

Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 15  
**From farming to civilization in Mesopotamia**

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- So far, we have seen
  - food production first arise in the Fertile Crescent
    - Earliest clear example at Abu Hureyra
      - domesticated rye, wheat, barley around 10,800 BCE
      - domesticated sheep, goats around 8,100 BCE
      - abrupt switch from mostly hunted gazelle to herded sheep and goats around 7,300 BCE
    - food production spread so that there were many farming villages throughout parts of Southwest Asia
    - a variety of hints of different kinds of social complexity in different regions within the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia
      - Jericho: farmers doing some foraging, built the wall and tower around 9600 BCE
        - Pre-pottery Neolithic A: round houses
        - Pre-pottery Neolithic B: rectangular houses
      - Göbekli Tepe: ritual structures built around 9200-8800 BCE, maybe by mobile foragers
      - Aşikli Höyük (8200-7500 BCE) and Çatal Hüyük (6400-6200 BCE): larger, denser settlements of people doing both farming and foraging
      - and undoubtedly others
  - and we have tried to organize and explain this increasing complexity
    - with lots of theoretical ideas about how food production could lead to complex societies
    - that is, Diamond's "kleptocracies" with hierarchies run by elites
  - Now let's look quickly at how complex societies actually developed in Mesopotamia (and next time, Egypt)
  - Mesopotamia
    - the area between and around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers
    - mostly not in the Fertile Crescent, which is an arc of hills and mountains
    - but instead, a flat plain with two wide, slow-flowing rivers and very little rain
      - hot but very fertile where there is enough river water
    - From roughly 6000 BCE to 4800 BCE: Neolithic roots of Sumerian civilization
      - three cultures, Hassuna, Halaf, and Samarra
        - partially sequential, partially overlapping in time
        - partially separate areas, partially overlapping on the map
        - we will just lump them together for this class
      - in the foothills and mountains of northern and northeastern Mesopotamia
      - same basic Neolithic food production as the rest of the Fertile Crescent for several thousand years before
        - wheat, barley, lentils, peas, etc.
        - cattle, sheep, goats, pigs
        - still some foraging, but clearly dependent on food production

- villages of several hundred people, ranging up to the largest towns with up to perhaps 1000 people
  - not nearly as large as Çatal Hüyük had been many centuries before
- Like the other cases we looked at, these societies developed some new features that suggest greater social complexity
  - the previous cases of greater social complexity seemed to work fine for a few centuries, then fade away
  - but this time, the changes seemed to accumulate and grow, starting a process that led to cities, governments, institutional religions, writing... what we would call civilization
- these three Neolithic cultures differed from our other cases in 3 major ways:
  - the changes were mostly economic
    - lots of evidence of increasing specialization, storage, ways of keeping track of goods, trade, appearance of wealthy elites
  - these societies were more seriously concerned about defense from attacks
    - maybe due to increasing wealth in towns, and goods worth taking by force?
  - one of these societies began practicing irrigation
    - capable of producing large surpluses in the right environment, like the Mesopotamian plain
- So let's look more carefully at these three Neolithic cultures at the edge of Mesopotamia:
- All three cultures made decorated pottery, beyond the purely utilitarian
  - some of which must have been made by specialists
    - who would have been supported by trading their work or products for food, rather than producing their own food
- Some (especially Halaf) of this pottery was traded over long distances
  - Halaf pots made from clay from the same source have been found up to 600 miles apart
  - that is, pots were traded at least 300 miles in opposite directions
  - suggesting specialist traders to transport the goods and negotiate their production and exchange
- Some sites (especially Hassuna and Samarran sites) had large, special storage buildings not associated with any particular house
  - maybe redistribution systems, which might imply that some people gained wealth and power by overseeing them?
  - or at least communal projects to build and operate community warehouses
- Some kept track of goods by using stamp seals (Hassuna, Samarra)
  - used to mark clay stoppers in ceramic vessels, globs of clay pressed around knots, etc.
  - these would identify ownership, or certify contents that could not be tampered with
  - this implies a need to track ownership, so probably trade, surplus stored outside the household in shared facilities... complex economy
- Some Samarran pots have maker's marks
  - suggesting specialists who fired their pots together and had to tell them apart afterwards
  - or buyers to commissioned pots to be made for them, etc.
  - again: complex economy, workshops, trade...
- At least one Samarran site, Tell Es-Sawwan, had large, central buildings with clean clay floors, decorative buttressing on external walls, and no traces of cooking or garbage

- maybe public buildings for ritual, social or meeting halls, etc.?
- or fancy residences for a rising elite?
- over 100 burials beneath the floors, most with one or a few alabaster vessels or figurines
  - suggesting that the people buried in these special buildings were wealthier than others
  - Samarran burials with no goods are common at other sites
- Some Samarran sites had mud-brick walls around the town
  - clearly for defense
    - with an exterior ditch that made the wall effectively higher
    - with L-shaped (or “baffled”) entryways for better defense
    - lots of clay sling balls near the walls
- And finally: the Samarrans began to irrigate their fields
  - before this, all farming had depended on rainfall
  - Samarrans were probably the first to move out of the hills, onto the Mesopotamian plain
  - where it was too dry to get a reliable crop without using ditches to bring river water to the fields
- From roughly 5600 BCE to 3900 BCE: ‘Ubaid period
  - the ‘Ubaid culture, ancestral to Sumerians
  - in the southern Mesopotamian plain (the Mesopotamian alluvium)
    - this region was later called Sumer, and its inhabitants Sumerians (different from Samarrans!)
    - “Sumer” refers to this region from around the end of the ‘Ubaid period, from about 3900 BCE through about 2300 BCE
    - little rainfall; impossible to farm there without irrigating
    - but very fertile when irrigated: lots of sun, good soil
    - but little else in this alluvial plain
      - no stone for building, cutting tools, grinding tools, jewelry, etc.
      - no metal ores
      - very few trees other than palm trees, so little wood for building or smaller implements
    - yet this is where civilization first arose
  - the ‘Ubaid people were either the first to move into this difficult area
    - or they might have displaced or absorbed a low density of foragers
  - ‘Ubaid people were probably related to the Samarrans, maybe derived from them
    - generally similar lifestyle, mostly in small farming villages
    - some possibly specialized potters and other craft workers
    - continued need to keep track of goods using seals
      - suggesting continuing trade, maybe shared storage facilities
  - one or a few ‘Ubaid towns grew to approach 5000 people: small possible cities
    - probably the biggest was Eridu
    - with central, fancy buildings
    - generally considered temples, but maybe “assembly halls”, etc.
    - built and rebuilt more and more elaborately on the same spot every 150-200 years, for the following 2500 years!
    - started small, but from the beginning had the same basic plan:

- central rectangular room
- recess at one end with a pedestal in it
- a second pedestal freestanding out in the main room
  - often with signs of burning on top
- each rebuilding resulted in the new temple standing on a platform enclosing the previous ones
  - with a decorative retaining wall that made it look like part of the building
  - long flight of stairs ascending to the temple
- 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 associated with the temple
  - the first positive evidence of a really stratified society...
- roughly 3900 BCE – 3000 BCE: the Uruk period
  - dramatic innovations, and the appearance of many things we associate with civilization
    - especially in the second half of the Uruk period, say 3500-3000 BCE
  - invention or significant adoption of:
    - plow pulled by animals (versus digging sticks used directly by people)
    - wheeled cart
      - important for moving large amounts of crops from outlying farms into towns or cities
      - greatly facilitates concentration of surplus production
    - fast potter's wheel (vs. the slow wheel or tournette)
      - 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)
      - precuneiform, as we saw earlier
  - increasing or culmination of trends from earlier periods:
    - dramatic shift of people out of rural villages and into large, definite cities
      - especially at the very end of the Uruk period
      - probably the largest city, Uruk, reached between 10,000 and 50,000 people
    - development of city states
      - city state: an independent political unit comprising a single city and its surrounding communities
    - continued or increasing conflict between these city states
      - indicated by city walls
    - development of even more complex economy and exchange networks involving:
      - copper, gold, silver
      - jewelry stones: turquoise, amethyst, lapis, quartz, carnelian, 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.)
- colonies (?) in foreign territories
  - settlements of people with Uruk style goods and houses in distant lands
  - maybe for trade, maybe for other purposes like diplomacy, maybe just seeking peace or opportunity, or ...?
- continued to build ever bigger, more impressive temples
  - like the White Temple on the Anu ziggurat (platform mound)
    - the platform and temple together were as tall as a modern 5-story building
    - estimated 7,500 person-years to build the Anu ziggurat (i.e. monumental architecture)
  - the city of Uruk now had a second walled precinct (the Eanna precinct) with many very fancy, large, public buildings inside
    - 9 ha, over twice the entire site of Jericho; 2/3 the size of all of Çatal Hüyük!
    - the “Limestone building”, for example, was as wide as Darwin Hall, and ¾ as long
    - some decorated with elaborate geometric mosaics
    - richly outfitted with sculptures
  - some, but maybe not all, probably for religious ritual
  - surrounded by facilities for economic activity
    - storage rooms
    - workshops for stone carving, potters shops, metalworker’s shops, etc.
      - making very fine objects for use in the temples or by wealthy elites
    - lots of clay tablets with accounting records written in precuneiform
      - the very earliest writing known anywhere
      - starting around 3400-3300 BCE
  - lots of broken clay sealings
    - indicating many, many received deliveries of goods in ceramic vessels, tied or wrapped bundles, etc.
- vast quantities of cheap, ugly, mass-produced bevel-rimmed bowls
  - fragments literally filled rooms in the ceremonial precinct
  - three roughly standard sizes
  - apparently used to distribute rations to workers
    - presumably of grain or other food taken from the temple storerooms
    - and accounted for on countless precuneiform tablets
- All adds up to strong evidence for redistribution
  - tithes, offerings, taxes, etc. paid by farmers to the temple
  - stored inside walled temple precinct
  - tracked and accounted for with seals and precuneiform
  - some made into beer, etc. for exchange
  - some used as grain or as beer to pay “rations” to workers on temple projects, craft workshops, etc.
  - probably a major source of real power for the temple elite
- implications of temples, ziggurats, etc.
  - these are really big, elaborate, expensive buildings

- even by today’s standards
- required a huge labor force to build
- required skill in planning the building and organizing logistics
- all suggest:
  - a powerful, organized, effective hierarchy of decisionmaking and administration
  - mobilization of large economic resources (control of centralized surplus)
  - organization of many laborers and specialists
    - including not only craftspeople, but also overseers, scribes, administrators, etc.
  - legitimization of the religion and its hierarchical organization through association with impressive monuments and ceremonies
- all together, the “temple” seems to have been the institution(s) around and through which a complex social hierarchy and political and economic power finally developed
- Early Dynastic Period roughly 3000 BC - 2373 BC
  - cities and temples continued to grow larger and apparently wealthier
    - the people running the temples must have been a very privileged elite
- Sumerian religion and ideology
  - inferred from Early Dynastic and later written sources, including the Gilgamesh stories
  - a model of, and legitimization for, hierarchical life here on earth
  - there was a hierarchy of gods
  - people were at the bottom
    - they belonged to their city’s god
  - the gods created people specifically to relieve the gods from the drudgery of work
  - gods appointed human representatives to direct the work: the priests of each temple
  - This ideology served to legitimize the political and economic order
    - question: did the ideology encourage the rise of a hierarchical society, or did an emerging hierarchical society form the ideology?
    - if the latter, was it conscious and intentional, or not?
    - could religious ideology be both cause and effect?
- Big change in the Early Dynastic Period: the appearance of a rival institution: the Palace, headed by a secular leader or king
  - huge room complexes with storage and craft workshops similar to the temple precincts
    - minus the public ritual facilities
    - plus extensive high-status residential areas for the king, his family, and the court
    - plus smaller-scale elaborate rooms, perhaps for royal audiences
    - plus workshops where weapons were made
  - Kings of different cities led organized armies
    - outfitted with weapons made in the palace workshops
    - including chariots, bronze helmets, spear points, etc.
    - wars were not for conquest (taking control of a group of people for the long term)
      - but rather, raiding (capturing wealth, animals, people)
      - or gaining and keeping control of disputed areas of irrigated farmland
  - by contrast, the temple institution apparently had little to do with warfare

- Cuneiform records show kingship passing from father to son for up to six generations: dynasties
- kingship seems to have had different origins in different cities
  - based on linguistic evidence
  - some kings were addressed as “lugal” (king), a word suggesting military leader appointed by a ruling council
  - others as “sangu” (accountant) (!), the word used for the top administrator of a temple
  - others by “ensi”, a word apparently related to the term for the human husband of a city’s goddess (that is, a ritual, temple-related office)
  - later, some by “ugula” (foreman)
  - suggests that in different cities, different offices, roles, or institutions gave rise to powerful secular institutions that look the same to us: palaces with “kings”
    - presumably, the process by which this happened varied somewhat in each case
- Kings claimed the power of conflict resolution by proclaiming laws
  - Urukagina, last Early Dynastic king of Lagash (around 2350 BC) is known for his legal reforms, which were recorded in inscriptions on buildings of his time
    - but only know them through references in later documents
    - we do not have a copy of the original law code itself
  - this is over 500 years before the famous law code of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC)
  - Hammurabi is better known because we have a nice, complete copy of his law code
  - Urukagina claimed to be restoring the justice of an earlier time, when the temple supposedly resolved conflicts
    - a king using the legitimacy of the ancient temple to support his growing secular power
  - like Hammurabi after him, Urukagina promised protections against breaking contracts, implying a complex economy
  - among other things, Urukagina promised to cut certain taxes on commoners (!)
    - heard that one before? (this promise dates to about 2350 BC)
    - confirms that the palace collected taxes
- Kings also organized long-distance exchange for exotic goods and materials
  - like the temples did, but for secular, military, and personal purposes
- Unlike the almost-invisible top priests, kings and their families became fantastically, ostentatiously wealthy
  - as seen in a number of royal burials at Ur
  - main occupant was surrounded by piles of fancy goods
  - and accompanied by over 50 people: female courtiers decked out in gold jewelry, musicians, soldiers in full armor
  - all dead with no sign of a struggle: maybe drank poison?
- textual evidence of status differences and hierarchical society:
  - law codes mentioned above
  - the “Standard Professions List”, a practice document written over and over again by scribes in training
    - a single list of job titles, ranging from king down to field workers, always in standard order

- By this point, all the elements of civilization were present, in the form of competing city-states
- Akkadian empire: ~2350 - 2150 BCE
  - Sargon, king of Akkad, invented a new form of warfare
  - instead of just raiding a conquered city for whatever could be stolen,
  - he left a governor and a garrison of soldiers
  - who from then on collected tribute for the ongoing maintenance of themselves and the empire
  - usually said to have been the first empire in the world
    - although a few Early Dynastic kings may have done this on a small scale in the century or so before
  - Sargon spoke not Sumerian, but a Semitic language (Akkadian)
- At this point, I leave most of the details to the book
  - (which is unfortunately riddled with errors, but that in itself should be a good lesson...)
- A “dark age” of political disunity followed the collapse of the Akkadian empire for roughly 50 years
- Neo-Sumerian empire (Ur III) empire: ~2100-2000 BCE
  - Ur-Nammu of Ur revitalized Sumerian leadership and conquered most of southern Mesopotamia
  - his descendants ruled from Ur for several generations, then the empire broke down
- another period of competing city-states, rival kings, alliances: 2000-1800 BCE
- Babylonian empire: ~1800-1600 BCE
  - Hammurabi was king of Babylon, up to then an unimportant city
  - around his 30<sup>th</sup> year of rule, he broke out from the pack of competing kings and conquered most of southern Mesopotamia
  - largely re-creating the Ur III empire
  - and went on to conquer the rest of Mesopotamia to the north
  - famous for his law code, but largely because we have a nice, complete copy of his, and not of the several earlier ones known
- Hittite empire: 1700-1200 BCE in Anatolia
  - raided into central and southern Mesopotamia, toppling Babylon, but then withdrew without ever controlling much of Mesopotamia
- Assyrian empire: 1300-612 BCE in Mesopotamia
  - early on, just one warring region out of many
  - by 1000 BCE or so, dominated Mesopotamia
  - Assurbanipal and others
- Phoenician domination of sea trade: see the book
- Israelite and Judean kingdoms in Palestine: see the book
- Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) empire: see the book