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ARCHAEOLOGY

# Ancient Mesopotamian histories

A historian explores the remarkable early civilizations of the Near East, from Uruk to Babylon

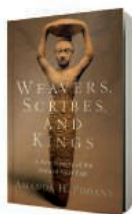
By Andrew Robinson

The civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome are relatively familiar to most people today. We know of these societies through buildings such as the Pyramids of Giza and the Parthenon of Athens, the art of pharaohs such as Ramses II and Tutankhamun, and the works of Homer and Plato. Many modern words are also derived from Greek and Latin, including “science,” borrowed from the ancient Roman *scientia*, meaning “knowledge, awareness, understanding.”

However, this familiarity does not extend to the civilizations of the ancient Near East, despite extensive and intriguing evidence from stone inscriptions such as King Hammurabi of Babylon’s code of laws and clay tablets such as the epic of Gilgamesh, excavated in this region. Written in the cuneiform script, these inscriptions began to be deciphered during the mid-19th century. However, the vast majority of cuneiform writing turned out to be related to government and commerce rather than ideas and literature, and

it lacked the aesthetic appeal of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. Even the fact that our measurement of time and angle uses a sexagesimal system derived from the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia is not a widely familiar fact.

“It is astonishing just how much we know about some people of the ancient Near East and how deeply we can dive into



**Weavers, Scribes, and Kings**  
Amanda H. Podany  
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their world, but it is also striking how little this knowledge has penetrated into the wider consciousness of educated people today,” remarks academic historian Amanda Podany in her new book, *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings*. Thus Podany, who specializes in this civilization, introduces her remarkably lively, if inevitably lengthy, chronicle aimed at nonexperts, which ranges from the Uruk period of 3500 BCE to Alexander the Great’s conquest

of Babylon, where he subsequently died in the fourth century BCE.

Consider the celebrated stone statue of King Enmetena of Lagash, who ruled around 2450 BCE. Discovered at excavations in Ur a century ago, it was stolen from Iraq after the 2003 invasion, rediscovered in New York in 2010, and subsequently returned to the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Although its head is missing, the statue’s cuneiform inscrip-

The ziggurat at Ur, shown here soon after its excavation in the 1920s and '30s, remains a mystery.

tion informs us that Enmetena erected the self-portrait before the god Enlil in his temple and named it “Enmetena (is the) Beloved of the god Enlil.” He added that his personal god, Shul-utul, should “forever pray” to Enlil on behalf of Enmetena. Did the king intend to avoid the bother of making his own prayers to Enlil? No, argues Podany: Ancient Mesopotamians would have believed the statue contained part of Enmetena’s “very being,” which was perpetually praying to Enlil.

Amazingly, Uruk—the world’s first city, located east of modern Samawah, Al-Muthanna, Iraq—was the same size in 3500 BCE as Athens was in 500 BCE. Its organizational requirements led to the development of proto-cuneiform script, which probably predated the earliest writing of Egypt. As Podany remarks, “it must have been magical to the Early Dynastic kings to realize that words, which had previously been as ephemeral as the wind in the trees, could be pinned down and preserved on stone.” Now the kings, like the gods, might live forever, so to speak.

Advanced writing systems notwithstanding, the cities of ancient Mesopotamia lacked many truly striking buildings. The ziggurat at Ur, for example, was—on its longest side—only a quarter of the length of the side of the Great Pyramid of Egypt, built half a millennium earlier. It lacked the pyramid’s smooth sides, rising instead in several giant steps. And unlike the pyramid, which enclosed three burial chambers, the ziggurat was a solid pile of bricks inscribed in cuneiform. It had crumbled into ruins by the sixth century BCE, when it was restored by the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Nabonidus. One is forced to wonder about the structure’s purpose. “Honestly, scholars wonder too,” admits Podany.

Yet Babylonian culture was much admired by the Persians under Cyrus the Great, who conquered Nabonidus’s empire in 539 BCE, and also by the Macedonian Greeks under Alexander, who conquered the Persian rulers in 331 BCE. Both invaders sought to preserve the ancient city, and cuneiform continued to be written as late as 74 or 75 CE in Babylon and 79 or 80 CE in Uruk. However, with the rise of the Roman Empire in the second century CE, the region’s cultural history was finally eclipsed. For the Romans, “ancient” literature was Greek, and their alphabetic script in Latin was derived from the Greek alphabet. With this development, the living culture of Mesopotamia vanished after more than three millennia. ■

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