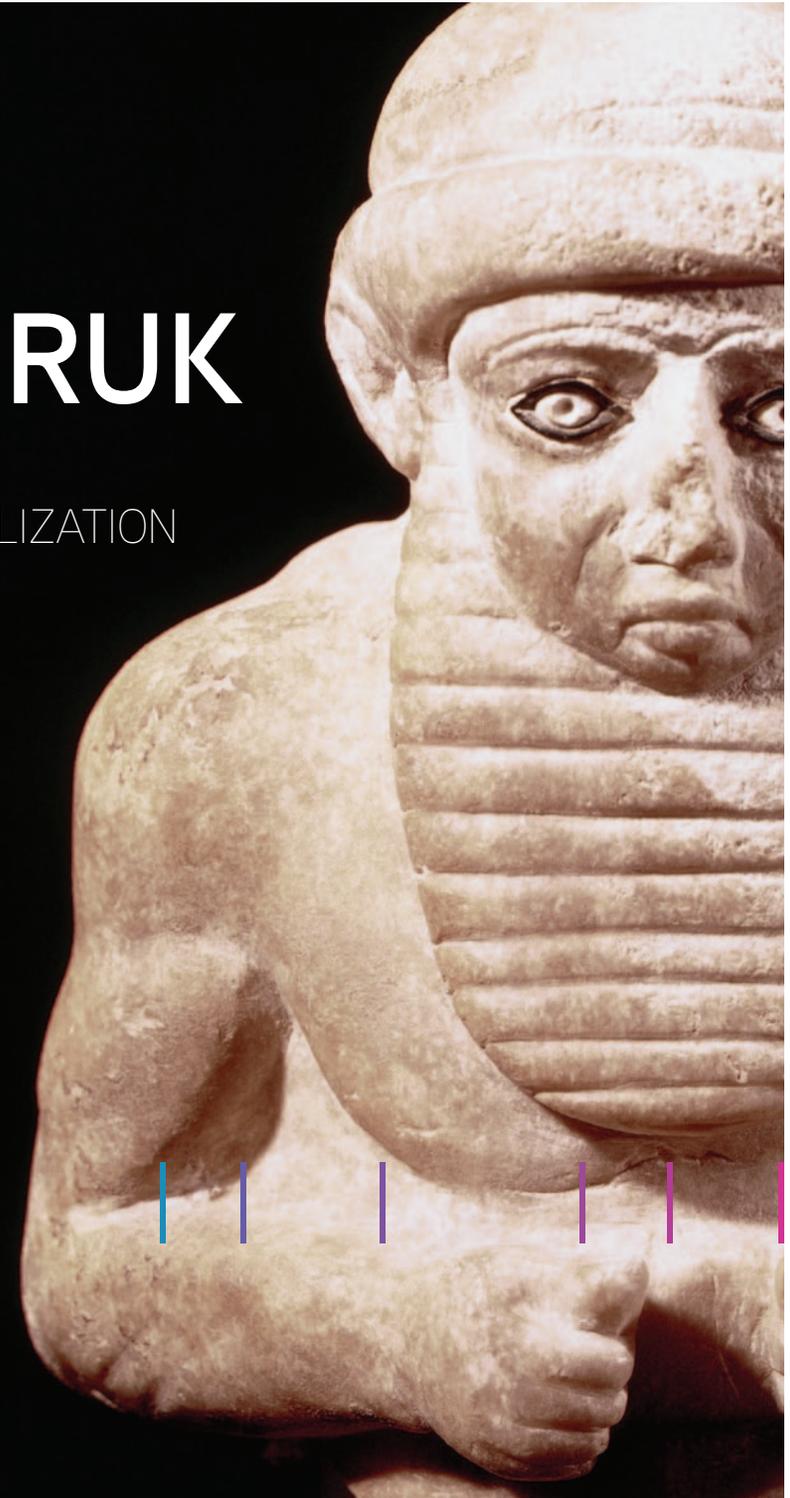


7

URUK

CIVILIZATION



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



URUK

THE WORLD'S
FIRST BIG CITY

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

Nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the world's first major city sprang up in a fertile region of land called Mesopotamia.

The first city

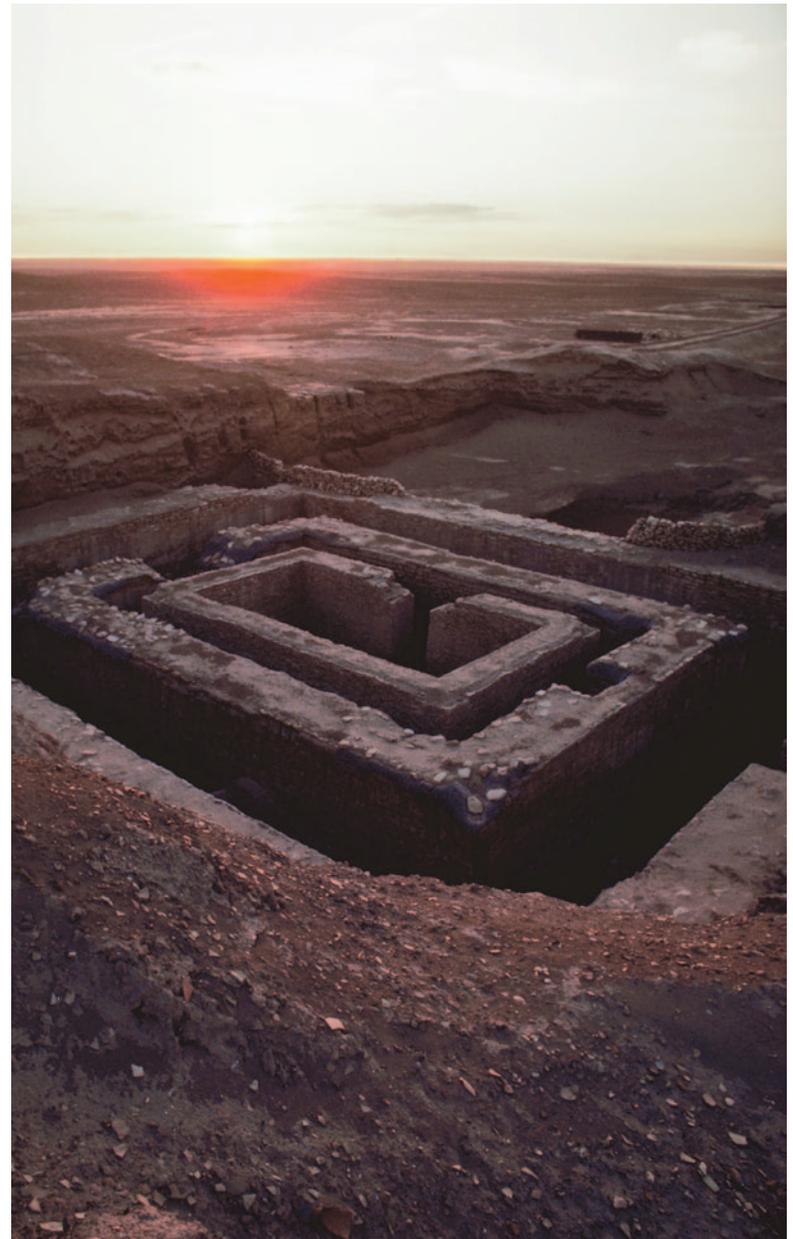
Between approximately 3600 and 2600 BCE, the people of Uruk created the innovations characteristic of cities ever since: social hierarchies, specialized occupations, coercive political structures, writing, religion and literature, and monumental architecture. What is a city? By “city” we mean simply a large group of people, tens of thousands, collected into a whole and living in a defined place with structures designated for a range of specific social functions. To support a city, people living on the land around it had to be able to generate stable surpluses of food from the fertility of the soil and the creatures that inhabited it. In addition, people in the city had to devise ingenious ways to distribute those surpluses, ways that would reinforce constructive patterns of conduct and practice.

Cities began to emerge about the same time in various places around the world. But most archaeologists agree that it is fair to claim Uruk (pronounced OO-rook) as one of the world’s first cities (*Uruk* is its Akkadian name; its own people called it *Unug*; the Hebrew Torah called it *Erech*; and its current name, *Warka*, is Arabic.) Uruk arose about 5,500 years ago, no time at all when measured against the more than 200,000 years of *Homo sapiens* or the 6 million years of hominin evolution.

Location, location, location

Uruk arose in the place now called Iraq, about 150 miles south of modern-day Baghdad. Greek historians called this area Mesopotamia, or “the land between the rivers.” Those rivers were the Euphrates to the west and the Tigris to the east, both of which flowed from the Taurus Mountains in Anatolia (now Turkey) in the north down to the Persian Gulf in the south.

By roughly 4000 BCE people living in higher places in what is now Iraq had settled down to care for domestic sheep and goats and to grow wheat, barley, and peas. Yet their climate was changing; less rain was falling, and they needed to move to more stable sources of water.



The ruins of Uruk

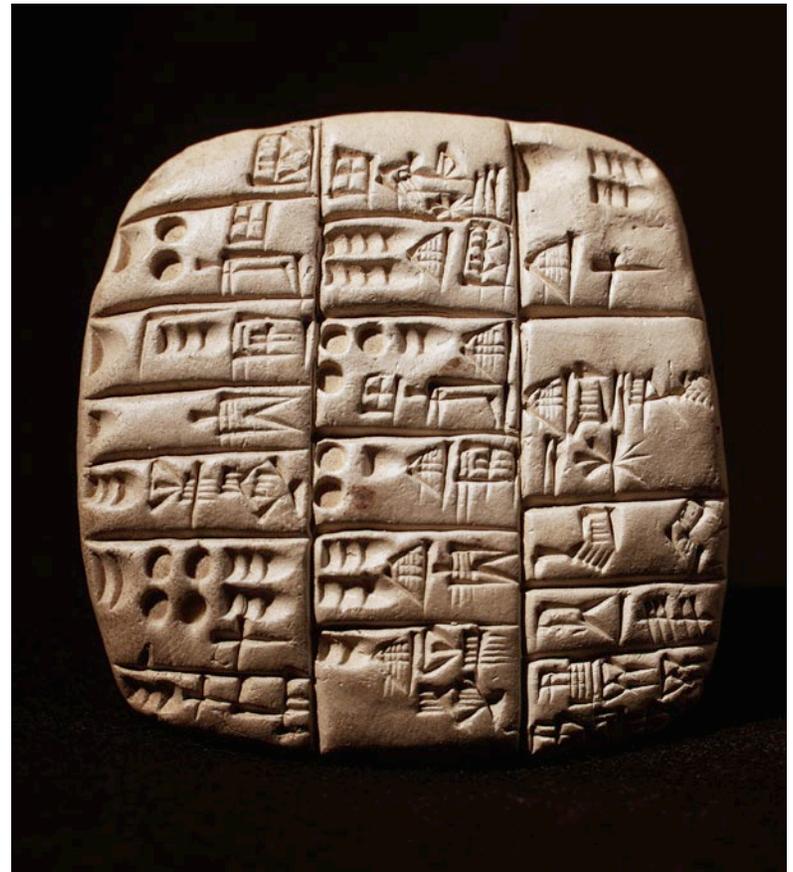
As people migrated into the two river valleys, they found that the soil produced abundant crops due to the fertility of topsoil from repeated flooding of the rivers. They could grow enough to store surplus grain, enough to support other individuals with occupations other than farming. The surplus grain needed to be collected and distributed; probably priests first managed this task. In addition to grains and domestic animals, people had plenty of fish and fowl from the river and marshes. Beer had already been invented, and a goddess of beer, named Ninkasi, was worshipped.

Writing, beliefs, and everyday life

A great deal is known about Uruk because of excavations of the site beginning in 1850 and because the earliest writing in the world comes from there, dated to about 3500 BCE. People in Uruk wrote on clay tablets with reeds. The writing is called “cuneiform,” named after the wedge-shaped reeds that writers pressed into wet clay. Since clay tablets are more durable than the silk, bark, bamboo, or papyrus used by other people for writing, many of Uruk’s tablets have survived and are now held in museums throughout the world.

From inscriptions found in Uruk we know that its people built a temple to a sky god called An and another one to his daughter, Inanna, goddess of love and war (later known as Ishtar). Inanna served as the patron goddess of Uruk; its inhabitants believed that they attracted her there by building a special house for her, staffed with priests and servants. The priests managed the people’s contributions and gradually built up their power, using temples as centers for the redistribution of surplus food.

As people learned to farm, they changed their clothing from wild-animal skins to what they could make from their domesticated animals and plants. In Mesopotamia this meant that most people wore woolen garments made from the fleece of their sheep, even in hot weather. Only the elite could wear linen, a textile made from the fibers of flax plants, because the process of making it took much longer than weaving or knitting wool.



Cuneiform writing was produced by pressing reeds into wet, unhardened clay

Uruk at its height

By 5,000 years ago Uruk held 40,000–50,000 people, and after another few hundred years it reached its peak of 50,000–80,000 inhabitants. By that time there were 11 other cities between the rivers, and they engaged in frequent warfare with each other over land, water, and other resources. Priests gradually had to share their power with warrior leaders, a system that eventually evolved into a single king ruling each city.

Early clay tablets in Uruk contain a “standard professions list,” which listed a hundred professions from the king down through ambassadors, priests, and supervisors and on through stonecutters, gardeners, weavers, smiths, cooks, jewelers, and potters. The social structure was topped by a small ruling and priestly elite, with a much larger group of commoners who either owned property or did not, and a bottom small group of slaves, those who were captured in war, convicted criminals, or people heavily in debt.

As a single authoritarian ruler emerged to lead Uruk and its surrounding farms and villages, historians say that the first state emerged almost simultaneously with the first city. The state consisted of powerful elites who could coerce labor and tribute. Why did the majority of people allow a few people so much power? This is difficult to answer, but on the one hand it seems that the elites took power as more resources became available. On the other hand, it seems that citizens gave power in exchange for organization, which permitted large-scale projects like irrigation, and for security and protection. What may have begun as consensual power may have evolved into coercive power as elites accumulated more resources.

Writing began in Uruk as a way to keep track of how many sheep, goats, and measures of grain passed through the central warehouses. It began with pictures made in wet clay representing the various goods. After about 400 years people had figured out how to use symbols and abstract numbers instead of drawing a picture for each item. They used a small wedge to represent one, a small circle to represent 10, a large wedge for 600, and a large circle for 3,600. Their system of numbers was based partly on 10 and partly on 60 for measuring grain. This latter base-60, or “sexagesimal,” system led to viewing a circle as 360 degrees.

After about a thousand years, people in Uruk had developed their system of writing sufficiently to compose hymns, funeral songs, and superhero epics. Here are some lines from “The Lady of the Evening,” a hymn to the evening star, which represented Inanna (Sumer refers to the area where people spoke Sumerian, from the vicinity of modern-day Baghdad down to the Persian Gulf):

At the end of the day, the Radiant Star, the Great Light that fills the sky,
The Lady of the Evening appears in the heavens.
The people in all the lands lift their eyes to her...
There is great joy in Sumer.
The young man makes love with his beloved.
My Lady looks in sweet wonder from heaven.
The people of Sumer parade before the holy Inanna.
Inanna, the Lady of the Evening, is radiant. I sing your praises,
holy Inanna. The Lady of the Evening is radiant on the horizon.
(Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983)

Poets in Uruk also gave us our first superhero story — in fact, our first recorded story of any kind — *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The tale imagines Gilgamesh, a king who may have actually ruled Uruk at about 2750 BCE, as 2/3 divine and 1/3 human. He has a friend, Enkidu, who becomes civilized and stops living as a wild hunter. They go on many adventures together, one of which results in Enkidu being condemned to death, and Gilgamesh has to accept the loss of his friend. This beautiful story has several modern versions. Here are a few lines describing the city of Uruk:

When at last they arrived, Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi [the boatman],
“This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how
its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase,
more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple,
sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty,
walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its
mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built,
observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards,
the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the
houses, the public squares.
(Mitchell, 2004)

The legacy of Uruk and Mesopotamia

Despite all the amazing innovations by its people, Uruk faced eventual decline. After Mesopotamia experienced several hundred years of constant warfare, Sargon of Akkad (ruled 2334–2279 BCE) conquered most of it. A serious drought occurred in about 2250 BCE. By 1700 BCE all of southern Mesopotamia had declined into a backwater of other empires. The underlying reasons seem to be environmental. The irrigation that Mesopotamians used to increase their crop yields increased the salinity, or salt content, of the soil. (As the sun evaporated the water standing in the fields, it left the mineral salts that had been dissolved in the water.) As the salinity of the soil increased, the yields of grain, especially of wheat, decreased gradually. By 1700 BCE crops were depleted by as much as 65 percent.

Mesopotamia had a new time of glory as Babylonia, under Hammurabi (ruled 1792–1770 BCE) — who had his capital at Babylon, a city about 250 miles northwest of Uruk on the Euphrates River. Hammurabi may be most famous for his Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest examples of a “written” set of laws. Other empires warred with Babylonia until it had a final moment under King Nebuchadnezzar, who in 586 BCE conquered Judah and Jerusalem and sent at least 10,000 Jewish people into exile in Babylon.

This is thought to be close to their original home. According to the Old Testament, Abraham came from the city of Ur, one of the 12 city-states in southern Mesopotamia, located about 50 miles southeast of Uruk. Apparently Abraham left Ur in about the 20th century BCE, in the midst of drought, warfare, and collapse, to travel southwest with his band of followers, eventually to settle in what is now Israel, carrying with them traditions from Mesopotamia.

Traditions from southern Mesopotamia also were adopted by Greek scholars, who got them from Babylonia. Especially in mathematics, ideas from Mesopotamia persist. Our day is still divided into 24 hours, each hour into 60 minutes, and each minute into 60 seconds. A circle still consists of 360 degrees. Cuneiform writing was used regionally until the beginning of the Common Era, when it disappeared; about 300 current scholars have learned



Hammurabi receives the laws from the Mesopotamian deity Shamash

to read it. By 300 CE people had mostly abandoned Uruk, and it was completely empty by the time of the Arab conquests in 634 CE.

People in Uruk put together all the pieces of what we call civilization 5,000 years ago. They combined kings, writing, monumental temples and palaces, specialized occupations, and literature into a culture remarkably similar to what we still know, despite the many changes that have occurred since.

Sources

Leick, Gwendolyn. *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City*. London: Penguin, 2001.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Schmandt-Besserat, Denise. *How Writing Came About: Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.

Wolkstein, Diane, and Samuel Noah Kramer. *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

Image credits

Sumerian statuette of a priest, c. 3000 BCE
© Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS

Sumerian ruins of Uruk
© Nik Wheeler/CORBIS

Detail of a cuneiform tablet from Tello in southern Mesopotamia
© Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS

Detail of the stele of Hammurabi
© Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS