

THE CAMBRIDGE WORLD HISTORY

*

VOLUME III

Early Cities in Comparative Perspective,
4000 BCE–1200 CE

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Edited by

NORMAN YOFFEE



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Mesopotamian cities and urban process, 3500–1600 BCE

GEOFF EMBERLING

Mesopotamia is one of the world's oldest urban cultures. Its first cities, which may have housed 50,000 people or more, were built by 3500 BCE and many were continuously inhabited for as much as 3,000 years. During this long history, cities defined Mesopotamian culture.

According to Mesopotamian ideology, the gods selected rulers who exercised kingship over cities and in some cases over territories. In the Sumerian King List, composed just before 2000 BCE, kingship was said to have "descended from heaven" and then resided in different cities in turn. Kings were proclaimed to be the builders of cities, or at least of their symbolically important components, which included temples, palaces, city walls, and canals.

Confronting this literary ideology in which gods and kings were the central (indeed, the only) actors, the archaeological and documentary record shows that Mesopotamian urban communities were composed of a variety of identities, factions, and local authorities. Ancient Mesopotamian cities were built around kings and gods, but without slaves, workers, artisans, priests, bureaucrats, merchants, tribal leaders, and other intermediate political figures, they could not sustain themselves.

An extensive body of historical and archaeological research provides a starting point for a synthetic understanding of Mesopotamian cities. As built environments, Mesopotamian cities were focused on the temple of the major city god and the palace of the ruler. Narrow streets ran through urban neighborhoods that were densely packed with houses, shrines, craft workshops, and even taverns, and larger streets connected these to city gates. The community was surrounded by a monumental city wall, and the city gates and harbors located on canals or river branches served as market areas. Open spaces were also part of the city plan – the Epic of Gilgamesh describes the city of Uruk as comprising the city, date-groves, and clay pits for making mudbricks in equal area, along with the temple of Ishtar. Streets

and canals could define neighborhoods or quarters in the city and along with larger spaces could also support public festivals and rituals like processions and feasts.

This familiar picture of Mesopotamian cities as physical places and communities, however, is a pastiche stitched together from different cities and different times. While it is understandable given the many gaps in our knowledge that we have assembled a static model of Mesopotamian cities, at the same time it deprives them of their dynamic, changing, and lived qualities. Cities are dynamic environments that themselves actively shape political, economic, and social relationships within their communities and across broader landscapes, and understandings of urbanism in Mesopotamia must take this into account.

Cities

Following V. Gordon Childe, we can broadly define cities as communities in which many households do not produce most of what they consume. It is difficult to specify the minimum population or density of occupation that defines a city, as the population of an urban center varies with local conditions of transportation and productivity of land. In practice, however, the threshold of population and productive specialization is often passed quickly and dramatically, leaving relatively little ambiguity in definition.

In newly developing cities, some people may have specialized in intensified agriculture or herding, and others – perhaps because of political or social position – worked to coordinate or control. Still others, using the surplus made available (or extracted), began to develop crafts or other technical knowledge and skill.¹ Economic specialization and social differentiation proceeded together. The crucial developments are concentration of people and specialization (or differentiation) of population, considered not as traits, but as ongoing processes. For provision of food and supply of population, cities also required and reshaped a rural hinterland.

People were moved into cities by political authority or military force or may have moved into them to seek economic opportunity or for protection. These varied processes could lead to the dissolution of old identities – for

¹ Guillermo Algaze, *Ancient Mesopotamia at the Dawn of Civilization: The Evolution of an Urban Landscape* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

example, a breakdown of kinship ties² – as well as formation of new communities. Disease and nutrition in ancient cities probably led to decreased life expectancy, but whether cities required continual immigration to maintain their population remains an open question.

A dynamic view of the integration and disintegration of urban networks³ from the rise of the first cities to the profound changes of the mid-second millennium BCE suggests that cities functioned to concentrate wealth and political authority in the hands of the elite, with economic processes that were increasingly differentiated and efficient. As people moved into cities and then back into an increasingly controlled rural landscape, old identities were modified and new urban identities were developed. The urban built environment also changed over the centuries, with development of new architectural forms as well as corresponding political practices and ideologies.

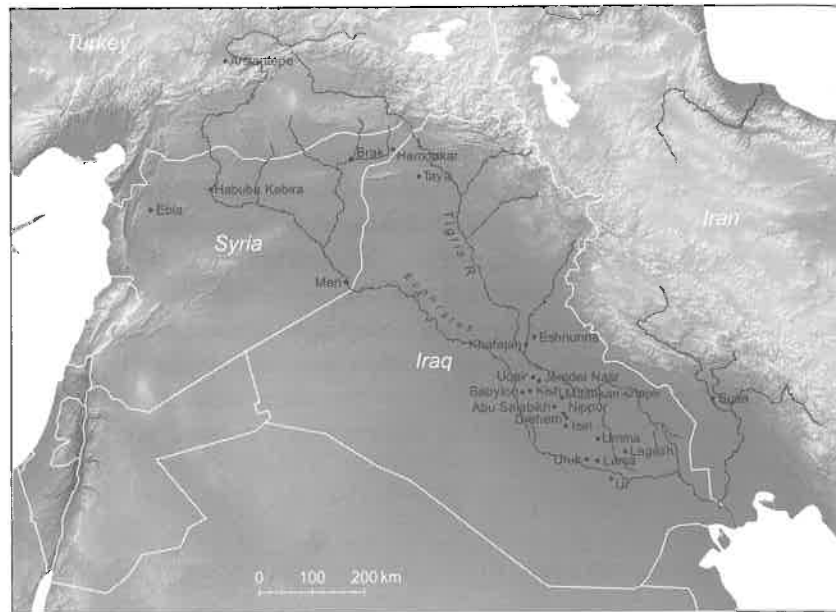
Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers

Mesopotamia, the area defined by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, is bounded by mountains to the north and east and by desert to the west (Map 12.1). It can be geographically and culturally divided into three zones. Upper Mesopotamia is an arc of foothills and plains that extends from southeastern Turkey and northeastern Syria through northern Iraq. Known in later times as Assyria, it received enough rain to grow barley and wheat without irrigation. The ecology of this dry farming landscape constrained cities to a size of roughly 100 hectares until the intensive irrigation projects of the Neo-Assyrian period.⁴ Lower Mesopotamia, the alluvial plains of southern Iraq, was called Sumer and Akkad in early times and is known to historians and archaeologists as Babylonia after 2000 BCE. It receives little regular rainfall, and settlement depended on the construction and maintenance of irrigation canals, as it did in the adjacent Khuzistan Plain in southwestern Iran, part of ancient Elam. Finally, the shifting marshes of southern Iraq were an important source of fish, birds, and reeds, as well as political

² Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1938), 1–24. In Mesopotamia, kinship groups did not disappear in cities, but citizens had other social identities beyond their kin groups.

³ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use on the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁴ Tony Wilkinson, "The Structure and Dynamics of Dry-Farming States in Upper Mesopotamia," *Current Anthropology* 35 (1994), 483–520.



Map 12.1 Map of ancient Middle Eastern cities mentioned in the text (courtesy of Jason A. Ur).

refuge. Mesopotamia as a whole is relatively poor in natural resources other than fertile farmland, although Upper Mesopotamia possesses more stone and wood than the south. The entire area depended on trade from the mountains and sometimes from the Persian Gulf for many types of stone, copper, tin, large timbers for building, and valuable materials like silver, gold, and ornamental stones.

The first Mesopotamian cities formed during the Uruk period (4000–3100 BCE) in separate cultural traditions in Lower and Upper Mesopotamia. In the later part of this period, people from southern cities expanded throughout Mesopotamia and beyond.⁵ While the nature and cause of this expansion are not agreed upon, it is clear that some local polities were conquered, and population in some areas decreased significantly. By the end of the Uruk

⁵ Guillermo Algaze, *The Uruk World System* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Mitchell Rothman (ed.), *Uruk Mesopotamia and Its Neighbors: Cross-Cultural Interactions and their Consequences in the Era of State Formation* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2002).

period, cuneiform writing had been invented (see Nissen, Chapter 6, this volume), and increasingly elaborate works of art marked the emergence of specialized artisans as well as new ideologies of authority.

During the Jamdat Nasr (3100–2900 BCE) and Early Dynastic (2900–2350 BCE) periods, Lower Mesopotamia, whose inhabitants largely spoke (or at least wrote in) Sumerian, was divided among cities that competed for power, with military conflict and the establishment of some brief regional hegemonies. Upper Mesopotamia, whose inhabitants spoke dialects of Semitic languages including Akkadian, as well as other languages, had been significantly deurbanized after the Uruk expansion but cities were rebuilt, borrowing cuneiform writing and other cultural forms from Lower Mesopotamia, beginning around 2600 BCE.

Much of Mesopotamia was conquered by the Akkadian Empire (2350–2200 BCE). After its collapse, the Ur III Empire (2100–2000 BCE) ruled Lower Mesopotamia and intensified administration as well as production while also extracting tribute from the Zagros Mountains to the east. Even before the Ur III period, tribal groups speaking Amorite (a West Semitic language) began settling in Lower Mesopotamian cities, and many rulers of the succeeding Isin–Larsa (2000–1800 BCE) and Old Babylonian (1800–1600 BCE) periods also claimed Amorite descent. During these centuries, kings from Susa in southwestern Iran to Yamkhad (centered on modern Aleppo) competed for political and economic dominance. Competing states were centered at Isin, Larsa, Babylon, Eshnunna, and Mari, among others, and they encompassed multiple urban centers. These periods also saw the first extensive use of cuneiform writing for non-palace, non-temple business, with letters and legal documents being written by and for private businesses and individuals as well as for palaces and temples. The collapse of this system, the arrival of Kassite rulers in Babylonia, and the rise of larger territorial states including Mitanni and Assyria in the years after 1600 BCE mark significant changes in the Mesopotamian political landscape.

There are three major sources of data for understanding Mesopotamian urbanism. The first comprises excavations and surface surveys of cities themselves – we have substantial areas of city and town plans apart from the monumental structures at a number of sites, including (Late Uruk) Habuba Kabira, (Early Dynastic III) Abu Salabikh, late third millennium Tell Taya (Figure 12.1), and Old Babylonian Ur (Figure 12.2), among others. The second source is the historical record – more than 100,000 cuneiform tablets for the periods under discussion here, the majority of which were purchased rather than excavated and so lack archaeological

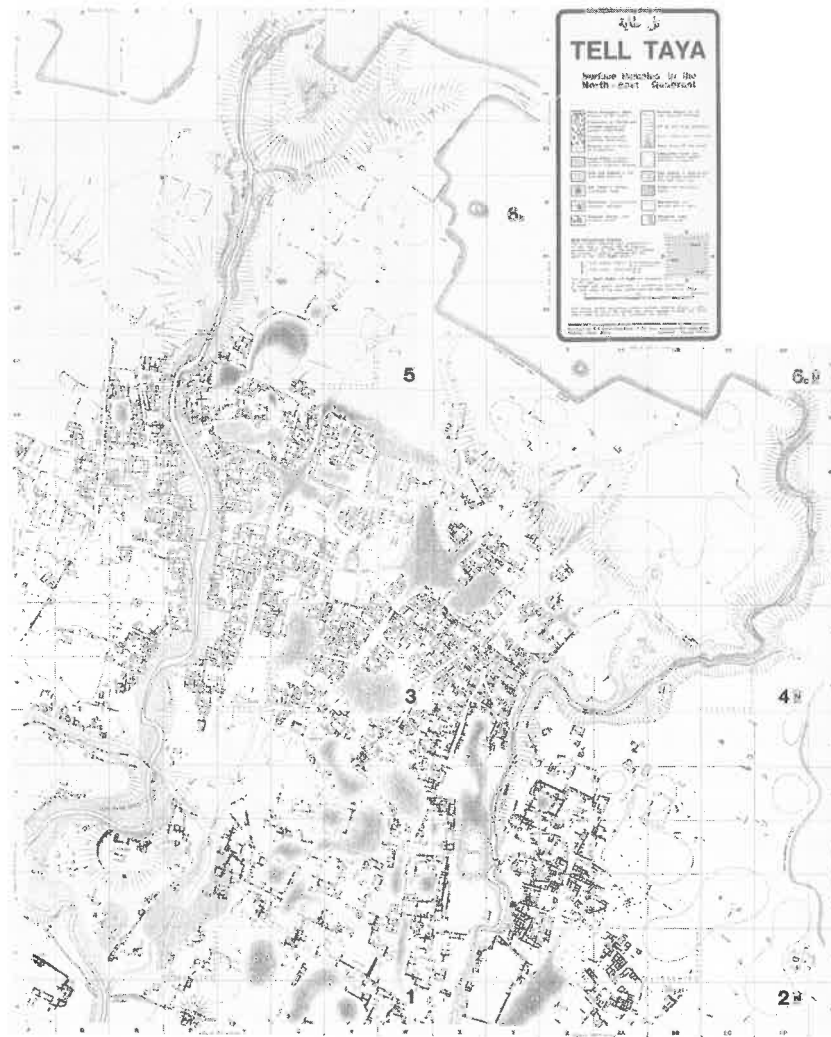


Figure 12.1 Plan of surface remains at Tell Taya, c. 2300 BCE, suggesting houses and a radial pattern of streets (Julian E. Reade, "Tell Taya [1972-73]: Summary Report," *Iraq* 35 [1973], 155-87; courtesy of Julian Reade, map by George Farrant).

context. The number of cuneiform tablets known has recently been significantly increased by tablets looted in Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s. Third are the fundamental regional archaeological surveys undertaken in Lower Mesopotamia by Robert McC. Adams and colleagues and more recent

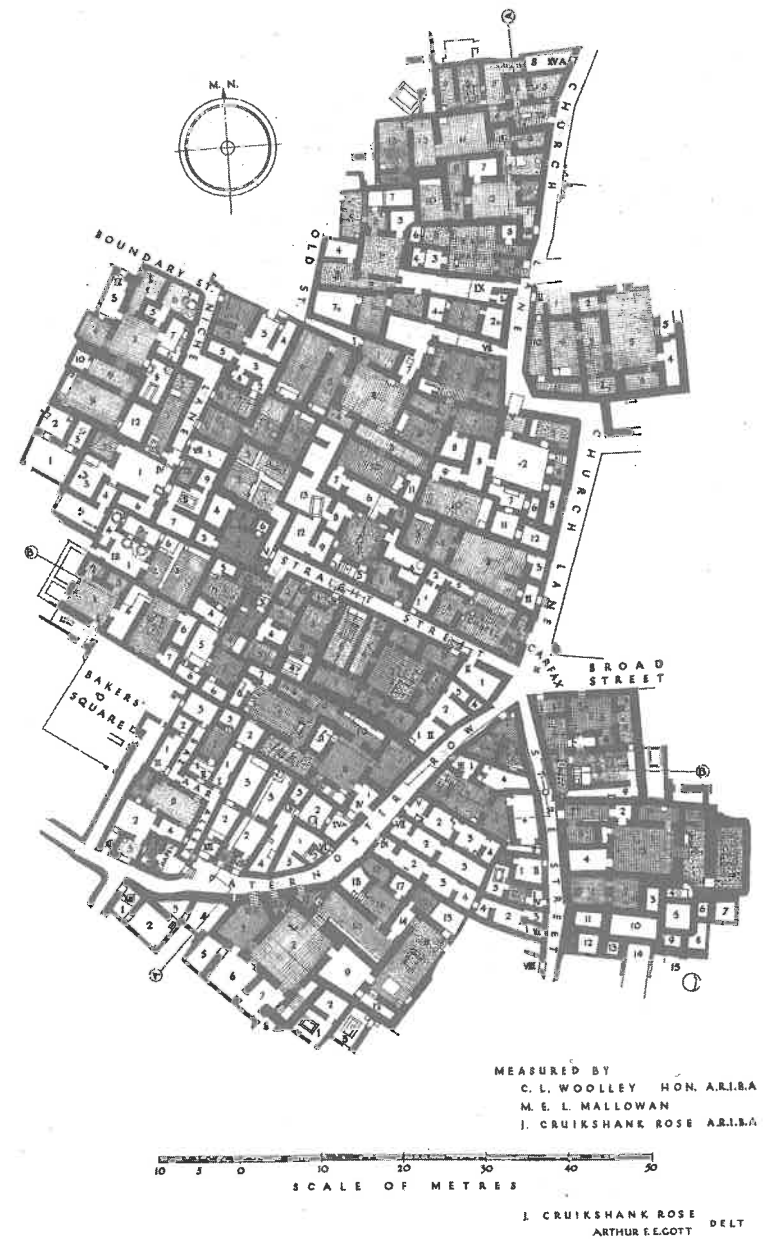


Figure 12.2 A neighborhood in the city of Ur, c. 1800 BCE (C. Leonard Woolley and M. E. L. Mallowan, *The Old Babylonian Period, Ur Excavations 7* [London: British Museum, 1976], fig. 124; courtesy of the Penn Museum).



Figure 12.3 Ancient clay tablet plan of the city of Nippur, c. 1300 BCE, with cuneiform captions naming gardens, a canal, the Euphrates River, city gates, and the temple and ziggurat of the god Enlil. The ancient city plan corresponds remarkably closely to the remaining ruins of the city (courtesy of the Hilprecht-Sammlung).

surveys across Upper Mesopotamia. Reanalysis of Adams' survey data has assessed and enhanced his results using models of site contemporaneity and satellite imagery.⁶ A unique source is a clay tablet with a plan of the city of Nippur (Figure 12.3).

Each of these sources of data has well-known biases. Because of the focus of earlier excavations on monumental areas of sites, and because of the size and complex multi-component nature of most Mesopotamian settlements, our city plans are incomplete and chronologically uneven. There are no cases in which excavation has shown changes in city plan over any appreciable area because of the difficulty of working at the large scales this would require. The cuneiform texts record the perspective of the literate elite – palaces and temples in earlier periods, and private but still elite individuals beginning in about 2000 BCE. Although the number of available texts is large, they are also unevenly distributed. Discovery of a major palace archive from the mid-third millennium BCE, for example, might significantly alter our understanding of the relative role of palace and temple in the south. Finally, the available survey data for Lower Mesopotamia is hampered by alluviation that has covered an unknown but likely significant number of smaller and earlier sites, and the methods used by Adams, while

⁶ Susan Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden that Never Was* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jennifer Pournelle, "KLM to CORONA: A Bird's-Eye View of Cultural Ecology and Early Mesopotamian Urbanization," in Elizabeth C. Stone (ed.), *Settlement and Society: Essays Dedicated to Robert McCormick Adams* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), pp. 29–62; and Carrie Hritz, "Tracing Settlement Patterns and Channel Systems in Southern Mesopotamia Using Remote Sensing," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 35 (2010), 184–203.

exemplary for the time, could be now improved by more comprehensive methods were it possible to work in Iraq. Neither of these problems applies to Upper Mesopotamia, where site visibility as well as survey methods have generally been excellent.

Political leaders and the rise of cities in Mesopotamia

Accounts of the origins of cities in Mesopotamia have focused on the city of Uruk since excavations there in the late 1920s and 1930s recovered abundant evidence of monumental structures of the late fourth millennium BCE at the center of a large city along with numerous early cuneiform texts (Nissen, Chapter 6, this volume).

There have been two significant comparative discussions of the origins of the city at Uruk. Adams focused on the city's location at an intersection of ecological zones in Lower Mesopotamia – irrigated farmland, pasture, and marsh – and suggested that the city arose as a center to coordinate exchange of these products in a redistributive system managed by an emergent urban elite.⁷ In another study, Wheatley proposed that early cities were built around temples.⁸ Accepting the existence of temples in pre-urban Mesopotamian settlements of the Ubaid period, he suggested that the religious authority of priests fostered the development of redistributive economy and that population subsequently grew around these ceremonial complexes, with temples being the dominant institution in the early cities. He based his argument in part on early studies of a temple archive from the city of Lagash (c. 2500 BCE) that had proposed that all the land and labor in the city was controlled by the temple.

It is not surprising forty or more years later that these explanations both require revision. First, the role of temples in the first cities of Mesopotamia was overstated. Forest has proposed that the so-called "temples" of the Ubaid period might relate to elite feasting instead.⁹ These buildings all have relatively open access that is quite different from what we know of later Mesopotamian religious practice, in which the divine statue would be protected from view. Expanding on Forest's suggestion, is it possible that

⁷ Robert McC. Adams, *The Evolution of Urban Society* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966).

⁸ Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971).

⁹ Jean-Daniel Forest, *Les premiers temples de Mésopotamie (4e et 3e millénaires)* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1999).

these structures might have been meeting places for the assembly of elders that has been postulated as an important institution in early Mesopotamian cities? In addition, continuing study of the Lagash archive has shown that the "temple-city" model dramatically overstated the proportion of land owned by one temple, and that, moreover, the temple in question was supervised by the queens of Lagash.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is now clear that cities developed in Upper Mesopotamia at about the same time as the rise of Uruk. Recent work in northeastern Syria has shown that Tell Brak, some 750 kilometers north of Uruk, had developed into a large city before 3500 BCE. Brak encompassed about 130 hectares of settled area by that time (perhaps 10,000–20,000 inhabitants), with differentiated settlement areas that included a temple with large numbers of votive offerings known as the Eye Temple, as well as residential areas and areas of workshops for ceramics and lithics at the edges of the city.¹¹ Other northern sites of this date, including Tell Hamoukar and Arslantepe, also show signs of being part of complex urban systems.¹² We thus have to consider explanations for the rise of Mesopotamian cities that encompass both the dry farming north and the irrigated fields and marshland of the south.

Both Uruk and Brak developed from the small-scale polities of the Ubaid period and were initially organized by extended kin-based social units whose leaders retained a political role in the new and developing cities. Brak and Hamoukar appear to have developed from clusters of smaller earlier occupations, and Uruk itself may have developed from two settlements named Eanna and Kullab. A unique building at Brak that may have been a feasting hall associated with a relatively large concentration of wealth¹³ may suggest the activities of these leaders. It is reasonable to suggest that these leaders may have been the members of the assemblies (of elders) that have various roles in Mesopotamian documents and literary texts into the early second millennium BCE, a proposal that

¹⁰ Scott Beld, "The Queen of Lagash: Ritual Economy in a Sumerian State," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan, 2002.

¹¹ Joan Oates, Augusta McMahon, Philip Karsgaard, Salam Al Quntar, and Jason A. Ur, "Early Mesopotamian Urbanism: A View from the North," *Antiquity* 81 (2007), 585–600.

¹² Clemens Reichel, "Administrative Complexity in Syria during the 4th Millennium B.C. – the Seals and Sealings from Tell Hamoukar," *Akkadica* 123 (2002), 35–56; and Marcella Frangipane (ed.), *Economic Centralisation in Formative States: The Archaeological Reconstruction of the Economic System in 4th Millennium Arslantepe* (Rome: Sapienza Università di Roma, 2010).

¹³ Geoff Emberling and Helen McDonald, "Excavations at Tell Brak 2000: Preliminary Report," *Iraq* 63 (2001), 22.

remains difficult to prove.¹⁴ A similar notion of the preservation of pre-urban social forms in cities has recently been proposed for Tiwanaku (Janusek, Chapter II, this volume), and represents a broader pattern in the formation of cities.

Most of the characteristics we associate with urban societies developed in Mesopotamia only after the first cities were built. This seems an obvious statement, perhaps, but it means that we cannot use later forms to explain the growth of the first cities. Thus, we cannot rely on the economic attraction of markets, the protection offered by city walls, or the pull of temple institutions to explain the rise of Mesopotamian cities, since these only developed fully in later historical times. A political explanation for the rise of cities would propose that leaders of kin-based corporate groups formed alliances (and assemblies) to manage conflict, and drew members of their groups into central places where these alliances were negotiated. Out of these political negotiations arose single leaders whose greater authority over greater numbers of people enabled them to organize agricultural intensification, construction projects, and military campaigns that brought captives as slaves into the cities. Temples may have had their origins in providing divine sanction to these new political realities.

Rule

Mesopotamian cities had rulers at least from the time of the first written records, and perhaps earlier. They were given a variety of titles in early Sumerian texts, including En, Ensi, and Lugal. Scholars continue to debate whether these differences were simply terminological or more substantive, perhaps reflecting different traditions of rule in different regions, cities, or ethnic groups, or functional differences between more military, administrative, or religious roles.¹⁵

In spite of the different terms used for kings, the range of functions they performed remained remarkably consistent through Mesopotamian history.

¹⁴ Marc van de Mieroop, "Democracy and the Rule of Law, the Assembly and the First Law Code," in Harriet Crawford (ed.), *The Sumerian World* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 277–89; and Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 109.

¹⁵ Gebhard Selz, "He Put in Order the Accounts . . ." Remarks on the Early Dynastic Background of the Administrative Reorganizations in the Ur III State," in Leonid E. Kogan, N. Koslova, S. Loesov, and S. Tishchenko (eds.), *City Administration in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), Vol. II, pp. 5–30.

As attested in representations beginning in the Late Uruk period, kings ruled on behalf of the gods and were held responsible for maintaining the gods' goodwill through rituals and by the construction and maintenance of temples. They were military leaders and skilled hunters as well as heads of their own palace household. The king was also the highest judicial authority in the state. What changed over time, in part because of the concentration of population into cities and the resulting availability of labor and wealth, was the scope of royal control and the scale of military and economic action it enabled.

One of the major physical manifestations of the ruler's authority in Mesopotamian cities was the palace, Sumerian "e-gal" or "big house." Early possibly palatial structures remain difficult to interpret. A fragment of an Ubaid period (c. 4500 BCE) monumental building with rooms more than 10 meters long found at Tell Uqair may have been an elite residence, but limited exposure makes it difficult to understand.¹⁶ The functions of the monumental complex of buildings at Uruk remain unclear (Nissen, Chapter 6, this volume). And at Jamdat Nasr a large but fragmentary building contained tablets and seal impressions indicating the presence of scribes and administrators (c. 3100–2900 BCE). There was no direct evidence of a royal residence in the preserved portion of the building, but it may have been a palace.¹⁷

It is not until the later Early Dynastic period (c. 2600–2350 BCE) that excavations and palace archives converge to show similar practices of rule across much of Mesopotamia. Palace buildings were organized around a series of courtyards of increasingly controlled access, with reception rooms arranged around them. They contained residential areas for the king and a separate area for the women of the palace, as well as quarters for palace officials, attendants, slaves. Cooking, craft production, storage, and areas for ritual activity were also commonly part of these structures. The palace archives from Ebla (c. 2350 BCE) and Mari (c. 1800 BCE) (Figure 12.4) provide abundant information about the operation of these palaces.¹⁸

¹⁶ Seton Lloyd and Fuad Safar, "Tell Uqair," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 (1943), 131–58.

¹⁷ Roger Matthews, *Secrets of the Dark Mound: Jemdet Nasr 1926–1928* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2002).

¹⁸ Jean-Marie Durand, "L'organisation de l'espace dans le palais de Mari: le témoignage des textes," in Edmond Lévy (ed.), *Le système palatial en Orient, en Grèce et à Rome* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), pp. 39–110; and Paolo Matthiae, *Ebla, la città del trono: Archeologia e storia* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2010).

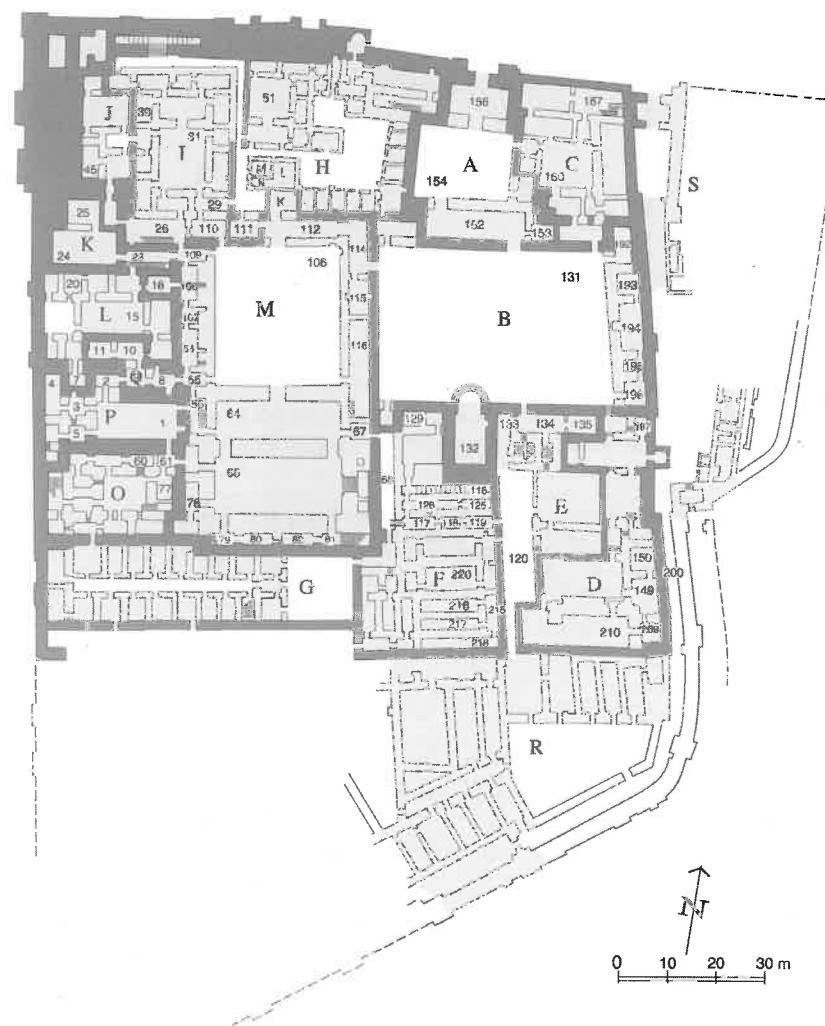


Figure 12.4 The palace of king Zimri-Lim at Mari, c. 1750 BCE. Open spaces are in white, roofed spaces in gray, and letters designate functional areas of the palace; the throne room is at the bottom of Area M, room 65 (Jean-Claude Margueron, *Recherches sur les palais mésopotamiens de l'Âge du Bronze* [Paris: Guethner, 1982], fig. 437).

At Tell Brak, arguably the northern administrative center of the Akkadian Empire, three monumental buildings cover something like 10 percent of the occupied area of the city. These constructions are not residential palaces of the imperial household, but seem to serve broader interests of

the empire, with administrative and storage areas along with small shrines and at least one larger courtyard with a throne base that was certainly a ceremonial area.¹⁹

Ritual and religion, temples and public spaces

Mesopotamian temples were the households of the gods. The deities were physically brought into their cult statues through rituals and the statues were clothed and fed. Major temples were not congregational spaces; rather, the divine statue was powerful and dangerous, and only those with ritual knowledge and preparation could be in its presence. In addition to their ritual function, however, temples were also significant economic institutions that held agricultural land, managed livestock, organized long-distance trade, and made loans.

The concentration of population into cities in early Mesopotamia led to the construction of the first temples and then to the increasing size of temple institutions, along with an increasing differentiation of size and location of temples and of the roles within them. Temples supported an ideology of rule in which kings were selected and supported by the gods and at the same time provided wealth and authority to priests and temple administrators who could resist royal authority.

Nissen (Chapter 6, this volume) discusses problems with the interpretation of the massive structures at the center of Uruk itself, the largest of which are more than 80 meters long and tripartite in form. Forest has proposed that only two quite different structures at Uruk be designated as temples: the so-called Steingebäude and the Riemchengebäude, each of which has a concentric plan with protective outer wall with a maximum dimension of 20–30 meters.²⁰ The plans of these buildings are more consistent with what we know of later Mesopotamian temples and cult practices than are the tripartite structures.

Mesopotamian cities contained temples dedicated to different deities. Beginning in the Early Dynastic period, massive temples within often curving enclosure walls were built at a number of sites. Of these “Temple Ovals” whose patron deities are known, most were devoted to the goddess Inanna rather than to the major deity of the city (Figure 12.5a).

¹⁹ David Oates, Joan Oates, and Helen McDonald, *Excavations at Tell Brak* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2001), Vol. II.

²⁰ Forest, *Premiers temples*.

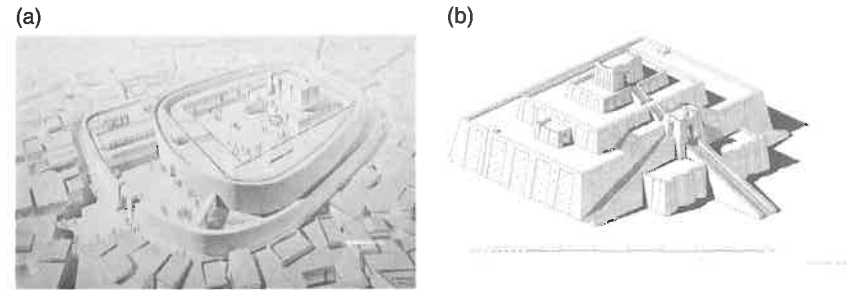


Figure 12.5 Reconstructions of Mesopotamian temples: the Temple Oval at Khafajah (c. 2400 BCE; Delougaz, *The Temple Oval at Khafajah*, frontispiece; courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) and the ziggurat at Ur (c. 2100 BCE; C. Leonard Woolley, *The Ziggurat and its Surroundings*, Ur Excavations 5 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939], pl. 86; courtesy of the Penn Museum). As with most archaeological reconstructions, many features of these drawings remain conjectural.

The enclosure walls of these temples encompass a space more than 100 meters long. The most completely excavated of these structures, that of Khafajah,²¹ provides some evidence of the temple's role as an economic institution, with kilns, and one storeroom containing stone-working debris and another containing agricultural implements including baskets and sickle blades set in bitumen. None of these temples is located in a particularly salient part of the city, neither elevated nor central. In some of these cases, what we would expect to be the Early Dynastic city god's temple is obscured by later construction. In those cases, then, these large temples would have existed alongside other temples at least as large. The notion that each city had a single patron deity thus appears from remaining architecture (as well as texts mentioning gods) to be an oversimplification.

Alongside these monumental temples, smaller temples or shrines appear within the neighborhood structure of Early Dynastic cities including Mari and Khafajah.²² These smaller temples were built within existing neighborhoods and so were often irregular in plan and dedicated to relatively minor deities. While we know little from texts about the activities of these smaller temple institutions, they could have been the focus of significant wealth in

²¹ Pinhas Delougaz, *The Temple Oval at Khafajah* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940).

²² Pinhas Delougaz and Seton Lloyd, *Pre-Sargonic Temples in the Diyala Region* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

the form of offerings. The plan of a residential neighborhood in Old Babylonian Ur contains a number of even smaller neighborhood shrines.²³

The most visible form of Mesopotamian religious architecture, however, was the ziggurat – the stepped temple tower (Figure 12.5b). Although temples on platforms like the White Temple at Uruk were predecessors, and structures in Early Dynastic Kish may have been ziggurats, the first textual references to ziggurats date from the Ur III period (c. 2100–2000 BCE), relatively late in the historical sequence. The ziggurats of Lower Mesopotamia had stairways leading to a shrine at the top. Herodotus suggested that these shrines served as a location for the sacred marriage ritual in which the king impregnated a priestess representing the goddess Ishtar.²⁴ The cult statue of the deity did not reside in the ziggurat itself but rather in a temple at its base, and these temples were dedicated to the major deity of the city.

Ziggurats provided a ritual focus to the urban built landscape. They physically represented the huge labor force available to the state at the same time as they masked its power as service to the gods. It is intriguing that these structures would first be built when the imperial conquests of the Ur III kings led to the development of supra-urban political institutions. The Sumerian King List, which had a similar focus on cities as the proper locus of royal identity, was also composed during this time.

A comprehensive study of public ritual outside temples has not been written for Mesopotamia, but it is likely to have been a significant way that the urban community developed a communal identity. One form of public ritual would have been royal burials. At Ur, royal burials of the late Early Dynastic period (c. 2500 BCE) were located close to the center of the city. The burial ritual included a funerary procession, suggested by ramps leading down to the burial chamber as well as the presence of carts in the burials, and the burial of numerous retainers. While sacrificial burial was not a common practice in Mesopotamia, contemporary elite burials at Kish and Abu Salabikh also included carts, and although we know relatively little about other royal burials, it is reasonable to suppose that they also included public performances.

²³ Kathryn Keith, "The Spatial Patterns of Everyday Life in Old Babylonian Neighborhoods," in Monica L. Smith (ed.), *The Social Construction of Ancient Cities* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2003), pp. 56–80.

²⁴ Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sacred Marriage and Popular Cult in Early Mesopotamia," in Eido Matsushima (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993), pp. 81–96.

It is also clear from ration texts and month names that the statues of gods were removed from temples and taken to visit other gods in their own temples, sometimes in boats. These processional rituals and associated public feasts would perhaps have focused on linear public spaces. The much later Processional Way of Babylon, with its molded glazed brick sculptures, was one such major public route.

Neighborhood and community

Cities, neighborhoods, and communities were formed and reformed by movements of people into and away from cities. Yet as difficult as it is to locate, survey, and perhaps excavate neighborhoods, it is even more difficult to investigate how urban community structure might change through time.

One of the most informative studies of Mesopotamian urban layout is the surface survey of the Isin–Larsa town at Mashkan-shapir (Figure 12.6).²⁵ Based on the traces of canals and walls, and based on the relatively even distribution of evidence for high status and for craft production in each zone of the city, Stone proposed that the city was arranged in roughly equivalent residential segments, with separate areas for palace, major temple, and the *kārum* (harbor).²⁶ Letters and legal documents of this period corroborate this idea of urban organization into wards or neighborhoods, which were known as *babtum*, and had their own authorities including local judges.

To what extent is this picture representative of other Mesopotamian cities of this or any other period? Is it possible that other cities might be organized by status, with elite families concentrated in one area? Pollock argues that houses excavated near the major temples in the Diyala region were relatively high status.²⁷ Is it possible that some cities might have been organized by profession? Studies of texts found in houses in Old Babylonian Ur suggest that people living close to the temple of Nanna were associated with the temple, and the city of Uruk may have been organized around craft guilds in the first millennium BCE.²⁸ The evidence, as sparse as it is, suggests

²⁵ Elizabeth C. Stone and Paul Zimansky, *The Anatomy of a Mesopotamian City: Survey and Soundings at Mashkan-shapir* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004).

²⁶ Elizabeth C. Stone, "City-States and Their Centers: The Mesopotamian Example," in Deborah Nichols and Thomas Charlton (eds.), *The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1997), pp. 15–26.

²⁷ Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*.

²⁸ Marc van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 181.

The City of Mashkan-shapir

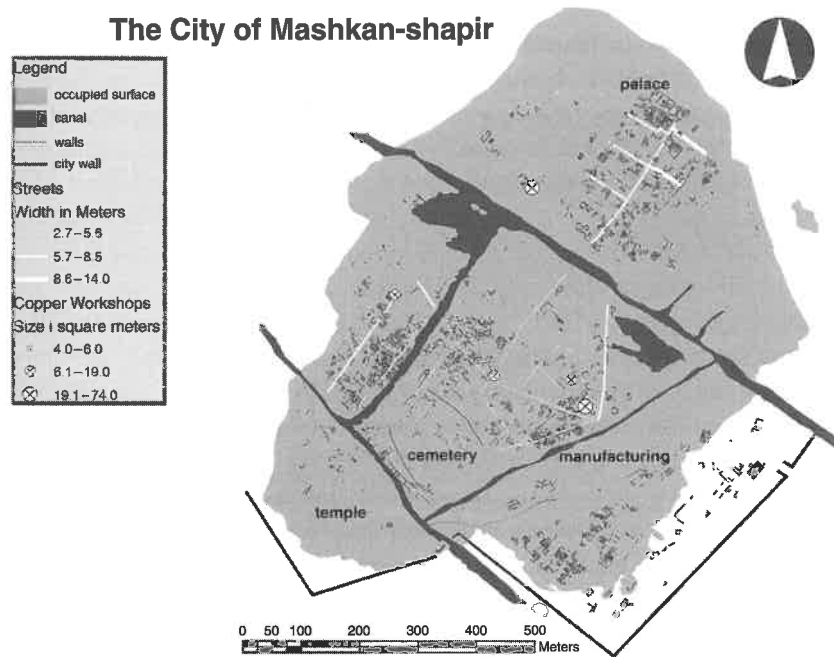


Figure 12.6 Plan of Mashkan-shapir based on surface survey and satellite imagery (Elizabeth C. Stone, "Surface Survey and Satellite Reconnaissance: Reconstructing the Urban Layout of Mashkan-shapir," *Iraq* 74 [2012], 65–74, fig. 1). Courtesy of Elizabeth C. Stone.

that there may have been varying forms of urban community organization through Mesopotamian history. Is it possible, for example, that the segmentary organization of Mashkan-shapir owes something to the increasing presence of Amorites in this region during the early second millennium BCE?

Another challenge in understanding Mesopotamian urban communities is the focus of the texts on palace and temple institutions, which makes it difficult to know what proportion of the population was not mentioned in these documents. Occasional mentions of groups like the *imru*, often translated as "clan," suggest that there were rural groups, and perhaps also people within the city, who were not recorded in these documents. During the Old Babylonian period, when textual production expanded considerably beyond the public institutions, texts mention a range of non-palace, non-temple authorities that include *rabiānum* (head-man) and the city elders and assembly.

Mesopotamian cities in their landscape

Mesopotamian cities depended on a countryside that urban institutions had a significant role in constructing. This process provides a basis for considering ways that Mesopotamian cities and urban institutions and residents shaped their rural landscape physically and ideologically.

Settlement

Survey data provide clear evidence for the way in which the process of urbanism altered the Mesopotamian landscape. In their initial formation, cities drew population from sometimes significant distances. This phenomenon is visible during the fourth millennium BCE around Uruk²⁹ and in the mid-third millennium BCE in Upper Mesopotamia.³⁰ It is possible that some of the population increase came from nomadic groups settling down, but in light of the decline in settlement on plains along the Zagros foothills, the evidence for violent conflict at some northern sites (Brak and Hamoukar), representations of conflict and prisoners on cylinder seals, and the appearance of terms for "slave" (written with signs meaning "man [or woman] from the mountain") in the earliest written texts that date to this period, it is also likely that some of the population represented prisoners of war.³¹

The proportion of people living in large settlements in Sumer increased in the early third millennium BCE and reached a peak at the end of the Early Dynastic period (c. 2400 BCE) in which Adams estimated that 78 percent of the population lived in sites larger than 40 hectares. The center of population moved away from Uruk and back to the Nippur area during the Akkadian period³² and the population of Lower Mesopotamia increased as much as five times from the mid-fourth to the end of the third millennium BCE.³³ The population increase clearly expanded the labor force potentially available to the large institutions at the same time as it intensified the challenges of administration.

Steinkeller provides a different perspective on the proportion of rural settlement around Ur III Umma in the Ur III period (c. 2100–2000 BCE).³⁴

²⁹ Adams, *Heartland of Cities*, p. 64; and Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 71–2.

³⁰ Jason A. Ur, "Cycles of Civilization in Northern Mesopotamia, 4400–2000 BC," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 18 (2010), 387–431.

³¹ Robert K. Englund, "The Smell of the Cage," *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal* 4 (2009).

³² Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 73–4.

³³ Adams, *Heartland of Cities*, pp. 69 and 142.

³⁴ Piotr Steinkeller, "City and Countryside in Third-Millennium Southern Babylonia," in Stone (ed.), *Settlement and Society*, pp. 185–211; and Robert McC. Adams, "An

According to his survey of place names, 70–80 percent of the population was settled outside Umma itself; Adams' survey data had estimated just 25 percent. This divergence is partially due to the different time scales of textual reference as opposed to archaeological survey, and partly a reminder of the proportion of rural settlements that survey may have missed in this alluvial environment.

The conquests of the Akkadian and Ur III Empires represented an extension of authority from an urban core across a broader territory. Ur III texts, in particular, describe a variety of specialized non-urban settlements that include rural estates (like Garshana, the estate of a general and a princess near Umma); massive centers for redistribution of imperial taxes (like Puzrish-Dagan [also known as Drehem]), and a variety of smaller sites including grain silos, threshing floors, and storehouses that enhanced production and distribution of agricultural products, as well as rural temples, weaving establishments, and stockyards.³⁵ The movement of people out of cities and into countrysides under imperial control and the increasingly specialized manipulations of the landscape are part of a development in which the large urban institutions extended control into the countryside.

In addition to drawing rural populations into cities, urban institutions also maintained political relationships with tribal groups that lived outside their direct control. This dynamic is known in detail for the Old Babylonian period, in which letters between kings and leaders of Amorite tribal groups, particularly at Mari, depict complex political and military interactions.³⁶

Agriculture

Urban institutions increasingly involved themselves in agricultural production around Mesopotamian cities.³⁷ The concerns of temple and palace officials included construction of canals, demarcation of institutional land, management of agricultural labor (plowing, seeding, threshing), and receipt and storage of products including barley, wheat, and dates. The status of the

Interdisciplinary Overview of a Mesopotamian City and its Hinterlands," *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal* 1 (2008).

³⁵ See Walther Sallaberger, "Ur III-Zeit," in Walther Sallaberger and Aage Westenholz, *Mesopotamien: Akkade-Zeit und Ur III-Zeit* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999), pp. 119–390.

³⁶ See Dominique Charpin, "Histoire politique du Proche-Orient Amorrite (2002–1595)," in Dominique Charpin, Otto Edzard, and Marten Stol, *Mesopotamien. Die altbabylonische Zeit* (Freiburg: Academic Press, 2004), pp. 25–480.

³⁷ Henry T. Wright, *The Administration of Rural Production in an Early Mesopotamian Town* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, 1969).

people working for the palace and temple households ranged from slaves (prisoners of war and debtors) to semi-indentured laborers who were given rations of food (beer, bread, and oil) and wool for their labor. For the moment, these activities are known mostly from texts, although more detailed landscape archaeology with excavation of rural features and settlements will surely recover some evidence of land use.

When the first royal inscriptions proclaiming the activities of southern kings were written beginning in about 2500 BCE (although an earlier, unpublished inscription from Kish exists, according to P. Steinkeller), canal construction was among the first projects mentioned. In addition to providing water for irrigation and making efficient transportation of agricultural products possible, major canals were a visible symbol of the king's ideological role as provider. They also served as territorial boundaries that marked the extension of royal power. Inscriptions of Eannatum, ruler of Lagash, note that he defeated an alliance of enemies at a canal bordering the territory of Lagash, and in the Stela of the Vultures that records a conflict between Umma and Lagash over a field belonging to the god Ningirsu, canals form a part of the boundaries of the state.

Over the course of the third millennium BCE, the productive capacity of palace and temple households expanded dramatically. We do not know the extent to which this was the result of deliberate institutional policies of maximizing production or whether living conditions in and around the cities generated increasing numbers of people who needed food and work. Early texts record the dimensions of fields and the yield from them – at Jamdat Nasr, a town that was also the site of a large building that was likely a palace, the ruler ("en") held on the order of 300 hectares of agricultural land.³⁸ The estates of the Temple of Ba'u at Lagash – source of the "temple-city" debate – were by contrast nearly 4,500 hectares or 45 square kilometers.³⁹ During the Ur III Empire, the governor of Lagash was responsible for cultivating 858 square kilometers of land.⁴⁰

³⁸ Robert K. Englund, "Texts from the Late Uruk Period," in Pascal Attinger and Markus Wäfler (eds.), *Mesopotamien: Späturuk und frühdynastische Zeit* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1998), pp. 15–233.

³⁹ Igor M. Diakonoff, "The Rise of the Despotic State in Ancient Mesopotamia," in Igor M. Diakonoff (ed.), *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-Economic History* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), pp. 173–203.

⁴⁰ Kazuya Maekawa, "The 'Temples' and the 'Temple Personnel' of Ur III Girsu-Lagash," in Kazuko Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), pp. 61–102.

Field measurements and proportions were standardized within regions, and by the end of the third millennium BCE, officials categorized types and sizes of available land in land surveys.⁴¹ The overall impression of increasing control over the rural landscape is difficult to avoid, and at the same time, it remains difficult to estimate the proportion of the population that lived and worked beyond the regular labor requirements of urban institutions.

Herds and textiles

The concentration of population in cities also made possible the development of what would become the most important export from Lower Mesopotamia – woolen textiles. This extremely labor-intensive industry is mentioned in Late Uruk texts as well as being depicted on cylinder seals of that period, in which women (usually “pig-tailed”) are shown working, most commonly on textile production.⁴² Textiles were made in a variety of grades: some used for rations to workers, some for trade, and others to clothe the elite.

As with agricultural land, there is a clear trend through the fourth and third millennia BCE for intensification of institutional textile production. Some early texts mention shepherds and their flocks (the largest in the Jamdat Nasr period being about 1,400 animals).⁴³ These herds were also monitored for production of milk products and were used as offerings to the temple of Inanna. Early Dynastic texts from Lagash record rations to textile workshops of up to twenty-five female weavers.⁴⁴ By contrast, in provinces of the Ur III Empire, one text records 378 tons of wool, which would have come from something like 500,000 sheep and close to 15,000 weavers – mostly women, most dependent on rations from the temple – in a single textile factory.⁴⁵ Over 13,000 workers were employed by the “Wool Office” in the imperial capital of Ur, which also accounted for at least 2,000 tons of wool.⁴⁶ It is clear that not all these workers resided in the city and that

⁴¹ Mario Liverani, “Reconstructing the Rural Landscape of the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39 (1996), 1–41; and Maekawa, “The ‘Temples.’”

⁴² Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck, “And They Said, Let Us Make Gods in Our Image: Gendered Ideologies in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in Alison B. Rautman (ed.), *Reading the Body: Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 150–64.

⁴³ Englund, “Texts from the Late Uruk Period,” p. 147, fig. 50.

⁴⁴ M. Lambert, “Recherches sur la vie ouvrière. Les ateliers de tissage de Lagash au temps de Lugalanda et d’Urukagina,” *Archiv Orientalni* 29 (1961), 422–43.

⁴⁵ Hartmut Waetzoldt, *Untersuchungen zur neusumerischen Textilindustrie* (Rome: Centro per le Antichità e la Storia dell’Arte del Vicino Oriente, 1972), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen, “On the Textile Industry at Ur under Ibbi-Sin,” in Fleming Hvidberg (ed.), *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen* (Munksgaard: Hauniae, 1953), pp. 172–87.

aspects of production took place in the countryside. Nevertheless, at a time when the city of Ur itself occupied not much more than 50 hectares in area, 13,000 people working in a single industry represents an extremely significant concentration of population.

It is not clear from these records where the 500,000 sheep were pastured, but this too represents a significant impact on the landscape. An innovation of the Ur III Empire was a series of centralized distribution centers that received taxes and tributes and redistributed them as necessary. The best-known of these was the livestock redistribution center at Puzrish-Dagan, and it is likely that some of the sheep and wool mentioned in the accounts of the Wool Office at Ur came from the broader imperial territory. In Old Babylonian times, palaces and temples conducted smaller-scale contracts with shepherds to produce wool.

Textiles produced in Mesopotamian cities were among the goods traded by Mesopotamian merchants. In the Early Dynastic period, these merchants were sent on trading expeditions by temple institutions. By the early second millennium BCE, trade was increasingly although not exclusively carried out by private family businesses, the best-known of which were the Assyrian traders who dealt in textiles from southern cities, along with tin, for copper and gold in the mountains of Anatolia. The clearest evidence for what we would recognize as modern economic behavior – fluctuating prices and profit motives – comes from the private businesses of the Old Assyrian period. Some scholars consider entrepreneurial behavior and most aspects of market economies to characterize Mesopotamia from the time of the earliest cities. However, others suggest that a market economy was itself a process that emerged in cities over the course of centuries, and particularly with the existence of huge productive capacity and the mechanisms for control and distribution at the end of the Ur III empire.

The economy of Upper Mesopotamian cities may also have focused on herds and textiles. The Early Dynastic palace archive at Ebla – Mesopotamian only in the broad sense of using cuneiform texts – suggests that the royal herds exceeded 600,000 animals.⁴⁷ Moreover, a distinctive urban form of Upper Mesopotamia known as *Kranzhügel*, with concentric walls enclosing empty space, may relate to the need to protect large flocks from attack.

⁴⁷ Lucio Milano, “Ebla: A Third-Millennium City-State in Ancient Syria,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* 2 (1995), 1219–30.

Conclusion: a landscape of cities

Mesopotamian cities have been extensively studied, and our view of these cities has ossified into a composite and static picture developed from all Mesopotamian cities. The account presented here proposes that ancient cities were dynamic and varied, and that they generated significant economic, political, and social change in Mesopotamian society. A potentially important step toward understanding these processes is the project begun by Tony Wilkinson and McGuire Gibson at the University of Chicago, Modeling Ancient Settlement Systems (MASS).⁴⁸ Mesopotamian cities were concentrations of population that were increasingly influenced by urban institutions of temple and palace. By concentrating people in cities, Mesopotamian rulers were able to increasingly produce and exchange agricultural products and textiles, which allowed them to build the central institutions of cities themselves. Urban merchants also contracted with temples and palaces, and were protected by rulers who negotiated treaties with their peers. The history of Mesopotamia cannot be told without reference to its cities, and an account of Mesopotamian cities resembles in some ways an account of Mesopotamian civilization itself.

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Teotihuacan: an early urban center in its regional context

SARAH C. CLAYTON

The first century BCE in the northeastern Basin of Mexico witnessed the emergence of Teotihuacan, a city that rapidly developed into the capital of a regional state of unprecedented size, monumentality, ethnic and social diversity, and political power in the Mexican Highlands (Map 13.1). Teotihuacan was a "primate" center, its peak population of more than 100,000 people dwarfing that of all contemporaneous settlements in the region. A varied mosaic of farmers, craft specialists, merchants, and immigrants resided in the 20-square-kilometer area identified as the urban zone of Teotihuacan. Teotihuacan's population was not limited, however, to the capital; it also extended to several rural settlements from which the state derived many resources necessary for sustaining the urban population. Teotihuacan extended its influence to such far-flung regions as the Gulf and Maya Lowlands, west Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Maya Highlands, engaging in interregional relations that likely ranged from occasional diplomatic interaction to political manipulation through acts of conquest. After flourishing for more than six centuries, Teotihuacan's political prominence and elite institutions had irrevocably dissolved by around 650 CE. Although its eminence was probably waning by the sixth century, Teotihuacan's eventual end was marked by calamitous events, as the city's central monuments and residences were violently attacked and burned. The city continued to be inhabited, supporting a relatively large population of perhaps 40,000, but it was never again to wield the degree of regional political power or interregional influence that it had previously achieved.¹

¹ George L. Cowgill, "The Central Mexican Highlands from the Rise of Teotihuacan to the Decline of Tula," in Richard E. W. Adams and Murdo J. MacLeod (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Vol. II, Part 1, pp. 250–317.