

Uruk: 5,000 Years of the Megacity

Pergamon Museum

Through Sept. 8

Berlin

Long before Hong Kong, Dubai and Tokyo there was Uruk, the city of the legendary king Gilgamesh and the first recorded urban center in history. "Uruk: 5,000 Years of the Megacity," at the Pergamon Museum here, argues that this ancient city—now Warka in southern Iraq, roughly 180 miles from Baghdad—contained the origins of urban life as we still know it.



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This clay tablet gives an accounting of grain products.

The exhibit makes its case by presenting a variety of innovations, including mass-produced goods and the first known system of writing. Organized to mark the 100th anniversary of the first excavations at Uruk, the show is a sweeping presentation of archaeological objects (including loans from the British Museum and the Louvre), architectural reconstructions and digital renderings that provide the most complete overview of the metropolis ever assembled.

For more than three millennia, Uruk was one of the world's centers of science, culture and religion. Founded about 4000 B.C., over the course of 800 years it underwent a dramatic shift from an assemblage of small villages to a large urban area with a highly developed administration, bureaucracy and diversified society. By the start of the third millennium B.C., it had grown to two square miles in area and had roughly 40,000 inhabitants. For more than 2,000 years, Uruk was the largest city in the world, surpassed in size only by Babylon in the sixth century B.C.

"We thought for a long time about what to call the exhibit," explained Ralf Wartke, deputy director of the Museum of the Ancient Near East, whose collection is housed in the Pergamon. "We chose the word 'Megacity' to deliberately invoke places like Tokyo or Mexico City and their monumental structures and defining characteristics of city life."

The exhibit wisely takes Gilgamesh as a point of departure. "Very few people actually know about Uruk, but everyone's heard about Gilgamesh," said Mr. Wartke, meaning both the king and the epic that contains a flood narrative similar to the Bible's. Mr. Wartke suggested that the lack of eye-catching finds from Uruk comparable to those from ancient Egypt might have something to do with the city's relative obscurity. The exhibition aims to correct this by highlighting Uruk's major role as the cradle of urban dwelling.

Archaeological research at Uruk has met with frequent interruptions; with the outbreak of the Second Gulf War in 2002, excavations stopped completely. But Uruk has been spared damage and looting thanks largely to the government's commitment to protecting the site.

Visitors to the show are greeted by an imposing figure long considered to be Gilgamesh. It is a replica of a statue from the palace of the Sumerian king Sargon that is now housed at the Louvre. In the Pergamon, it is positioned at the beginning of the processional road leading to the Gates of Ishtar, the ornately tiled entrance to Babylon that is one of the most impressive reconstructions in the museum's collection.

The first room of the exhibit discusses the parallels between the mythic and historical city of Uruk and displays some stunning terra cotta busts and reliefs depicting popular episodes from the epic. It is unclear from archaeological evidence whether Gilgamesh actually existed. If he was a flesh-and-blood ruler, ancient near-Eastern man certainly elevated him to the stature of a god. He certainly became the prototype of the ideal ruler, and the Sumerian kings claimed descent from him. This is illustrated by his inclusion in a clay list of Sumerian kings from 1740 B.C. on loan from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England.

Time and again, the exhibit stresses the dimensions of Uruk from an ancient perspective. According to tradition, Gilgamesh himself erected the imposing city walls, made up of more than 300 million bricks and measuring 26 feet high and almost four miles in length. But the exhibition also focuses on the specific innovations developed at Uruk and shows how they often arose in response to new challenges posed by urban life. About 3000 B.C., Uruk had developed the technologies to sustain a massive population. The city's financial and administrative systems relied on the world's first known system of writing, cuneiform, which was used to record transactions, issue receipts and compile inventories. The exhibit even displays a recipe for brewing beer, as well as lexical lists and glossaries that scribes compiled and relied on and which, more recently, have been of invaluable help to scholars. This symbolic system of notation also has shown scholars how writing first developed to provide a permanent record of information rather than as a way to set down spoken language.

Representing Uruk's mass-produced goods are beveled-rim bowls that were made using molds and often used for workers' rations. Among Uruk's other advances was the quickly turning potter's wheel, a systematic division of labor and the invention of cylinder seals. These cylindrical pieces of stone, some barely an inch in length, were incised with intaglio designs featuring gods and animals. When rolled across wet clay, the image would appear in relief, repeated more than once if the cylinder was rolled over any length. They were commonly used for trade, and could contain information about the origin or quantity of goods. Additionally, they were a way to guarantee authenticity and even served as antitampering devices. The most impressive example on display is a magnificent lapis lazuli seal with a carved bull for a handle. "You could say that Uruk is to blame for bureaucracy," Mr. Wartke said half-jokingly when referring to the city's penchant for validating and recording goods.

The city walls and massive temple complexes with ziggurats or step-pyramids attest to the ingenuity of Uruk's architects and builders. A monumental reconstruction of an adobe brick facade is one part of the museum's permanent collection incorporated into the show. Decorated with alcoves, mosaics, colored clay and stone cones, it dates from 3500 B.C. and comes from Uruk's sacred district, Eanna. This zone was not only where devotion to Inanna, ancient Mesopotamia's chief female deity (and a counterpart to the Akkadian goddess Ishtar) was practiced; it was also something of the city's downtown, a vast complex of buildings where much of Uruk's legislative, administrative and financial power was concentrated.

But beyond any single innovation, the exhibition argues that the most modern aspect of Uruk was its status as a forward-thinking urban center. One walks away convinced that Uruk, like all great cities, was far more than the sum of its parts. As Mr. Wartke explained, "Uruk shares so many of the structures that one still finds today in megacities. Especially taking into account all the cultural achievements and innovations, things that connect the present to the past and continue to inform the way that we live and cohabitate nowadays."

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