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1. IN THE BEGINNING

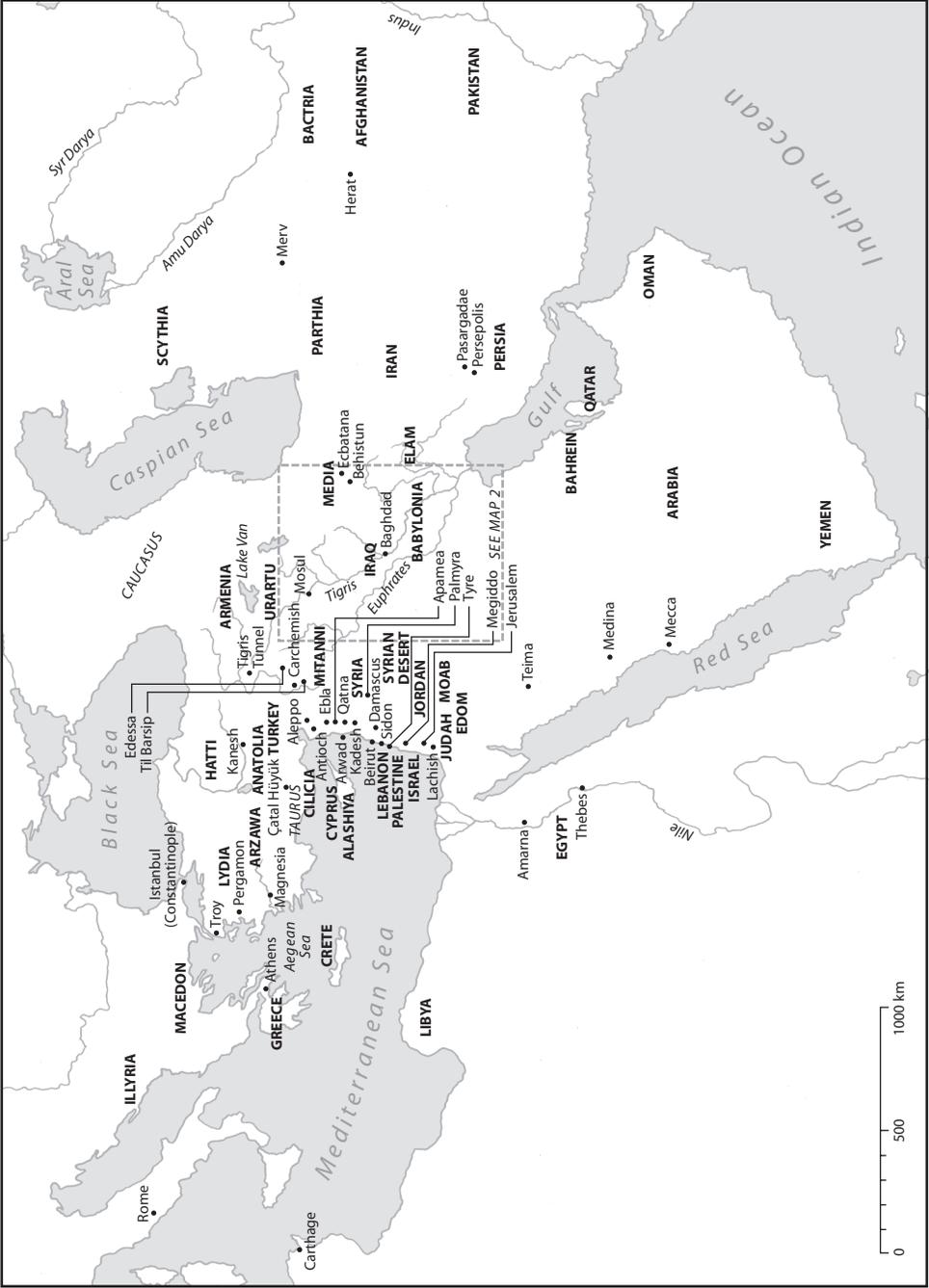
Marduk created wild animals, the living
creatures of the open country.
He created and put in place Tigris and
Euphrates rivers,
He pronounced their names with favor.
Marduk, Creator of the World

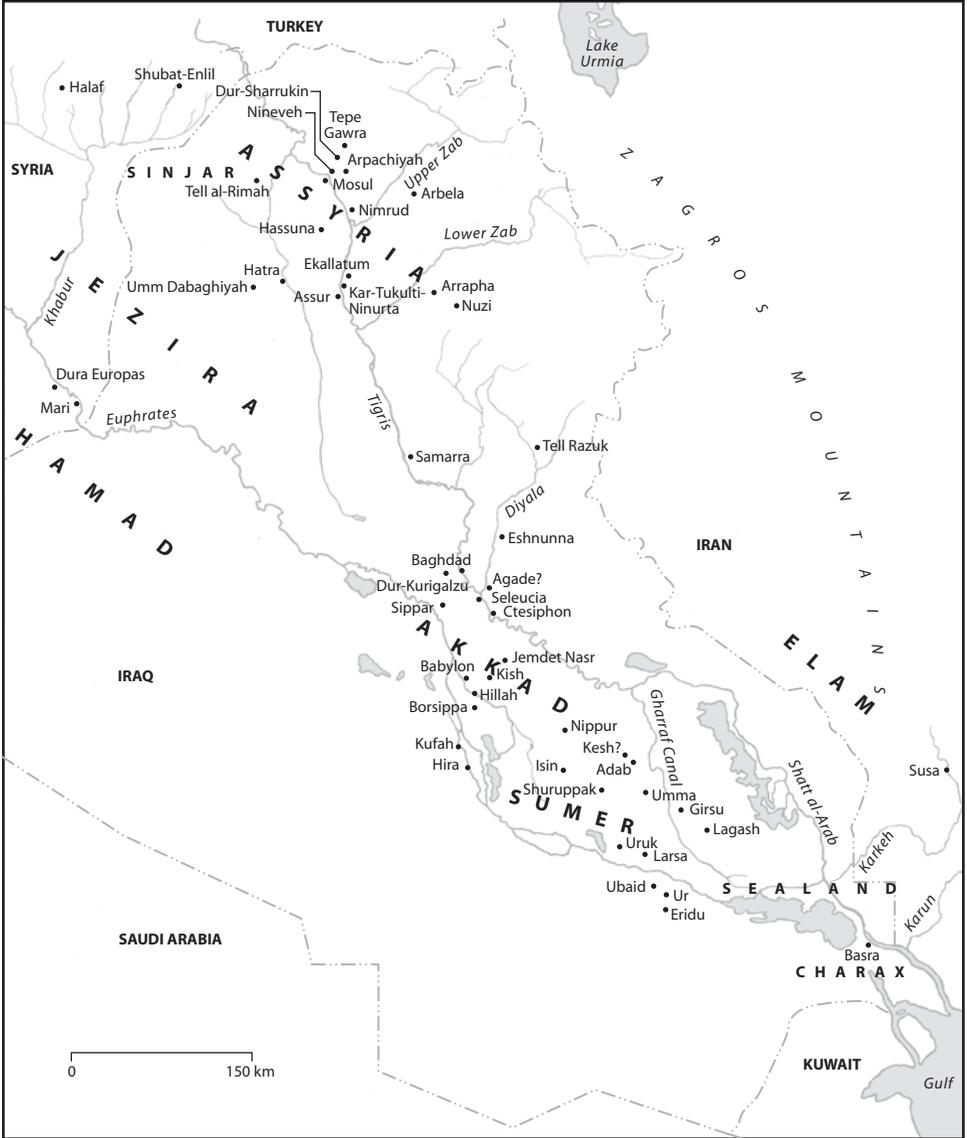
Of Tigris and Euphrates

Ancient Iraq is the gift of two rivers. The Euphrates rises on the Anatolian plateau in Turkey, flows southwest into Syria and then turns southeast across Iraq, emptying into the Gulf. Its broad, shallow channel makes it an ideal source for irrigation water, and in many stretches the Euphrates is easily navigable. As the river moves across the southern alluvial plains and approaches the Gulf, it merges with the Tigris, amidst a network of smaller rivers, lakes, and marshes. To a Babylonian poet, the Euphrates seemed a mighty canal, divinely made:

O River, creator of all things,
When the great gods dug your bed,
They set well-being along your banks.¹

The Tigris, though it too rises on the Anatolian plateau, passes through more rugged terrain, at one point disappearing into a





Map 1. (left) From Rome to the Indus (after Collon 1995)

Map 2. (above) Ancient Iraq (after Lloyd 1978)

natural tunnel. A Sumerian poet mythologized the volcanic origin of the Tigris headlands as an epic battle between a hero-god and a personified, erupting volcano that “gashed the earth’s body . . . bathed the sky in blood . . . and till today black cinders are in the fields.”² Both rivers flood when the snows melt in the highlands, but the Tigris often does so in violent, destructive onslaughts of water, swelled by its three main tributaries—the Upper and Lower Zab and the Diyala—pouring down from deep gorges in the Zagros Mountains. By contrast, the two principal tributaries of the Euphrates—the Khabur and Balikh, which join it in northeastern Syria—enclose a swath of fine agricultural land known as the Jezira, whose productivity is augmented by sufficient annual rainfall for crops.

The rivers of Iraq have determined its history in three crucial ways. The Euphrates was an important route of communication with Syria, central Turkey, and the Mediterranean; the Tigris and its tributaries afforded links with eastern Turkey and the Iranian plateau. Above all, both rivers made possible human life on the plains, annually renewing the soil with flood-borne silts and bringing the water that farmers needed to till their fields and herdsmen to sustain their flocks.³

During the Pliocene and early Pleistocene epochs, the earth’s great tectonic plates began shaping the main geographical features of Iraq. As the Arabian and African plates moved slowly northward, they encountered the more intransigent Iranian and Turkish plates and were forced to grind beneath them, resulting in the uplift of the Zagros on Iraq’s eastern border and the Anatolian ranges and plateau on its northern border. Where the Arabian plate thrust under the Iranian plate, subduction pressures also formed the trough of the Gulf and the alluvial plains of Iraq’s river systems. Ongoing tectonic activity accounts for the Middle East’s frequent earthquakes and numerous volcanoes.

Over the eons, Iraq’s major hydrological and environmental changes have been brought about primarily by worldwide cooling and warming trends, which have caused the waters of the Gulf to fall and rise, respectively. At the height of the last Ice Age, the Gulf was a plain through which the ancestral Tigris and Euphrates meandered. As the glaciers melted, the Gulf reached approximately

its current level, with temperature fluctuations over the millennia causing repeated advances and retreats of the coastline. Studies of pollen preserved in the sediments of ancient lakes have shed considerable light on the region's climate and vegetation, from the last glaciation to early historical times. Millennia of dry cold seem to have given way to a warmer, moister period about ten thousand years ago, which in turn ended in renewed desiccation, producing the desert and steppe we recognize as salient features of Iraq's present landscape. Grazing, agriculture, and the deforestation of the Zagros woodlands have affected the region's ecosystems as well.⁴

Today, as in historical antiquity, forbidding deserts stretch to the west of the plains of Iraq for hundreds of kilometers. To the east and north, the foothills ascend swiftly to mountains with peaks "sharp-tipped as a spear point," as an Assyrian writer put it.⁵ To the south is the Gulf. Small wonder, then, that the people of ancient Iraq thought that the alluvial plains were the center of the inhabited world, ringed by deserts, mountains, and seas. For them, all that lay beyond was foreign and strange, the source of exotic materials and strange beasts, the abode of brutish folk. The farthest reaches the plains dwellers knew were the "Upper and Lower Seas," the Mediterranean and the Gulf.⁶

No one knows what the earliest names for the region signify. Kengir or Sumer (biblical Shinar) referred to the southern half of the alluvial plains, while the northern half was called Wari, later Akkad. After about 1700 B.C.E., Sumer and Akkad together constituted what came to be known as Babylonia. A thousand years later, the southern marshes were called the Sealand, later Chaldea. The region north of Baghdad, along the Tigris, was known as Assyria. The word Subir was sometimes used to refer to northern Mesopotamia as a whole.⁷

The modern name Iraq was first regularly used after the Muslim conquest of 637. Though it appears to be an Arabic word, its meaning and etymology are obscure. The various proposals by medieval Arab geographers show only that they were making them up. One of the most widely accepted explanations is that it means "arable land along a major river," vaguely corresponding to English "alluvium," but this may have been reasoned backwards from the reality of Iraq itself.⁸

The ancient Greek term Mesopotamia, now generally understood to mean “Land Between Rivers,” has also been used to refer to Iraq, especially by European scholars and twentieth-century colonial administrators. Mesopotamia originally denoted the land enclosed by the big bend of the Middle Euphrates River, east of modern Aleppo in Syria, but it soon came to mean the expanse of plains and uplands between the Tigris and Euphrates, from the Gulf to the Anatolian plateau.⁹ Many writers today use the term Mesopotamia when discussing the region before the Muslim conquest, and Iraq thereafter. Although this may be a convenient historical distinction, others prefer not to separate the pre-Islamic and Islamic past of Iraq. In this book, we use Mesopotamia and Iraq interchangeably.

To visitors from parts of the earth with more temperate climates and more varied scenery, the hot, featureless plains of southern Iraq may seem a place inhospitable to the development of civilization. Nor are there splendid ruins to admire or reflect on, such as might evoke a glorious past. In fact, the only hints on the landscape attesting to the remote antiquity of human habitation are mounds covered with potsherds, broken bricks, and other debris, sometimes lying amongst faint outlines of walls and dwellings, all that remain of once bustling cities and towns, home to a vibrant and long-lived literate culture. This early Victorian traveler’s experience still rings true:

He has left the land where nature is still lovely, where, in his mind’s eye, he can rebuild the temple or the theatre. . . . He is now at a loss to give any form to the rude heaps upon which he is gazing. . . . The scene around is worthy of the ruin he is contemplating; desolation meets desolation; a feeling of awe succeeds to wonder; for there is nothing to relieve the mind, to lead to hope, or to tell of what has gone by.¹⁰

The ancient visitor would have had a very different view, largely because the Tigris and Euphrates, like other restless waterways, are prone to carving out new courses, sometimes shifting their riverbeds by many kilometers. Today in southern Iraq, the Euphrates

flows far to the east of its course in historical antiquity, so that what were once riverside or canalside cities, towns, and villages became the “rude heaps” of remote deserts. As a result, many of the important ancient cities in southern Iraq were left unmolested and uninhabited for thousands of years. Unhampered by modern development, archaeologists have been able to investigate these sites in depth, recovering most of what we know about the history and culture of ancient Iraq. In more recent times, these isolated fields of ruins have fallen easy prey to large-scale looting and destruction. Much of their vast and rich historical record is now lost forever. In the north, where the river channels are more stable, ancient settlements and cities often underlie modern ones, making them more difficult to excavate, but less vulnerable to looters. We return to these matters in the Epilogue.

Still, one may well ask, why was civilization born on these alluvial plains, so far in advance of all other places in the world? There are at once many answers and no answer to this simple question. Intensive archaeological research in Iraq and in neighboring lands has given us numerous responses, and we may draw these proposals and theories together into a narrative that seems reasonable and convincing in its outline, even if specifics remain frustratingly elusive. At the same time, there is no answer, for we often describe events and changes without really knowing how or why they came about, and refer to people about whom we know very little. New discoveries and reinterpretations of old ones give us fascinating evidence to work into the story, but ultimately leave the reader wishing to know more than we can say at present.

The First Villages

Of the many ways to describe human beings of former times and how they lived, one long popular has been with reference to their technology. We may speak of the Old Stone Age (Paleolithic) and New Stone Age (Neolithic), implying that people mostly used stone tools, or the Bronze Age, when people mostly used bronze weapons. Or we may focus on religious belief, referring to pagan, Christian, or pre-Islamic societies. In older books, one wrote of

ances: Oriental and Occidental peoples, the “great white race,” the Indo-Europeans, the Semites. Since the 1960s, anthropologists and archaeologists have used a more inclusive system referring to modes of subsistence, that is, by what means people obtained the food they needed to survive.¹¹

For almost its entire history, the human race subsisted by hunting game and gathering naturally occurring plants. This mode was so successful and so undemanding as a way of life that it ensured human survival for hundreds of thousands of years. To judge from present-day hunting cultures, hunters need exercise their skill only two or three days out of seven to provide sufficient meat for their community. They kill and collect only what they need to live, and do not reduce their resources for sport or entertainment. Hunter-gatherer populations, moreover, tend to remain fairly stable. They usually have small families; their children, especially girls, mature late; and some groups even abandon infants to control population.¹²

About ten thousand years ago, peoples in the Middle East evolved a radically different subsistence pattern based on agriculture and the management of domesticated animals. Some historians refer to this momentous development as a revolution, thereby implying sweeping change.¹³ But the change was abrupt only in comparison with the manner in which people had interacted with the natural world for all the preceding millennia. We see the transition vividly in Iraq and also, at about the same time, in Iran, Turkey, Syria, Israel, and Palestine.¹⁴ How and why did it occur, and what did it mean for the human race?

Archaeological work in the foothills of the Zagros has shown that people began settling in small villages in areas where certain wild grains, such as barley, and wild animals, such as sheep and goats, occurred naturally and plentifully. Gradually, people came to realize that these resources could be managed by controlling their reproduction to obtain specific desirable traits. This selection process, termed the domestication of plants and animals, caused permanent genetic and associated morphological changes in the species involved. Barley, for example, was selected for preferred strains, such as those with softer husks and larger ears of grain;

animals were bred for quality of wool or milk, or for fattiness or yield of meat. Within the village confines, plots were sown and animals penned, though in some seasons the animals might be herded to better, more distant pastures. Although we may now be able to describe in some detail the transition from hunting and gathering to pastoral and village life, we still cannot explain why this occurred when it did.¹⁵

The domestication of plants and animals brought with it substantial changes in social outlook, behavior, and organization. The hunter attacked or trapped, whereas the farmer and herdsman nurtured. The self-narrative of the hunter was aggressive and dramatic, that of the farmer and herdsman reliant and protective. For much of the year, agricultural work was systematic and unrelenting: preparing the soil, sowing, watering, weeding, driving off pests, harvesting, threshing, and storing. This pattern of life brought with it an ethos of working in rhythm with the seasons for family and community, of saving against future want, and of hopeful dependence on uncontrollable forces and events. Agricultural success resulted in larger families, because even small children could be useful in fieldwork and herding. And with earlier physical maturity came steady, even exponential, population growth.¹⁶

In response to agricultural and pastoral needs, new technologies developed for producing such items as ground-stone tools, wooden implements, baskets, and textiles. New materials also appeared, among them obsidian from the volcanic areas of eastern and central Turkey. It is not clear how obsidian, prized for sharp blades, reached the early farming villages of Iraq, whether brought by traders or acquired through expeditions, but its presence attests to well-established, long-distance networks.¹⁷

The most important innovation was pottery. Prior to about 6500 B.C.E., containers had been made of skins, bitumen-coated baskets, gypsum or lime plaster, and stone. The earliest ceramic vessels were lightly fired, but the development of more efficient kilns resulted in the production of nonporous, durable wares adaptable to a wide range of uses.¹⁸ These included the storage, transport, preparation, and cooking of a variety of solids and

liquids, from grain and cheese to beer. The discovery of fermentation created beverages that altered mood and behavior; drinking thus acquired social and ritual functions, as Sumerian drinking songs celebrate:

When I make my way around a round of beer,
 When I feel grand, when I feel grand,
 Drinking beer in a merry mood,
 Imbibing fruit of the field in a light-hearted state,
 With a joyful heart and a happy inside . . .¹⁹

Because fired clay is a nearly indestructible material, the shapes and decorations of pottery vessels usually afford the best evidence we have for the creativity and aesthetic sensibilities of ancient peoples. In Iraq, as elsewhere, major pottery types are frequently named after the sites at which they were first discovered, or which seem to have been centers of production. The Hassuna ware of the mid-seventh millennium from northern Iraq tends to be decorated with herringbone and other patterns incised with a pointed tool. The Samarra and Halaf wares that followed, from northern and central Iraq, are more finely made, with painted patterns on a buff ground. The interiors of Samarra bowls often feature stylized horned animals circling round, drawn in dark brown with verve and assurance. Halaf pottery of the mid-sixth millennium is the first polychrome ware known, characterized by sophisticated geometric designs in red, black, and white, possibly inspired by textiles. Vessels such as the bowl pictured here (figure 1) were likely made by specialized potters based in certain villages, whereas simpler pots were probably made locally.²⁰

So it was, in this period of change ten thousand years ago, in the foothills of Iraq, that small villages sprang up, their mud-brick houses consisting of a few rooms and an open area, pens for animals and storage bins for foods, the settlements surrounded by an agricultural hinterland extending perhaps several hours' walk.²¹ So forceful was this new trajectory of human life that in a few places beyond Iraq, such as Çatal Hüyük in central Turkey, good-sized towns appeared, with comparatively large populations and elaborately embellished structures, apparently serving some religious

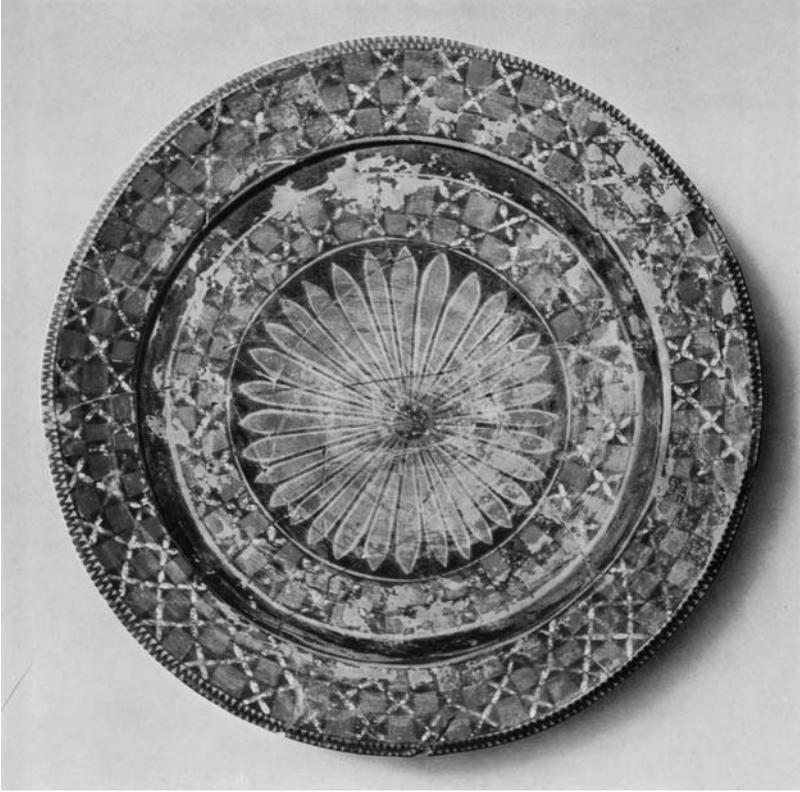


Figure 1. Halaf ware bowl from Arpachiyah, diameter 33 cm, Iraq Museum, Baghdad. (Strommenger 1962: pl. II) *For most periods of ancient Iraq, pottery provides the chronological framework essential for understanding the successive levels of occupation of a site. During the course of an archaeological excavation, hundreds of thousands of potsherds are collected and recorded. The smallest fragment may be as valuable as an intact vessel for enriching our knowledge of techniques, artistic developments, and interconnections. When the Iraq Museum storerooms were ransacked in April 2003, the excavated pottery and other artifacts awaiting study and final publication were thrown into disorder or stolen.*

purpose.²² But this was exceptional. Most villages comprised a few dozen houses, all of the same size and plan, suggesting an egalitarian society, with communal as well as individual storage facilities. Perhaps resources of fields and flocks were also managed communally.

From the Foothills to the Plains

A second important transition, several thousand years after the development of agriculture, was the movement of farmers and stockbreeders down from the foothills onto the plains of Iraq. No one knows precisely when this occurred, for the earliest lowland settlements may be buried deep in the modern alluvium and thus archaeologically inaccessible. Why move to the plains? One theory is population pressure, but no evidence has been produced from the foothills to suggest that the population had become too large to be sustained there. The important point is that once human beings had mastered agricultural and pastoral skills, they could live in areas where the wild ancestors of the domesticated plants and animals they had come to depend on did not naturally occur. In bringing the new species of plants and animals with them, humans caused permanent changes in the ecology of the plains.²³

In Iraq, the lowlands presented challenges that were not easily met. The dearth of rainfall in the south required irrigation for the cultivation of cereal crops. In principle, irrigation need only be a matter of digging a ditch to bring water to a field. In practice, irrigation involved community participation in the construction and maintenance of a network of ditches, as well as decisions about who was to receive how much water, where, and when. The water situation in southern Iraq was further complicated by the fact that the rivers flood in the early spring, at sowing time, and reach their low point in the hot season, at growing time, when water is most needed. Despite these challenges, people settled first in small villages dispersed across the alluvial plains, especially in the south, then in increasing numbers along natural watercourses, allowing us to trace those now vanished or shifted thanks to patterns of habitation. Furthermore, we can see in the relative sizes of the villages an emerging hierarchy among them.²⁴

The settlement of farmers on the alluvial plains of Iraq was thus a success, the first stage in a story of human activity there that continues to the present day. We need not imagine, of course, that the plains lay empty before people began to till the soil. Hunter-gatherers had long pursued the abundant game, such as gazelle,

and the marsh creatures, such as turtles, birds, and fish, that this hospitable Sumerian fisherman invites into his traps:

Let your acquaintances come,
 Let those precious to you come,
 Let your father and grandfather come, . . .
 Let your wife and children come, . . .
 Let the group around your doorway come,
 Do not leave anyone around you out, not a single one!²⁵

But with the advent of agriculture and stockbreeding, the land was changed forever. These two modes coexisted well, and might be carried on by members of the same family. Flocks of sheep and goats grazed widely on the grassy plains and on the first spring-time shoots of the grain crops, increasing the already high yields of the fields by causing the grain to put out a thicker second growth and by fertilizing the soil.²⁶ In summer, when the grass withered in the heat, the animals might be moved to higher pastures or fed on stored grain and the leftovers from milling and brewing. To judge from later periods, for which written sources are available, the main products of the time were wool, wheat, and barley. The diet was supplemented by the fruit of the date palm, plentiful river fish, sheep and goats, and wild game.

From about 5900 to 4300 B.C.E., this lowland peasant culture, termed by archaeologists the Ubaid, diffused throughout Iraq and far beyond, into the Anatolian plateau and the steppes of northern Syria.²⁷ Differences in water resources led to variations in how northern and southern Iraq developed. In the north, where agriculture could be sustained by rainfall and wells, there was less intensive fieldwork than in the irrigated south, and the potential existed for a greater area under cultivation. But if the south had smaller plots, those irrigated fields had much higher productivity per hectare. And because the population was concentrated in the south, extensive areas of the north may not have been cultivated at all, even during later periods. Southern settlements followed the natural watercourses needed for irrigation and transportation; northern villages tended to be spread across the landscape, wherever wells could be dug.²⁸

Material culture, south and north, befitted a peasant way of life: simple tools, practical vessels. In general, Ubaid ceramics are modestly decorated, often, in the later phases, with dark painted patterns rapidly applied, showing none of the glossy polychromy of Halaf ware (figure 1). We see the spread of Ubaid culture through finding its pottery, including some locally made imitations, from the Mediterranean to Oman.²⁹

What these peoples called themselves, what languages they spoke, what social institutions, spiritual life, and traditions they had, we know not. The platforms, niched façades, and interior fittings of some Ubaid shrines became standard elements of later temples, which suggests a certain measure of continuity. Because both shrines and houses often had a tripartite plan (a central room flanked by rows of rooms), and because the plastic arts that have come down to us are primarily exaggerated representations of the female body, we surmise that Ubaid religious belief and practice focused on the forces most important to their way of life, especially fertility, procreation, and the safety of the home hearth.³⁰

Four aspects of the Ubaid culture impress the modern observer: its longevity of 1,600 years, or more, indicating that a viable way of life had been successfully transplanted to the alluvial plains of Iraq and beyond; its wide extent, compared to later cultures; its overall uniformity throughout Iraq, notwithstanding regional phases and variations; and its striking absence of weapons and fortifications, implying peaceful coexistence. People might have continued to live in this mode indefinitely had not something extraordinary happened.