

Sumer

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

Sumer was the first major civilization to develop in Mesopotamia. Religion in Sumer holds significant symbolic and religious significance. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. Time Period and Location of Sumer
2. Sumer and Religion
3. Early Civilization and the City-State
4. The City-State of Ur
5. The Ziggurat
6. Votive Figures
7. The Eye

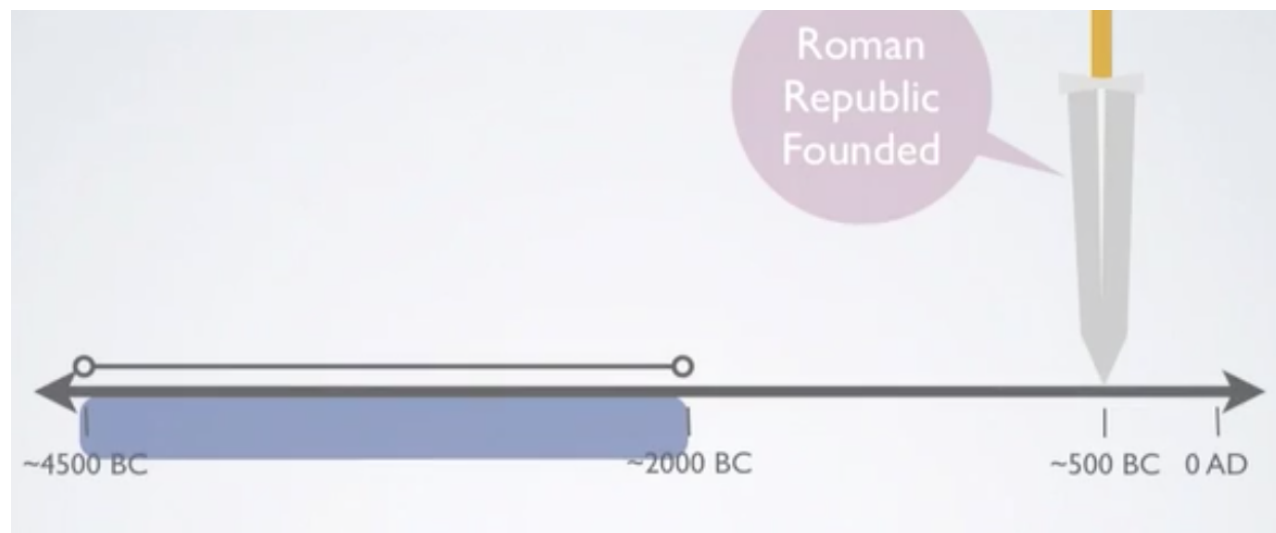


BIG IDEA

Sumer was the first major civilization to develop in ancient Mesopotamia.

1. Time Period and Location of Sumer

This lesson covers the years from around 4500 BCE to around 2000 BCE.



Sumer was a civilization that developed within Mesopotamia and consisted of a number of city-states that established themselves over time.

The map below shows Mesopotamia and the surrounding geography. Notice Mesopotamia's location relative to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the city-states indicated with red dots.



2. Sumer and Religion

Sumer was the first major civilization that we know of to develop in Mesopotamia. People came to form city-states, which functioned more or less independently of one another, at least with respect to the local government. The religion of Sumer was of particular historical importance because of the influence it had on the Sumerian people and the role it played in their daily lives.

In terms of stratification, the priestly class of individuals, who were the religious leaders and differentiated from the secular rulers of a particular city-state, were at the top. They controlled the religious functions of the community and had a monopoly on the available face time with the deities. Ceremonies and rights were likely carried out in the shrines atop ziggurats, which were large religious temples that had an important place within the layout of each city-state.

DID YOU KNOW

Religious ceremonies and access to religious shrines in Sumer seemed to have been exclusive to certain individuals rather than open to the public.

3. Early Civilization and the City-State

The concept of a city-state is important to understand as you explore this time period. A city-state is completely independent of any outside government. In other words, it's an autonomous state that consists of the city and perhaps some surrounding territory. Early civilizations often began as city-states.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Athens and Sparta in Greece are city-states that might be familiar to you.

The city-state of Ur is particularly important in this lesson. Ur is located in the southern part of Mesopotamia and indicated by the red dot on the map below.

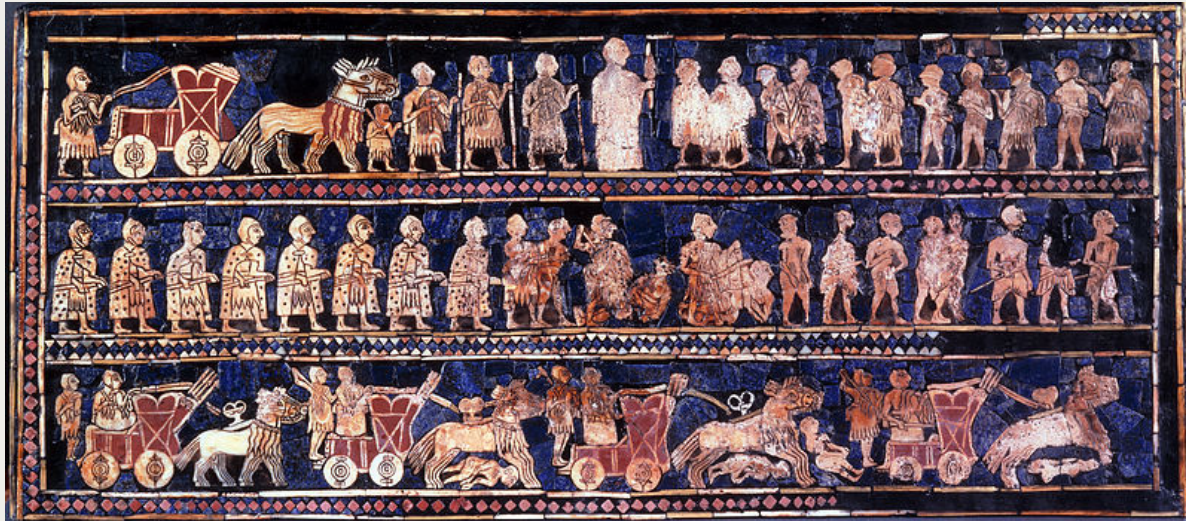


4. The City-State of Ur

Much like the use of patron saints in older cities throughout Europe, each city-state in Mesopotamia had a patron deity who protected the city. Religious emphasis was on honoring the city's patron deity. In Ur, Nanna, the moon goddess in the Sumerian religion, was the patron deity of Ur.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look at this image below of a work of art called The Standard of Ur. As the name implies, it is widely believed to have served as a standard, something that's carried around for display. But its true use is still a mystery. It's a six-sided mosaic that dates from between 2600 and 2400 BCE.



The Standard of Ur
2600–2400 BCE
Mosaic (shell, limestone, lapis lazuli)

This piece has two main panels. One of these is of war, and it depicts a Sumerian army conquering its enemies and presenting the captured and naked foes before their leader. The other panel, not shown, depicts peace through what is thought to be a typical Sumerian banquet scene.

5. The Ziggurat

A **ziggurat** is a symbolic and religious structure, much like a temple. It was looked at as a holy mountain, reinforcing the idea that the gods dwelt above humans. The public were not allowed to gather here; rather, it was limited to only a privileged few, the priestly class, who conducted their business within the shrine at the top. The Nanna ziggurat was the major religious structure within the city of Ur.

IN CONTEXT

Below is a reconstruction of the original Nanna ziggurat. The original remains are actually slightly visible by the people at the top.

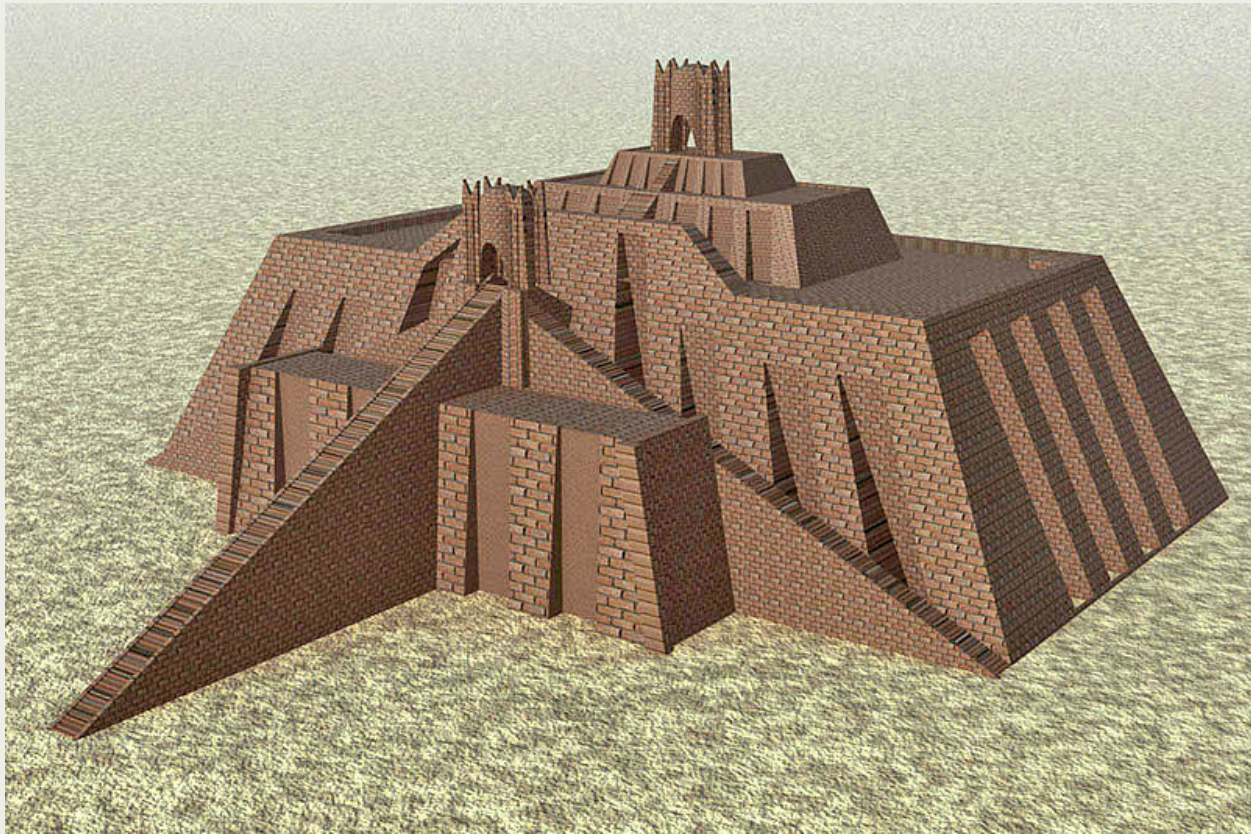


Ziggurat

Ur (present day Dhi Qar Province, Iraq)

21st century BCE

Here is a more detailed CAD rendering of what the ziggurat may have looked like in its day. Notice in the image below that the stepped or tiered structure has long access ramps. These are common ziggurat design elements.



CAD reconstruction of Ur-Nammu's ziggurat



DID YOU KNOW

The tiered structure was likely a limitation of the building materials and construction techniques of the time. Materials available included predominantly mud brick, which is sun-baked. While mud brick has a relatively decent level of compression strength, it is not an ideal material for building tall, airy structures. Structures made with mud bricks tend to be rather stocky.



TERM TO KNOW

Ziggurat

A Mesopotamian temple shaped as a pyramid tower that is winding and round, having a number of stories.

6. Votive Figures

At the top of the ziggurat shrine is a small opening for access. Religious function would have been performed inside the temple, which would also serve to house votive sculptures.



Male worshipper votive sculpture
2750–2600 BCE
Alabaster, shell, and black limestone



Standing female worshipper, Sumerian
2600–2500 BCE
Limestone inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli

These **votive figures** played an important role for the elite class in Sumer, serving as representations of people, devout worshipers who were not priests and therefore could not ascend all the way to the top of the ziggurat. Their purpose was to continue the act of prayer in the absence of the people who offered them. We know that these are votive figures because many of them have inscriptions on them that say that they were offered in prayer. In addition, they appear somewhat subservient to modern viewers, with their enormous eyes and clasped hands. Happy gods meant a safe and prosperous city, so these sculptures were of utmost importance to national security.

Although Sumerian civilization occupied the land between two rivers, the climate was harsh and the location offered little in terms of natural resources. For this reason, the Sumerian world view appears to have been that their gods were distant and demanding, as expressed in their art and architecture.

TERM TO KNOW

Votive Figures

Sculptures placed in a shrine in fulfillment of a vow.

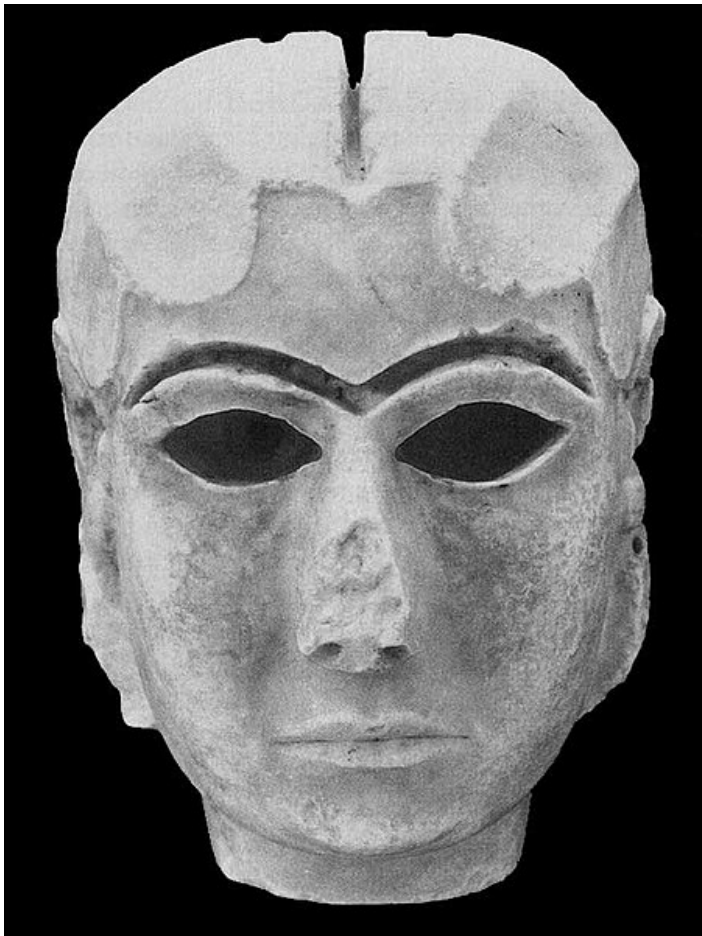
7. The Eye

The eye is an important symbol in Middle Eastern cultures. In Mesopotamian art, it meant to approach a deity with an attentive and respectful gaze. In certain parts of Mesopotamia, objects have been found that appear to be votive figures that consist of nothing but an enormous pair of eyes attached to a body. Some people refer to them as eye idols. We do not know what the function of these objects may have been, beyond those of more conventional votive sculptures. They might be related to "evil eye" jewelry that is common in the present.



Eye Idols
2nd half of the 4th century BCE
Limestone

This is a mask from Warka, sometimes referred to as the “Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia” or the “Lady of Uruk.”



Mask of Lady of Uruk
~3200–3100 BCE
Marble

This is a very important artistic relic. It was likely a representation of the goddess Inanna, another important Sumerian deity and the goddess of love, fertility, and war. This is also one of the earliest representations of a human face. The eyes may have been inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli, and other stones may have been used to create the eyebrows. The curved lines around the forehead likely indicate where other materials might have been used for hair. This head may have been attached to a body made of wood or another substance.

DID YOU KNOW

During the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, this sculpture was stolen from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, along with many other valuable artifacts and works of art. A tip led to the sculpture being recovered from a farmer's field, where it had been buried.

SUMMARY

One of the first major civilizations came to be in Mesopotamia. This civilization was Sumer, and religion was of utmost importance to this civilization and its people. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of Sumer** as well as **Sumer and its religion**. The religious leaders, separate from the secular rulers of a particular city-state, were at the top of the social hierarchy, and they controlled the religious functions of the community.

You also learned about **early civilization and the city-state**, more specifically, **the city-state of Ur**. Within this civilization and the city-states, you learned that **the ziggurat** was a symbolic and religious structure, much like a temple. It was looked at as a holy mountain, reinforcing the idea that the gods dwelt above humans. **Votive figures and the eye** were also extremely symbolic during this time period. The votive figure served as a representation of a person, a devout worshipper, and the eye was a symbol that reminded individuals to approach a deity with an attentive and respectful gaze.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Votive Figures

Sculptures placed in a shrine in fulfillment of a vow.

Ziggurat

A Mesopotamian temple shaped as a pyramid tower that is winding and round, having a number of stories.