of lower Mesopotamia came to dominate the entire Near East. Under Cyrus the Great (r. 559–530/29 BCE), ruler of the Achaemenid dynasty, the people of Parsa—the Persians—overthrew the king of the Medes, then conquered major parts of Asia Minor in ca. 547 or 546 BCE, and Babylon in 538 BCE. Cyrus assumed the title “king of Babylon,” along with the broader ambitions of Mesopotamian rulers. The empire he founded continued to expand under his successors. Egypt fell in 525 BCE, while Greece only narrowly escaped Persian domination in the early fifth century BCE. At its height, under Darius I (r. 521–486 BCE) and his son Xerxes (r. 485–465 BCE), the territorial reach of the Persian Empire far outstripped the Egyptian and Assyrian empires combined. It endured for two centuries, during which it developed an efficient administration and monumental art forms.

Persian religious beliefs related to the prophecies of Zoroaster (Zarathustra) and took as their basis the dualism of good and evil, embodied in Ahuramazda (Light) and Ahriman (Darkness). The cult of Ahuramazda focused its rituals on fire altars in the open air; consequently, Persian kings did not construct monumental



2.26 Palace of Darius and Xerxes, Persepolis. 518–460 BCE

religious architecture. Instead they concentrated their attention and resources on royal palaces, which were at once vast and impressive.

**PERSEPOLIS** Darius I began construction on the most ambitious of the palaces, on a plateau in the Zagros highlands at Parsa or Persepolis, in 518 BCE. Subsequent rulers enlarged it (fig. 2.26). Fortified and raised on a platform, it consisted of a great number of rooms, halls, and courts laid out in a grid plan. The palace is a synthesis of materials and design traditions from all parts of the far-flung empire; brought together, they result in a clear statement of internationalism. Darius boasts in his inscriptions that the palace timber came from Lebanon (cedar), Gandhara and Carmania (yaka wood), and its bricks from Babylon. Items for palace use (such as the golden **rhyton**, or ritual cup, in fig. 2.27), were of Sardian and Bactrian gold, Egyptian silver, and ebony, and Sagdianan lapis lazuli and carnelian. To work these materials, the Achaemenids brought in craftsmen from all over the empire, who

2.27 Achaemenid rhyton. 5th–3rd centuries BCE. Gold. Archaeological Museum, Tehran, Iran





2.28 Audience Hall of Darius and Xerxes, Persepolis, Iran. ca. 500 BCE

then took this international style away with them on returning to their respective homes. The gold-worker responsible for the rhyton shaped it as a *senmurv*, a mythical creature with the body of a lion sprouting griffin's wings and a peacock's tail. It belongs firmly to the tradition of Mesopotamian hybrid creatures.

Visitors to the palace were constantly reminded of the theme of empire, beginning at the entrance. There, at the massive "Gate of All the Lands," stood colossal winged, human-headed bulls, like the Assyrian *lamassu* (see fig. 2.18). Inside the palace, architects employed columns on a magnificent scale. Entering the 217-foot-square Audience Hall, or *apadana*, of Darius and Xerxes, a visitor would stand amid 36 columns, which soared 40 feet up to support a wooden ceiling. A few still stand today (fig. 2.28). The concept of massing columns in this way may come from Egypt; certainly Egyptian elements are present in the vegetal (plantlike) detail of their bases and capitals. The form of the shaft, however, echoes the slender, fluted column shafts of Ionian Greece (see fig. 5.8). Crowning the column capitals are "cradles" for ceiling beams composed of the front parts of two bulls or similar creatures (fig. 2.29). The animals recall Assyrian sculptures, yet their truncated, back-to-back arrangement evokes animal motifs of Iranian art, as seen in the form of the rhyton.

2.29 Bull capital, from Persepolis. ca. 500 BCE. Musée du Louvre, Paris

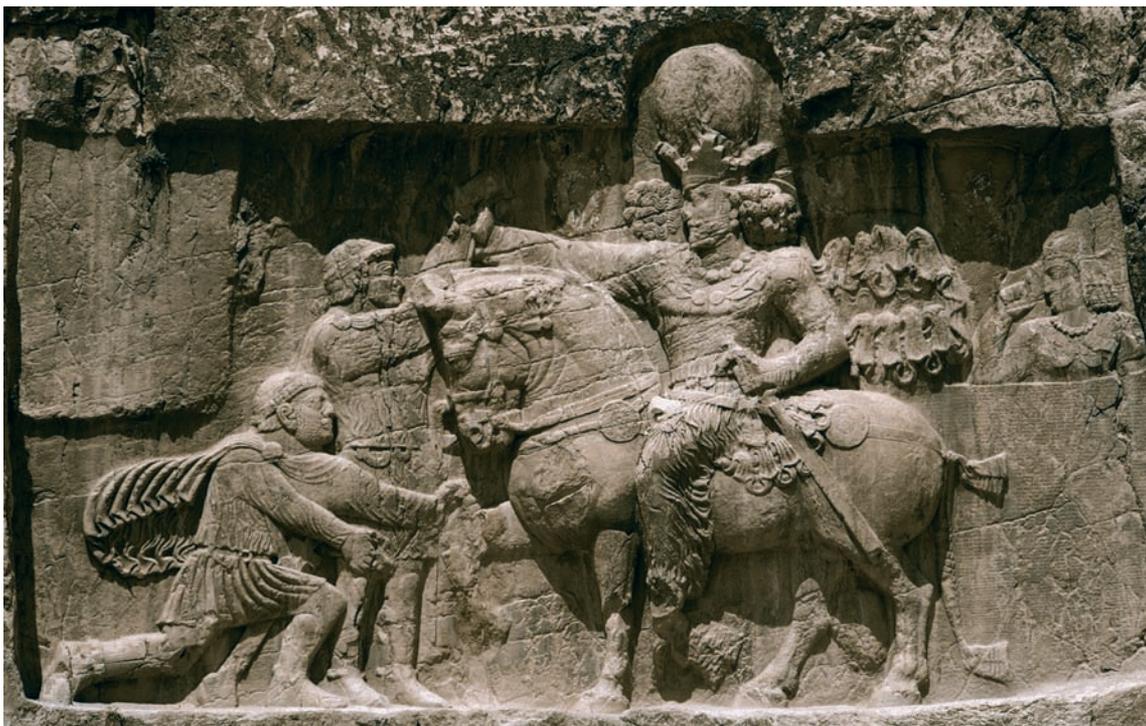




2.30 *Darius and Xerxes Giving Audience*. ca. 490 BCE. Limestone, height 8'4" (2.5 m). Archaeological Museum, Tehran, Iran

In marked contrast to the military narratives of the Assyrians, reliefs embellishing the platform of the Audience Hall and its double stairway proclaim a theme of harmony and integration across the multicultural empire (fig. 2.30). Long rows of marching figures, sometimes superposed in registers, represent the empire's 23 subject nations, as well as royal guards and Persian dignitaries. Each of the nations' representatives wears indigenous dress and brings a regional gift—precious vessels, textiles—as tribute to the

Persian king. Colored stone and metals applied to the relief added richness to a wealth of carved detail. The relief is remarkably shallow, yet by reserving the figures' roundness for the edge of their bodies (so that they cast a shadow), and by cutting the background away to a level field, the sculptors created an impression of greater depth. Where earlier Mesopotamian reliefs depict figures in mixed profile and frontal views, most of these figures are in full profile, even though some figures turn their heads back to



2.31 *Shapur I Triumphant over the Roman Emperors Philip the Arab and Valerian*, Naksh-i-Rustam (near Persepolis), Iran. 260–272 CE

address those who follow. Through repetition of the walking human form, the artists generated a powerful dynamic quality that guides a visitor's path through the enormous space. The repetition also lends the reliefs an eternal quality, as if preserving the action in perpetual time. If, as some believe, the relief represents the recurring celebration of the New Year Festival, this timeless quality would be especially apt.

The Achaemenid synthesis of traditions at Persepolis demonstrates the longevity and flexibility of the Near Eastern language of rulership. The palace provides a dramatic and powerful setting for imperial court ritual on a grand scale.

### *Mesopotamia Between Persian and Islamic Dominion*

Rebuffed in its attempts to conquer Greece, the Persian Empire eventually came under Greek and then Roman domination, but like many parts of the Greek and Roman empires, it retained numerous aspects of its own culture. The process began in 331 BCE with Alexander the Great's (356–323 BCE) victory over the Persians, when his troops burnt the palace at Persepolis in an act of symbolic defiance. After his death eight years later, his generals divided his realm among themselves, and Seleukas (r. 305–281 BCE) inherited much of the Near East. The Parthians, who were Iranian nomads, gained control over the region in 238 BCE. Despite fairly constant conflict, they fended off Roman advances until a brief Roman success under Trajan in the early second century CE, after which Parthian power declined. The last Parthian king was overthrown by one of his governors, Ardashir or Artaxerxes, in 224 CE. This Ardashir (d. 240 CE) founded the Sasanian dynasty, named for a mythical ancestor, Sasan, who

claimed to be a direct descendent of the Achaemenids, and this dynasty controlled the area until the Arab conquest in the mid-seventh century CE.

Ardashir's son, Shapur I (r. 240–272 CE), proved to be Darius' equal in ambition, and he linked himself directly to the Persian king. He expanded the empire greatly, and even succeeded in defeating three Roman emperors in the middle of the third century CE. Two of these victories Shapur commemorated in numerous reliefs, including an immense panel carved into rock at Naksh-e Rostam, near Persepolis, where Darius I and his successors had previously located their rock-cut tombs (fig. 2.31). The victor, on horseback, raises his hand in a gesture of mercy to the defeated "barbarian," who kneels before him in submission. This was a stock Roman scene, recognizable to Roman viewers, and this quotation gives the relief an ironic dimension, for the victorious Shapur here expropriates his enemy's own **iconography** of triumph. Elements of style are typical of late or provincial Roman sculpture, such as the linear folds of the emperor's billowing cloak. However, Shapur's elaborate headdress and clothing, his heavily caparisoned horse, and his composite pose are all distinctly Near Eastern.

Roman and Near Eastern elements are combined again in Shapur I's palace (242–272 CE) at Ctesiphon, near Baghdad, with its magnificent brick, barrel-vaulted audience hall, or **iwān** (fig. 2.32). It was a Roman practice to exploit the **arch** to span huge spaces (see fig. 7.61), and the architect used it here to enclose a space 90 feet high, typical of the Near Eastern tradition of large-scale royal building. The registers of arched blank windows or **blind arcades** may derive from Roman façades, such as those in the stage buildings of theaters or ornamental fountains (see fig. 7.7). Yet the shallowness of the arcades creates a distinctly



2.32 Palace of Shapur I, Ctesiphon, Iraq. 242–272 CE

eastern surface pattern, in turn subordinated to an awe-inspiring entryway.

Metalwork continued to flourish in the Sasanian period, using a wide variety of techniques. Hunting scenes were a popular subject, as seen in figure 2.33, a late fifth-century CE silver bowl that probably represents King Peroz I hunting gazelles. A metalworker turned the bowl on a lathe, and hammered out the king and his prey from behind (a technique known as **repoussé**), before applying gilt and inlaying details such as the horns of the

animals and the pattern on the quiver, with **niello**, a compound of sulphur. The hunting subject continues a tradition known to Assyrians, as well as to Egyptians and Romans. Sasanians exported many of their wares to Constantinople (see map 8.1) and to the Christian West, where they had a strong impact on the art of the Middle Ages. Artists would manufacture similar vessels again after the Sasanian realm fell to the Arabs in the mid-seventh century CE, and these served as a source of design motifs for Islamic art as well (see Chapter 9).



2.33 *Peroz I (457–483) or Kavad I hunting rams*. 5th–6th century CE. Silver, mercury gilding, niello inlay, diameter 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (21.9 cm), height 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (4.6 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1934 (34.33)

# Ancient Near Eastern Art

ca. 4000 BCE  
Handleless beaker  
from Susa



ca. 2600 BCE The *Royal Standard of Ur*



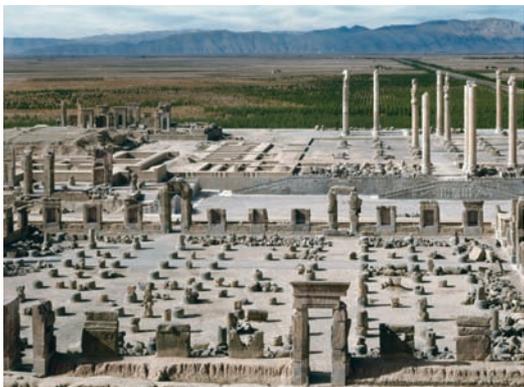
ca. 2100 BCE King Urnammu commissions the Great Ziggurat at Ur



ca. 957 BCE Solomon's Temple is completed in Jerusalem



ca. 668-627 BCE Assyrians construct the North Palace of Ashurbanipal



ca. 518 BCE Construction of the Persian palace at Persepolis begins



242-272 CE Shapur I's palace at Ctesiphon built

4000  
BCE

3500  
BCE

3000  
BCE

2500  
BCE

2000  
BCE

1500  
BCE

1000  
BCE

500  
BCE

0

500  
CE

ca. 3500 BCE Sumerian city of Uruk emerges  
ca. 3500 BCE Pottery manufacturing appears in western Europe

ca. 3100-2600 BCE Neolithic stone houses at Skara Brae

ca. 2900 BCE Mesopotamians begin using cuneiform writing

ca. 2350 BCE Conflict begins among Sumerian city-states over access to water and fertile land

after 2150 BCE Earliest surviving Akkadian tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

ca. 2100 BCE Final phase of construction at Stonehenge

ca. 1792-1750 BCE Hammurabi rules Babylon

ca. 1595 BCE The Hittites conquer Babylon

1400-1200 BCE Apogee of the Hittite Empire

612 BCE Nineveh falls to the Medes and resurgent Babylonians; end of the Assyrian Empire

ca. 604-562 BCE Reign of the Late Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II

ca. 559-530/29 BCE Rule of Cyrus the Great, who leads Persians to overthrow the Medes

331 BCE Alexander the Great defeats the Persians

224 CE Ardashir founds the Sasanian dynasty