

The emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia: 'Ubaid and Uruk

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- 'Ubaid period (I, II, III, IV; about 5600 - 3900 BC)
- 'Ubaid style pottery was made by the first settlers on the southern alluvium, the "'Ubaidans"
 - 'Ubaid I and II were contemporary with people who made Halafian and Samarran style pottery to the north and in the hills
 - 'Ubaid I (and, according to some authors, "0") sites are on the natural ground surface; these are apparently the first settled occupations in southern Mesopotamia
 - there *may* have been mobile foragers or pastoralists earlier
 - who may have themselves settled down and become the 'Ubaid people
 - or who may have been displaced by the 'Ubaid people
 - or who may have mixed with incoming settlers to create the 'Ubaid culture
- One exception, the site of Tell Ouilli
 - underneath the lowest 'Ubaid levels are remains of buildings and artifacts that resemble Samarran material
 - suggesting that 'Ubaid culture was a development from Samarran settlers venturing into the southern alluvium
- Sea level was lower, coast may have been further out, much silt has accumulated
 - earlier sites may exist but be buried or under the sea
 - but generally nothing is found below the 'Ubaid 0, I, II levels at the bottom of known sites
 - since these were good places to live at the very beginning of the 'Ubaid period, you would think that they would also have been good places in the centuries before that
 - so the consistent absence of earlier material under these mounds suggests that there really were not many people living in the region before the 'Ubaid period
- Lack of rain in Sumer required that they use irrigated agriculture
 - so the 'Ubaidans settled along rivers and streams
 - they farmed the basic wheat, barley, and lentils, plus sheep, goats, and cattle
 - also hunted gazelle and horse, and fished
 - Wenke suggests that these foods were made into one-pot stews and porridges
- One thing that the 'Ubaid people had plenty of was clay
 - 'Ubaid pottery was decorated, made on turnette (slow wheel)
 - like that of their neighbors and antecedents, the Samarrans
 - got simpler over time, more utilitarian
 - other clay items:
 - clay sickles (!)
 - continued the tradition of clay figurines, both female and male
 - mud-brick houses
- But they did not have their own sources of building stone, precious stones, good wood, ores or metals, or many other materials
 - so they had to trade for them

- While people in the north continued on without developing larger towns or more complex social and economic organization, the 'Ubaid societies in the south became more complex
 - At least in part in order to get needed resources from neighboring areas and/or groups
 - they would have needed more substantial trade or procurement expeditions and associated economic and organizational arrangements
- Initially, all 'Ubaid settlements were small, relatively uniform, scattered along rivers over the entire alluvium
- by 4500 BC (middle 'Ubaid, or 'Ubaid II-III), there were a limited number of large centers (1000-3000 or even 5000 people), surrounded by a network of many small hamlets
 - small towns
 - rectangular houses of mud brick and reeds
 - the early levels at al 'Ubaid are an example
 - al 'Ubaid probably had some 750 residents
 - large towns
 - comparable in size to Jericho and Çatal Hüyük
 - but unlike Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, these 'Ubaid towns just kept expanding and getting more complex
 - and they had some distinctly different features:
 - densely packed rectangular houses and courtyards separated by alley-like streets
 - areas of larger, more elaborate residences with storage features (storerooms, storage pits, etc.)
 - central mounds with special architecture on them
- there was only one very large town in the 'Ubaid period: Eridu
 - first occupied 4750 BC; big by 4500 BC (Wenke has it founded in 5400 BC)
 - possibly up to 5000 people in 4500 BC
 - densely packed rectangular mud-brick houses
 - some built around courtyards
 - alley-like streets
 - large mud-brick temple
 - the same spot was used for a temple from 'Ubaid through Ur III times (conservatively, 4500 – 2000 BC, or 2500 years!)
 - rebuilt 13 times (or 17 times, according to Wenke)
 - i.e. each successive temple was used an average of 150 to 200 years
 - comparable to historic government buildings in Boston or Washington DC – but 13 to 17 times in a row!
 - the temple was initially a modest, one-room structure
 - eventually built up to a large complex on a high platform mound
 - that is, they got bigger and more elaborate with each rebuilding
 - from the beginning, these buildings had distinctive features:
 - a central rectangular room (the first was 3.5 X 4.5 m, or about 11 X 15 feet)
 - with a recess at one end containing a pedestal, possibly an altar
 - and a second, similar pedestal standing out in the main room
 - with signs of burning on top

- later temples (at Eridu and other sites, as well) had
 - more subsidiary rooms
 - increasing complexity of buttresses
 - built on raised platforms
 - typically fronted by a flight of stairs
 - always dominated by a larger, elongated central room (“cella”) with an altar at one end
 - with multiple smaller rooms surrounding it
- final temple (long after the 'Ubaid period) was on a high platform, 10 X 20 meters on top, with a stairway leading up the front of the platform to the temple entrance
- lots of fishbones in fill between temples suggests that the temple was for Enki, the god of water, who was the city god of Eridu in early written records
 - but these records are from much later than the 'Ubaid period, so projecting this god back into prehistoric times is only a reasonable hypothesis
- around the temple, buildings were arranged roughly in concentric zones:
 - elite houses closest to temple
 - craft workshops further away
 - farmers around the edges
 - suggests complex social organization with higher-status people somehow associated with temple
- this was a new kind of settlement and society
 - with one or a few large religious structures
 - that is, a shared institution, as opposed to household-level ritual as at Çatal Hüyük
 - such shared institutions may have already been appearing in Samarran and Halafian sites, with their central structures
 - these structures presumably served not only the inhabitants of the large town, but also the inhabitants of smaller towns nearby who didn't have their own
 - the temples must have been places where labor and goods were concentrated
 - simply to build and maintain the architecture
 - also to carry out whatever rituals or other activities were done there
 - higher-status people were associated with the religious institution (the temple)
 - we infer this because the largest, fanciest houses were generally near the temple buildings
 - they would have had some control over sources of wealth not available to others, thus economic power
 - this is evidently so from the size and quality of their residences
 - maybe also some power due to connection with the supernatural
 - the beginning of a new kind of stratified society
 - built around the elaboration of religion
 - was religion a cause, or a means? Or both?
- But oddly enough, there is little evidence of social ranking or differences in wealth in 'Ubaid cemeteries
 - Over 200 'Ubaid graves known from Eridu
 - They contain up to a few pottery or stone vessels, occasionally a figurine or some beads

- by the late 'Ubaid period: the 'Ubaid expansion
 - the regional population had increased dramatically
 - 'Ubaid people lived all along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, even up into modern Turkey
 - and to the south down the Persian Gulf shore of Saudi Arabia
 - goods were procured from as far away as India (amazonite, a semi-precious stone) and Anatolia (obsidian)
 - presumably by people who made long journeys to trade for it
 - outposts like Tepe Gawra were established in the north, presumably for trade
 - Tepe Gawra had three temples facing a central plaza
 - in very much the same style as the temples at Eridu
 - interestingly, much of this 'Ubaid expansion did not “take”
 - for example, the 'Ubaid sites in Saudi Arabia were occupied for long periods, but the region was eventually abandoned
 - and rather than leading to other forms of settled society or cities, the local people went back to foraging
 - this suggests that the 'Ubaid expansion really was an intrusion of people from the alluvium moving into new areas, not just a gradual spread of ideas
 - due to simple population growth and need for land?
 - trade?
 - political or military positioning?
 - note: there is no reason to think that the 'Ubaid people who comprised this expansion were politically unified; they just shared a common culture
 - so these sites might be outposts of many different independent chiefdoms centered on the larger towns
 - or they might just be other settlements of 'Ubaid people that “budded off” into available areas, without maintaining any political connection to people in the 'Ubaid heartland at all
 - the next step, to really big, complex Sumerian cities and states, only happened in the core of the southern Mesopotamian alluvium
 - not in these outlying areas
- the Mesopotamian alluvium was not developing in isolation
 - neighboring areas were also developing complex societies
 - apparently along similar lines
 - they interacted a lot with each other
 - example: the city of Susa, on the Susiana plain
 - a major center of the poorly-known Elamite culture, now known to extend over a large area east of southern Mesopotamia
 - limiting our attention to just southern Mesopotamia is a bit arbitrary
- Towards the end of the 'Ubaid period, many towns erected enclosing walls
- Overall, the changes were not a broad, uniform trend towards “civilization”, but rather a series of fits and starts, larger towns growing and shrinking, very patchy and irregular, but averaging out to a gradual increase in larger, more complex settlements
 - there was plenty of time for this; the 'Ubaid period was 1,700 years long!

- Uruk period: lots of changes (Early 3900-3600; Middle 3600-3400; Late 3400-3100 BC)
(some just use Early and Late; dates vary a bit)
- Uruk style pottery was made by the Sumerians
 - the style is named after the largest early Sumerian site, Uruk
 - people of the time would not have thought of themselves as being part of a single culture or group, but rather probably identified with the large town they lived in or near
 - even much later written sources show that people thought of their world as a patchwork of rival groups, not the larger category of “Sumerian” or “Mesopotamian” society that we talk about today
 - Note the difference between the Uruk PERIOD and the SITE of Uruk, which continued to be occupied in later periods
 - Uruk period is also called “protoliterate” period in some sources
 - other sources use “protoliterate” to refer to the transition from the Uruk period to the Early Dynastic period
 - this corresponds roughly to the time when Jemdet Nasr style pottery was used
- Preview and generalizations: Uruk period innovations (mostly in the Middle and Late Uruk periods)
 - plow
 - wheeled cart
 - fast potter’s wheel (vs. the slow wheel or tournette)
 - may have been invented a bit earlier, like the late 'Ubaid
 - allowed the mass production of ceramics
 - but apparently also the simplification and decline in craftsmanship of it
 - maybe invented in the late 'Ubaid, but came into wide use in the Uruk period
 - sophisticated copper casting (open molds, lost wax)
 - early writing by 3400 BC (beginning of Late Uruk period)
 - initially “pre-cuneiform”
 - initially for accounting for stored or exchanged goods
 - this system was elaborated in later periods to express other kinds of things, eventually political propaganda, letters between members of the elite, myths, epics, poetry/songs, etc.
 - we’ll look at the origin of writing in more detail later
 - dramatic rise in regional population and number of settlements
 - increasing total population
 - increasingly concentrated in large towns or cities
 - especially at the very end of the Uruk period: more on that later
 - development of city states
 - escalation of conflict between these city states
 - indicated by city walls
 - development of even more complex economy and exchange networks
 - goods they imported:
 - copper for high-status goods by 3500 BC (middle of Uruk period)
 - gold, silver

- jewelry stones: carnelian, turquoise, amethyst, lapis, quartz, many others
- stone for architectural carvings, bowls, sculpture
- presumably wood, although it is not usually preserved
- presumably many other perishable goods (textiles, oils, spices, other foods, etc.)
- organization of long-distance exchange
 - transport by ship along the Euphrates river, and also on the network of canals and canalized streams
 - (the Tigris, especially the upper parts, is steeper and less navigable)
 - centralized storage and control of trade goods in each city's central ceremonial or public precinct
 - this presumably developed from an elaboration of institutions originally set up for redistribution...
 - colonies in foreign territories
 - Tepe Gawra continued
 - plus additional, new colony-like sites
 - whether trade was the principal function of these sites is debated, but at least some did handle goods from distant regions
- Early Uruk (3900 – 3600 BC; 300 years long)
 - apparently continued same patterns as late 'Ubaid
 - a gradual local development from 'Ubaidian to Sumerian culture
 - concentration of ceramic production at large centers
 - that is, specialization at a larger scale
 - example Early Uruk artifact from Eridu: a ceramic male figurine ~ 3700 BC, 43 cm tall (17")
- Middle Uruk (3600 – 3400 BC; 200 years long)
 - they continued building and using temples
 - which got bigger and more elaborate over time
 - beveled-rim bowls appeared
 - enormous quantities of broken beveled-rim bowls were found in excavations
 - the pieces filled rooms and were banked up against walls of temple buildings
 - so many, and so ugly, that in many early projects they were not even counted or weighed
 - mass-produced
 - chaff-tempered
 - apparently made by pressing into a crude mold, maybe a hole in the ground
 - rim cut at an angle
 - so crude that they may have been intended to be disposable
 - suggested that they came in several more-or-less standardized sizes
 - for standardized ration distribution?
 - by the Late Uruk period, precuneiform writing used a picture of a bowl and a head to indicate the concept of a ration of food
 - what might the temple or other central institution have "paid" (or provided rations to) people for?

- maybe labor to build, maintain, renovate the monumental buildings
- make goods for trade by the temple, etc.
- if so, suggests a managed economy
 - fits in nicely with a redistributive system, centered on temple or perhaps other communal or public institutions
- lots of cylinder seals and stamp seals
 - stamp seals were already around; cylinder seals seem to have been invented in the Middle Uruk period
 - like a large cylindrical bead, as thick as a pencil or a fat magic marker, one to three inches long
 - carved on the exterior, used in a rolling motion
 - also may suggest commerce, accounting, etc.
 - may suggest administered labor: pay in rations, etc.
 - Note the illustration of a temple on a seal, part of the basis for reconstructions of the upper portions that no longer exist
 - notice the “serpo-felines”
 - also notice a boat
- Long distance trade: spread of Uruk style goods
 - Uruk pottery was widely exchanged, often by ship
 - to Susa (Elam), Zagros mountains, up the Euphrates river...
 - Uruk goods exported to Egypt
 - Uruk pottery, seals, silver, obsidian, lapis found in Egypt
 - Goods from Anatolia imported into Sumer
 - timber, olive oil, silver
 - Goods from Afghanistan (far east, over the Zagros mountains) imported into Sumer
 - lapis, gold
- The Uruk expansion: spread of Uruk people
 - roughly, a repeat of the 'Ubaid expansion
 - but some argue that it was more sudden, short-lived
 - Nissen sees an early, broad spread of Uruk culture, followed by the establishment of additional sites like Habuba Kabira abruptly in the last century or two of the expansion
 - and in slightly different areas
 - north and east as in the 'Ubaid expansion
 - plus Egypt, where 'Ubaid influence did not reach
 - but not south into Saudi Arabia, where there had been 'Ubaid settlements
 - Uruk people moved to distant places and established settlements
 - this was a rather sudden process, over just a few generations
 - thousands of people were involved
 - most moved into the mountains north and east of Mesopotamia
 - the upper Euphrates river and parts of modern Syria and southern Turkey
 - possibly as “merchant colonies” with Uruk pottery
 - far east into Zagros mountains of Iran

- and in northern Levant (Tell Habuba Kabira)
- some went to the Nile delta of Egypt, as we will see later
- the locations of many of these settlements made sense for controlling key points along trade routes or access to certain natural resources
 - but some did not...
- another possible interpretation is that these are groups that fled the southern Mesopotamian alluvium because of problems there
 - possibly warfare, political oppression, excessive taxation or tribute demands, etc.
- Example of a distant Uruk settlement: Tell Habuba Kabira, in the northern Levant, on the Euphrates river
 - got to be 8 ha in size (about 4 times the area of the central quad)
 - perhaps up to 5000 people lived there
 - using exactly the same styles of goods as people at Uruk
 - occupied for perhaps a few generations without fortifications
 - then a massive wall 6 m thick with many towers was built around the three sides not facing the river
 - indicates increasing fear of attack
 - possibly increasing concentration of wealth in the site?
 - increasing organization and power of “foreign” trading partners as a result of this “business”?
 - cone wall mosaics found at this provincial site
 - indicate a high-status individual or institution controlling considerable wealth
 - some Egyptian pottery suggests long-distance trade with the mouth of the Nile
 - bullae (clay envelopes containing accounting tokens) with cylinder seal imprints
 - indicate that goods being kept track of, probably “contracts” or “bills of lading”: i.e. trade
 - but no actual precuneiform writing, according to Nissen
- other sites
 - some were medium sized; others just a few buildings
 - some walled, some not
- all apparently direct transplants of people from Sumer
- also Uruk enclaves within towns of other cultures, especially on the northern margin of Mesopotamia
 - these are thought to be residences and facilities of specialized traders from Sumer
 - like a more formalized version of San Francisco's Chinatown
 - but there is some debate about this interpretation of why they were there, since virtually no potential trade goods have been found at these sites
 - one would expect traders to have caches of exotic goods
 - or is it just that they did, in fact, trade them all away, leaving none in the ground for us to find?
- many of these remote settlements and enclaves were apparently in tense relations or conflict with the local people, or at least feared conflict
 - because they tend to be walled off from the local people
- unlike the 'Ubaid expansion, this did not last very long

- few of these settlements seems to have lasted more than maybe 150 or 200 years
 - although recent interpretations are tending towards a longer period again
- all seem to have been abandoned at roughly the same time, just before precuneiform writing came into use
 - Nissen finds it hard to believe that precuneiform would not have been used if the knowledge was available
 - in this view, the Uruk expansion ended abruptly around perhaps 3400 or 3300 BC
- currently debated whether the expansion was mostly a commercial phenomenon, or a military/political one, or maybe something else