history of Mesopotamia

Sites associated with ancient Mesopotamian history

history of

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Mesopotamia, history of the region in southwestern Asia where the world's earliest civilization developed. The name comes from a Greek word meaning "between rivers," referring to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but the region can be broadly defined to include the area that is now eastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and most of Iraq. The region was the centre of a culture whose influence extended throughout the Middle East and as far as the Indus valley, Egypt, and the Mediterranean.

This article covers the history of Mesopotamia from the prehistoric period up to the Arab conquest in the 7th century CE. For the history of the region in the succeeding periods, *see* Iraq, history of. For a discussion of the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, *see* Mesopotamian religion. *See also* art and architecture, Mesopotamian.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Mesopotamia to the end of the Old Babylonian period

The origins of Mesopotamian history

The background

In the narrow sense, Mesopotamia is the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, north or northwest of the bottleneck at Baghdad, in modern Iraq; it is Al-Jazīrah ("The Island") of the Arabs. South of this lies Babylonia, named after the city of Babylon. However, in the broader sense, the name Mesopotamia has come to be used for the area bounded on the northeast by the Zagros Mountains and on the southwest by the edge of the Arabian Plateau and stretching from the Persian Gulf in the southeast to the spurs of the Anti-Taurus Mountains in the

northwest. Only from the latitude of Baghdad do the Euphrates and Tigris truly become twin rivers, the *rāfidān* of the Arabs, which have constantly changed their courses over the millennia. The low-lying plain of the Kārūn River in Persia has always been closely related to Mesopotamia, but it is not considered part of Mesopotamia as it forms its own river system.

Mesopotamia, south of Al-Ramādī (about 70 miles, or 110 kilometres, west of Baghdad) on the Euphrates and the bend of the Tigris below Sāmarrāʾ (about 70 miles north-northwest of Baghdad), is flat alluvial land. Between Baghdad and the mouth of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab (the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, where it empties into the Persian Gulf) there is a difference in height of only about 100 feet (30 metres). As a result of the slow flow of the water, there are heavy deposits of silt, and the riverbeds are raised. Consequently, the rivers often overflow their banks (and may even change their course) when they are not protected by high dikes. In recent times they have been regulated above Baghdad by the use of escape channels with overflow reservoirs. The extreme south is a region of extensive marshes and reed swamps, *hawr*s, which, probably since early times, have served as an area of refuge for oppressed and displaced peoples. The supply of water is not regular; as a result of the high average temperatures and a very low annual rainfall, the ground of the plain of latitude 35° N is hard and dry and unsuitable for plant cultivation for at least eight months in the year. Consequently, agriculture without risk of crop failure, which seems to have begun in the higher rainfall zones and in the hilly borders of Mesopotamia in the 10th millennium BCE, began in Mesopotamia itself, the real heart of the civilization, only after artificial irrigation had been invented, bringing water to large stretches of territory through a widely branching network of canals. Since the ground is extremely fertile and, with irrigation and the necessary drainage, will produce in abundance, southern Mesopotamia became a land of plenty that could support a considerable population. The cultural superiority of north Mesopotamia, which may have lasted until about 4000 BCE, was finally overtaken by the south when the people there had responded to the challenge of their situation.

The present climatic conditions are fairly similar to those of 8,000 years ago. An English survey of ruined settlements in the area 30 miles around ancient Hatra (180 miles northwest of Baghdad) has shown that the southern limits of the zone in which agriculture is possible without artificial irrigation has remained unchanged since the first settlement of Al-Jazīrah.

The availability of raw materials is a historical factor of great importance, as is the dependence on those materials that had to be imported. In Mesopotamia, agricultural products and those

from stock breeding, fisheries, date palm cultivation, and reed industries—in short, grain, vegetables, meat, leather, wool, horn, fish, dates, and reed and plant-fibre products—were available in plenty and could easily be produced in excess of home requirements to be exported. There are bitumen springs at Hīt (90 miles northwest of Baghdad) on the Euphrates (the Is of Herodotus). On the other hand, wood, stone, and metal were rare or even entirely absent. The date palm—virtually the national tree of Iraq—yields a wood suitable only for rough beams and not for finer work. Stone is mostly lacking in southern Mesopotamia, although limestone is quarried in the desert about 35 miles to the west and “Mosul marble” is found not far from the Tigris in its middle reaches. Metal can only be obtained in the mountains, and the same is true of precious and semiprecious stones. Consequently, southern Mesopotamia in particular was destined to be a land of trade from the start. Only rarely could “empires” extending over a wider area guarantee themselves imports by plundering or by subjecting neighbouring regions.

The raw material that epitomizes Mesopotamian civilization is clay: in the almost exclusively mud-brick architecture and in the number and variety of clay figurines and pottery artifacts, Mesopotamia bears the stamp of clay as does no other civilization, and nowhere in the world but in Mesopotamia and the regions over which its influence was diffused was clay used as the vehicle for writing. Such phrases as cuneiform civilization, cuneiform literature, and cuneiform law can apply only where people had had the idea of using soft clay not only for bricks and jars and for the jar stoppers on which a seal could be impressed as a mark of ownership but also as the vehicle for impressed signs to which established meanings were assigned—an intellectual achievement that amounted to nothing less than the invention of writing.

The character and influence of ancient Mesopotamia

Questions as to what ancient Mesopotamian civilization did and did not accomplish, how it influenced its neighbours and successors, and what its legacy has transmitted are posed from the standpoint of modern civilization and are in part coloured by ethical overtones, so that the answers can only be relative. Modern scholars assume the ability to assess the sum total of an “ancient Mesopotamian civilization”; but, since the publication of an article by the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger on “Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt” (1926; “The Distinctive Conceptuality of the Babylonian World”), it has become almost a

commonplace to call attention to the necessity of viewing ancient Mesopotamia and its civilization as an independent entity.

Ancient Mesopotamia had many languages and cultures; its history is broken up into many periods and eras; it had no real geographic unity, and above all no permanent capital city, so that by its very variety it stands out from other civilizations with greater uniformity, particularly that of Egypt. The script and the pantheon constitute the unifying factors, but in these also Mesopotamia shows its predilection for multiplicity and variety. Written documents were turned out in quantities, and there are often many copies of a single text. The pantheon consisted of more than 1,000 deities, even though many divine names may apply to different manifestations of a single god. During 3,000 years of Mesopotamian civilization, each century gave birth to the next. Thus classical Sumerian civilization influenced that of the Akkadians, and the Ur III empire, which itself represented a Sumero-Akkadian synthesis, exercised its influence on the first quarter of the 2nd millennium BCE. With the Hittites, large areas of Anatolia were infused with the culture of Mesopotamia from 1700 BCE onward. Contacts, via Mari, with Ebla in Syria, some 30 miles south of Aleppo, go back to the 24th century BCE, so that links between Syrian and Palestinian scribal schools and Babylonian civilization during the Amarna period (14th century BCE) may have had much older predecessors. At any rate, the similarity of certain themes in cuneiform literature and the Hebrew Bible, such as the story of the Flood or the motif of the righteous sufferer, is due to such early contacts and not to direct borrowing.

The achievements of ancient Mesopotamia

The world of mathematics and astronomy owes much to the Babylonians—for instance, the sexagesimal system for the calculation of time and angles, which is still practical because of the multiple divisibility of the number 60; the Greek day of 12 “double-hours”; and the zodiac and its signs. In many cases, however, the origins and routes of borrowings are obscure, as in the problem of the survival of ancient Mesopotamian legal theory.

The achievement of the civilization itself may be expressed in terms of its best points—moral, aesthetic, scientific, and, not least, literary. Legal theory flourished and was sophisticated early on, being expressed in several collections of legal decisions, the so-called

ziggurat at Ur

codes, of which the best-known is the Code of Hammurabi. Throughout these codes recurs the concern of the ruler for the weak, the widow, and the orphan—even if, sometimes, the phrases were regrettably only literary clichés. The aesthetics of art are too much governed by subjective values to be assessed in absolute terms, yet certain peaks stand out above the rest, notably the art of Uruk IV, the seal engraving of the Akkad period, and the relief sculpture of Ashurbanipal. Nonetheless, there is nothing in Mesopotamia to match the sophistication of Egyptian art. Science the Mesopotamians had, of a kind, though not in the sense of Greek science. From its beginnings in Sumer before the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE, Mesopotamian science was characterized by endless, meticulous enumeration and ordering into columns and series, with the ultimate ideal of including all things in the world but without the wish or ability to synthesize and reduce the material to a system. Not a single general scientific law has been found, and only rarely has the use of analogy been found. Nevertheless, it remains a highly commendable achievement that Pythagoras' law (that the sum of the squares on the two shorter sides of a right-angled triangle equals the square on the longest side), even though it was never formulated, was being applied as early as the 18th century BCE. Technical accomplishments were perfected in the building of the ziggurats (temple towers resembling pyramids), with their huge bulk, and in irrigation, both in practical execution and in theoretical calculations. At the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE, an artificial stone often regarded as a forerunner of concrete was in use at Uruk (160 miles south-southeast of modern Baghdad), but the secret of its manufacture apparently was lost in subsequent years.

Writing pervaded all aspects of life and gave rise to a highly developed bureaucracy—one of the most tenacious legacies of the ancient Middle East. Remarkable organizing ability was required to administer huge estates, in which, under the 3rd dynasty of Ur, for example, it was not unusual to prepare accounts for thousands of cattle or tens of thousands of bundles of reeds. Similar figures are attested at Ebla, three centuries earlier.

Above all, the literature of Mesopotamia is one of its finest cultural achievements. Though there are many modern anthologies and chrestomathies (compilations of useful learning), with translations and paraphrases of Mesopotamian literature, as well as attempts to write its history, it cannot truly be said that "cuneiform literature" has been resurrected to the extent that it deserves. There are partly material reasons for this: many clay tablets survive only in a

fragmentary condition, and duplicates that would restore the texts have not yet been discovered, so that there are still large gaps. A further reason is the inadequate knowledge of the languages: insufficient acquaintance with the vocabulary and, in Sumerian, difficulties with the grammar. Consequently, another generation of Assyriologists will pass before the great myths, epics, lamentations, hymns, “law codes,” wisdom literature, and pedagogical treatises can be presented in such a way that modern readers can fully appreciate the high level of literary creativity of those times.

The classical and medieval views of Mesopotamia; its rediscovery in modern times

Before the first excavations in Mesopotamia, about 1840, nearly 2,000 years had passed during which knowledge of the ancient Middle East was derived from three sources only: the Bible, Greek and Roman authors, and the excerpts from the writings of Berosus, a Babylonian who wrote in Greek. In 1800 very little more was known than in 800 CE, although these sources had served to stir the imagination of poets and artists, down to *Sardanapalus* (1821) by the 19th-century English poet Lord Byron.

Apart from the building of the Tower of Babel, the Hebrew Bible mentions Mesopotamia only in those historical contexts in which the kings of Assyria and Babylonia affected the course of events in Israel and Judah: in particular Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Sennacherib, with their policy of deportation, and the Babylonian Exile introduced by Nebuchadrezzar II. Of the Greeks, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (5th century BCE, a contemporary of Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I) was the first to report on “Babylon and the rest of Assyria”; at that date the Assyrian empire had been overthrown for more than 100 years. The Athenian Xenophon took part in an expedition (during 401–399 BCE) of Greek mercenaries who crossed Anatolia, made their way down the Euphrates as far as the vicinity of Baghdad, and returned up the Tigris after the famous Battle of Cunaxa. In his *Cyropaedia* Xenophon describes the final struggle between Cyrus II and the Neo-Babylonian empire. Later, the Greeks adopted all kinds of fabulous tales about King Ninus, Queen Semiramis, and King Sardanapalus. These stories are described mainly in the historical work of Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE), who based them on the reports of a Greek physician, Ctesias (405–359 BCE). Herodotus saw Babylon with his own eyes, and Xenophon gave an account of travels and battles. All later historians, however, wrote at second or third hand, with one exception, Berosus (born *c.* 340 BCE), who emigrated at an advanced age to the Aegean island of Cos, where he is said to have composed

the three books of the *Babylōniaka*. Unfortunately, only extracts from them survive, prepared by one Alexander Polyhistor (1st century BCE), who, in his turn, served as a source for the Church Father Eusebius (died 342 CE). Berosus derided the "Greek historians" who had so distorted the history of his country. He knew, for example, that it was not Semiramis who founded the city of Babylon, but he was himself the prisoner of his own environment and cannot have known more about the history of his land than was known in Babylonia itself in the 4th century BCE.

Berosus' first book dealt with the beginnings of the world and with a myth of a composite being, Oannes, half fish, half man, who came ashore in Babylonia at a time when men still lived like the wild beasts. Oannes taught them the essentials of civilization: writing, the arts, law, agriculture, surveying, and architecture. The name Oannes must have been derived from the cuneiform U'anna (Sumerian) or Umanna (Akkadian), a second name of the mythical figure Adapa, the bringer of civilization. The second book of Berosus contained the Babylonian king list from the beginning to King Nabonassar (Nabu-naṣir, 747–734 BCE), a contemporary of Tiglath-pileser III. Berosus' tradition, beginning with a list of primeval kings before the Flood, is a reliable one; it agrees with the tradition of the Sumerian king list, and even individual names can be traced back exactly to their Sumerian originals. Even the immensely long reigns of the primeval kings, which lasted as long as "18 sars" (= 18 × 3,600 = 64,800) of years, are found in Berosus. Furthermore, he was acquainted with the story of the Flood, with Cronus as its instigator and Xisuthros (or Ziusudra) as its hero, and with the building of an ark. The third book is presumed to have dealt with the history of Babylonia from Nabonassar to the time of Berosus himself.

Diodorus made the mistake of locating Nineveh on the Euphrates, and Xenophon gave an account of two cities, Larissa (probably modern Nimrūd [ancient Kalakh], 20 miles southeast of modern Mosul) and Mespila (ancient Nineveh, just north of Mosul). The name Mespila probably was nothing more than the word of the local Aramaeans for ruins; there can be no clearer instance of the rift that had opened between the ancient Middle East and the classical West. In sharp contrast, the East had a tradition that the ruins opposite Mosul (in north Iraq) concealed ancient Nineveh. When a Spanish rabbi from Navarre, Benjamin of Tudela, was traveling in the Middle East between 1160 and 1173, Jews and Muslims alike knew the position of the grave of the prophet Jonah. The credit for the rediscovery of the ruins of Babylon goes to an Italian, Pietro della Valle, who correctly identified the vast ruins north of

modern Al-Ḥillah, Iraq (60 miles south of Baghdad); he must have seen there the large rectangular tower that represented the ancient ziggurat. Previously, other travelers had sought the Tower of Babel in two other monumental ruins: Birs Nimrūd, the massive brick structure of the ziggurat of ancient Borsippa (modern Birs, near Al-Ḥillah), vitrified by lightning, and the ziggurat of the Kassite capital, Dur Kurigalzu, at Burj ʿAqarqūf, 22 miles west of Baghdad. Pietro della Valle brought back to Europe the first specimens of cuneiform writing, stamped brick, of which highly impressionistic reproductions were made. Thereafter, European travelers visited Mesopotamia with increasing frequency, among them Carsten Niebuhr (an 18th-century German traveler), Claudius James Rich (a 19th-century Orientalist and traveler), and Ker Porter (a 19th-century traveler).

In modern times a third Middle Eastern ruin drew visitors from Europe—Persepolis, in the land of Persia east of Susiana, near modern Shīrāz, Iran. In 1602, reports had filtered back to Europe of inscriptions that were not in Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Georgian, or Greek. In 1700 an Englishman, Thomas Hyde, coined the term “cuneiform” for these inscriptions, and by the middle of the 18th century it was known that the Persepolis inscriptions were related to those of Babylon. Niebuhr distinguished three separate alphabets (Babylonian, Elamite, and Old Persian cuneiform). The first promising attempt at decipherment was made by the German philologist Georg Friedrich Grotefend in 1802, by use of the kings’ names in the Old Persian versions of the trilingual inscriptions, although his later efforts led him up a blind alley. Thereafter, the efforts to decipher cuneiform gradually developed in the second half of the 19th century into a discipline of ancient Oriental philology, which was based on results established through the pioneering work of Emile Burnouf, Edward Hincks, Sir Henry Rawlinson, and many others.

Today this subject is still known as Assyriology, because at the end of the 19th century the great majority of cuneiform texts came from the Assyrian city of Nineveh, in particular from the library of King Ashurbanipal in the mound of Kuyunjik at Nineveh.

Modern archaeological excavations

More than 150 years separate the first excavations in Mesopotamia—adventurous expeditions involving great personal risks, far from the protection of helpful authorities—from those of the present day with their specialist staffs, modern technical equipment, and objectives wider than the mere search for valuable antiquities. The progress of six generations of excavators has led

to a situation in which less is recovered more accurately; in other words, the finds are observed, measured, and photographed as precisely as possible. At first digging was unsystematic, with the consequence that, although huge quantities of clay tablets and large and small antiquities were brought to light, the locations of the finds were rarely described with any accuracy. Not until the beginning of the 20th century did excavators learn to isolate the individual bricks in the walls that had previously been erroneously thought to be nothing more than packed clay; the result was that various characteristic brick types could be distinguished and successive architectural levels established. Increased care in excavation does, of course, carry with it the risk that the pace of discovery will slow down. Moreover, the eyes of the local inhabitants are now sharpened and their appetite for finds is whetted, so that clandestine diggers have established themselves as the unwelcome colleagues of the archaeologists.

A result of the technique of building with mud brick (mass production of baked bricks was impossible because of the shortage of fuel) was that the buildings were highly vulnerable to the weather and needed constant renewal; layers of settlement rapidly built up, creating a tell (Arabic: *tall*), a mound of occupation debris that is the characteristic ruin form of Mesopotamia. The word itself appears among the most original vocabulary of the Semitic languages and is attested as early as the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. Excavation is made more difficult by this mound formation, since both horizontal and vertical axes have to be taken into account. Moreover, the depth of each level is not necessarily constant, and foundation trenches may be dug down into earlier levels. A further problem is that finds may have been removed from their original context in antiquity. Short-lived settlements that did not develop into mounds mostly escape observation, but aerial photography can now pick out ground discolorations that betray the existence of settlements. Districts with a high water level today, such as the reed marshes (*hawr*s), or ruins that are covered by modern settlements, such as Arbīl (ancient Arbela), some 200 miles north of Baghdad, or sites that are surmounted by shrines and tombs of holy men are closed to archaeological research.

Excavations in Mesopotamia have mostly been national undertakings (France, England, the United States, Germany, Iraq, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Japan, and the former Soviet Union), but joint expeditions like the one sent to Ur (190 miles south-southeast of Baghdad) in the 1920s have become more frequent since the 1970s. The history of archaeological research in Mesopotamia falls into four categories, represented by phases of differing lengths: the first, and by far the longest, begins with the French expedition to Nineveh (1842) and Khorsabad

(the ancient Dur Sharrukin, 20 miles northeast of modern Mosul; 1843–55) and that of the English to Nineveh (1846–55) and Nimrūd (ancient Kalakh, biblical Calah; 1845, with interruptions until 1880). This marked the beginning of the “classic” excavations in the important ancient capitals, where spectacular finds might be anticipated. The principal gains were the Assyrian bull colossi and wall reliefs and the library of Ashurbanipal from Nineveh, although the ground plans of temples and palaces were quite as valuable. While these undertakings had restored the remains of the Neo-Assyrian empire of the 1st millennium BCE, from 1877 onward new French initiatives in Telloh (Arabic: Tall Lōḥā, 155 miles southeast of Baghdad, reached almost 2,000 years further back into the past. There they rediscovered a people whose language had already been encountered in bilingual texts from Nineveh—the Sumerians. Telloh (ancient Girsu) yielded not only inscribed material that, quite apart from its historical interest, was critical for the establishment of the chronology of the second half of the 3rd millennium BCE but also many artistic masterpieces. Thereafter excavations in important cities spread to form a network including Susa, 150 miles west of Eṣfahān in Iran (France; 1884 onward); Nippur, 90 miles southeast of Baghdad (the United States; 1889 onward); Babylon, 55 miles south of Baghdad (Germany; 1899–1917 and again from 1957 onward); Ashur, modern Ash-Sharqāṭ, 55 miles south of Mosul (Germany; 1903–14); Uruk (Germany; 1912–13 and from 1928 onward); and Ur (England and the United States; 1918–34). Mention also should be made of the German excavations at Boğazköy in central Turkey, the ancient Hattusa, capital of the Hittite empire, which have been carried on, with interruptions, since 1906.

The second phase began in 1925 with the commencement of American excavations at Yorgan Tepe (ancient Nuzi), 140 miles north of Baghdad, a provincial centre with Old Akkadian, Old Assyrian, and Middle Assyrian/Hurrian levels. There followed, among others, French excavations at Arslan Tash (ancient Hadatu; 1928), at Tall al-Aḥmar (ancient Til Barsib; 1929–31), and above all at Tall Ḥarīrī (ancient Mari; 1933 onward) and American excavations in the Diyālā region (east of Baghdad), at Tall al-Asmar (ancient Eshnunna), at Khafājī, and at other sites. Thus, excavation in Mesopotamia had moved away from the capital cities to include the “provinces.” Simultaneously, it expanded beyond the limits of Mesopotamia and Susiana and revealed outliers of “cuneiform civilization” on the Syrian coast at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit; France, 1929 onward) and on the Orontes of northern Syria at Al-ʿAṭshānah (ancient Alalakh; England, 1937–39 and 1947–49), while, since 1954, Danish excavations on the islands of Bahrain and Faylakah, off the Tigris-Euphrates delta, have disclosed staging

posts between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley civilization. Short-lived salvage operations have been undertaken at the site of the Assad Dam on the middle Euphrates (e.g., German excavations at Ḥabūba al-Kabīra, 1971–76). Italian excavations at Tall Mardīkh (ancient Ebla; 1967 onward) have yielded spectacular results, including several thousand cuneiform tablets dating from the 24th century BCE.

In its third phase, archaeological research in Mesopotamia and its neighbouring lands has probed back into prehistory and protohistory. The objective of these investigations, initiated by American archaeologists, was to trace as closely as possible the successive chronological stages in the progress of man from hunter-gatherer to settled farmer and, finally, to city dweller. These excavations are strongly influenced by the methods of the prehistorian, and the principal objective is no longer the search for texts and monuments. Apart from the American investigations, Iraq itself has taken part in this phase of the history of investigation, as has Japan since 1956 and the former Soviet Union from 1969 until the early 1990s.

Finally, the fourth category, which runs parallel with the first three phases, is represented by “surveys,” which do not concentrate on individual sites but attempt to define the relations between single settlements, their positioning along canals or rivers, or the distribution of central settlements and their satellites. Since shortages of time, money, and an adequate task force preclude the thorough investigation of large numbers of individual sites, the method employed is that of observing and collecting finds from the surface. Of these finds, the latest in date will give a rough termination date for the duration of the settlement, but, since objects from earlier, if not the earliest, levels work their way to the surface with a predictable degree of certainty or are exposed in rain gullies, an intensive search of the surface of the mound allows conclusions as to the total period of occupation with some degree of probability. If the individual periods of settlement are marked on superimposed maps, a very clear picture is obtained of the fluctuations in settlement patterns, of the changing proportions between large and small settlements, and of the equally changeable systems of riverbeds and irrigation canals —for, when points on the map lie in line, it is a legitimate assumption that they were once connected by watercourses.

During the four phases outlined, the objectives and methods of excavation have broadened and shifted. At first the chief aim was the recovery of valuable finds suitable for museums, but at the same time there was, from early on, considerable interest in the architecture of Mesopotamia, which has won for it the place it deserves in architectural history. Alongside

philology, art history has also made great strides, building up a chronological framework by the combination of evidence from stratigraphic and stylistic criteria, particularly in pottery and cylinder seals. The discovery of graves and a variety of burial customs has thrown new light on the history of religion, stimulated by the interest of biblical studies. While pottery was previously collected for purely aesthetic motives or from the point of view of art history, attention has come to be paid increasingly to everyday wares, and greater insight into social and economic history is based on knowledge of the distribution and frequency of shapes and materials. The observation and investigation of animal bones and plant remains (pollen and seed analysis) have supplied invaluable information on the process of domestication, the conditions of animal husbandry, and the advances in agriculture. Such studies demand the cooperation of both zoologists and paleobotanists. In addition, microscopic analysis of the floors of excavated buildings may help to identify the functions of individual rooms.

The emergence of Mesopotamian civilization

The Late Neolithic Period and the Chalcolithic Period. Between about 10,000 BCE and the genesis of large permanent settlements, the following stages of development are distinguishable, some of which run parallel: (1) the change to sedentary life, or the transition from continual or seasonal change of abode, characteristic of hunter-gatherers and the earliest cattle breeders, to life in one place over a period of several years or even permanently, (2) the transition from experimental plant cultivation to the deliberate and calculated farming of grains and leguminous plants, (3) the erection of houses and the associated “settlement” of the gods in temples, (4) the burial of the dead in cemeteries, (5) the invention of clay vessels, made at first by hand, then turned on the wheel and fired to ever greater degrees of hardness, at the same time receiving almost invariably decoration of incised designs or painted patterns, (6) the development of specialized crafts and the distribution of labour, and (7) metal production (the first use of metal—copper—marks the transition from the Late Neolithic to the Chalcolithic Period).

These stages of development can only rarely be dated on the basis of a sequence of levels at one site alone. Instead, an important role is played by the comparison of different sites, starting with the assumption that what is simpler and technically less accomplished is older. In addition to this type of dating, which can be only relative, the radiocarbon, or carbon-14, method has proved to be an increasingly valuable tool since the 1950s. By this method the known rate of decay of the radioactive carbon isotope (carbon-14) in wood, horn, plant fibre,

and bone allows the time that has elapsed since the “death” of the material under examination to be calculated. Although a plus/minus discrepancy of up to 200 years has to be allowed for, this is not such a great disadvantage in the case of material 6,000 to 10,000 years old. Even when skepticism is necessary because of the use of an inadequate sample, carbon-14 dates are still very welcome as confirmation of dates arrived at by other means. Moreover, radiocarbon ages can be converted to more precise dates through comparisons with data obtained by dendrochronology, a method of absolute age determination based on the analysis of the annual rings of trees.

The first agriculture, the domestication of animals, and the transition to sedentary life took place in regions in which animals that were easily domesticated, such as sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs, and the wild prototypes of grains and leguminous plants, such as wheat, barley, bitter vetch, pea, and lentil, were present. Such centres of dispersion may have been the valleys and grassy border regions of the mountains of Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine, but they also could have been, say, the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush. As settled life, which caused a drop in infant mortality, led to the increase of the population, settlement spread out from these centres into the plains—although it must be remembered that this process, described as the Neolithic Revolution, in fact took thousands of years.

Representative of the first settlements on the borders of Mesopotamia are the adjacent sites of Zawi Chemi Shanidar and Shanidar itself, which lie northwest of Rawāndūz. They date from the transition from the 10th to the 9th millennium BCE and are classified as prepottery. The finds included querns (primitive mills) for grinding grain (whether wild or cultivated is not known), the remains of huts about 13 feet in diameter, and a cemetery with grave goods. The presence of copper beads is evidence of acquaintance with metal, though not necessarily with the technique of working it into tools, and the presence of obsidian (volcanic glass) is indicative of the acquisition of nonindigenous raw materials by means of trade. The bones found testify that sheep were already domesticated at Zawi Chemi Shanidar.

At Karīm Shahir, a site that cannot be accurately tied chronologically to Shanidar, clear proof was obtained both of the knowledge of grain cultivation, in the form of sickle blades showing sheen from use, and of the baking of clay, in the form of lightly fired clay figurines. Still in the hilly borders of Mesopotamia, a sequence of about 3,000 years can be followed at the site of Qalʾat Jarmo, east of Kirkūk, some 150 miles north of Baghdad. The beginning of this settlement can be dated to about 6750 BCE; excavations uncovered 12 archaeological levels of

a regular village, consisting of about 20 to 25 houses built of packed clay, sometimes with stone foundations, and divided into several rooms. The finds included types of wheat (emmer and einkorn) and two-row barley, the bones of domesticated goats, sheep, and pigs, and obsidian tools, stone vessels, and, in the upper third of the levels, clay vessels with rough painted decorations, providing the first certain evidence for the manufacture of pottery. Jarmo must be roughly contemporary with the sites of Jericho (13 miles east of Jerusalem) and of Çatalhüyük in Anatolia (central Turkey). Those sites, with their walled settlements, seem to have achieved a much higher level of civilization, but too much weight must not be placed on the comparison because no other sites in and around Mesopotamia confirm the picture deduced from Jarmo alone. Views on the earliest Neolithic in Iraq have undergone radical revisions in the light of discoveries made since the 1970s at Qermez Dere, Nemrik, and Maghzaliyah.

About 1,000 years later are two villages that are the earliest so far discovered in the plain of Mesopotamia: Ḥassūna, near Mosul, and Tall Ṣawwān, near Sāmarrāʾ. At Ḥassūna the pottery is more advanced, with incised and painted designs, but the decoration is still unsophisticated. One of the buildings found may be a shrine, judging from its unusual ground plan. Apart from emmer there occurs, as the result of mutation, six-row barley, which was later to become the chief grain crop of southern Mesopotamia. In the case of Tall Ṣawwān, it is significant that the settlement lay south of the boundary of rainfall agriculture; thus it must have been dependent on some form of artificial irrigation, even if this was no more than the drawing of water from the Tigris. This, therefore, gives a date after which the settlement of parts of southern Mesopotamia would have been feasible.

The emergence of cultures

For the next millennium, the 5th, it is customary to speak in terms of various “cultures” or “horizons,” distinguished in general by the pottery, which may be classed by its colour, shape, hardness, and, above all, by its decoration. The name of each horizon is derived either from the type site or from the place where the pottery was first found: Sāmarrāʾ on the Tigris, Tall Ḥalaf in the central Jazīrah, Ḥassūna Level V, Al-ʿUbaid near Ur, and Ḥājj Muḥammad on the Euphrates, not far from Al-Samāwah (some 150 miles south-southeast of Baghdad). Along with the improvement of tools, the first evidence for water transport (a model boat from the prehistoric cemetery at Eridu, in the extreme south of Mesopotamia, *c.* 4000 BCE), and the development of terra-cottas, the most impressive sign of progress is the constantly accelerating

advance in architecture. This can best be followed in the city of Eridu, which in historical times was the centre of the cult of the Sumerian god Enki.

Originally a small, single-roomed shrine, the temple in the Ubaid period consisted of a rectangular building, measuring 80 by 40 feet, that stood on an artificial terrace. It had an "offering table" and an "altar" against the short walls, aisles down each side, and a facade decorated with niches. This temple, standing on a terrace probably originally designed to protect the building from flooding, is usually considered the prototype of the characteristic religious structure of later Babylonia, the ziggurat. The temple at Eridu is in the very same place as that on which the Enki ziggurat stood in the time of the 3rd dynasty of Ur (*c.* 2112–*c.* 2004 BCE), so the cult tradition must have existed on the same spot for at least 1,500 to 2,000 years before Ur III itself. Remarkable as this is, however, it is not justifiable to assume a continuous ethnic tradition. The flowering of architecture reached its peak with the great temples (or assembly halls?) of Uruk, built around the turn of the 4th to 3rd millennium BCE (Uruk Levels VI to IV).

In extracting information as to the expression of mind and spirit during the six millennia preceding the invention of writing, it is necessary to take account of four major sources: decoration on pottery, the care of the dead, sculpture, and the designs on seals. There is, of course, no justification in assuming any association with ethnic groups.

The most varied of these means of expression is undoubtedly the decoration of pottery. It is hardly coincidental that, in regions in which writing had developed, high-quality painted pottery was no longer made. The motifs in decoration are either abstract and geometric or figured, although there is also a strong tendency to geometric stylization. An important question is the extent to which the presence of symbols, such as the bucranium (a sculptured ornament representing an ox skull), can be considered as expressions of specific religious ideas, such as a bull cult, and, indeed, how much the decoration was intended to convey meaning at all.

It is not known how ancient is the custom of burying the dead in graves nor whether its intention was to maintain communication (by the cult of the dead) or to guard against the demonic power of the unburied dead left free to wander. A cemetery, or collection of burials associated with grave goods, is first attested at Zawi Chemi Shanidar. The presence of pots in the grave indicates that the bodily needs of the dead person were provided for, and the

discovery of the skeleton of a dog and of a model boat in the cemetery at Eridu suggests that it was believed that the activities of life could be pursued in the afterlife.

The earliest sculpture takes the form of very crudely worked terra-cotta representations of women; the Ubaid Horizon, however, has figurines of both women and men, with very slender bodies, protruding features, arms akimbo, and the genitals accurately indicated, and also of women suckling children. It is uncertain whether it is correct to describe these statuettes as idols, whether the figures were cult objects, such as votive offerings, or whether they had a magical significance, such as fertility charms, or, indeed, what purpose they did fulfill.

Babylonian seal

Seals are first attested in the form of stamp seals at Tepe Gawra, north of Mosul. Geometric designs are found earlier than scenes with figures, such as men, animals, conflict between animals, copulation, or dance. Here again it is uncertain whether the scenes are intended to convey a deeper meaning. Nevertheless, unlike pottery, a seal has a direct relationship to a particular individual or group, for the seal identifies what it is used to seal (a vessel, sack, or other container) as the property or responsibility of a specific person. To that extent, seals represent the earliest pictorial representations of persons. The area of distribution of the stamp seal was northern Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Iran. Southern Mesopotamia, on the other hand, was the home of the cylinder seal, which was either an independent invention or was derived from stamp seals engraved on two faces. The cylinder seal, with its greater surface area and more practical application, remained in use into the 1st millennium BCE. Because of the continuous changes in the style of the seal designs, cylinder seals are among the most valuable of chronological indicators for archaeologists.

In general, the prehistory of Mesopotamia can only be described by listing and comparing human achievements, not by recounting the interaction of individuals or peoples. There is no basis for reconstructing the movements and migrations of peoples unless one is prepared to equate the spread of particular archaeological types with the extent of a particular population, the change of types with a change of population, or the appearance of new types with an immigration.

The only certain evidence for the movement of peoples beyond their own territorial limits is provided at first by material finds that are not indigenous. The discovery of obsidian and lapis lazuli at sites in Mesopotamia or in its neighbouring lands is evidence for the existence of trade, whether consisting of direct caravan trade or of a succession of intermediate stages.

Just as no ethnic identity is recognizable, so nothing is known of the social organization of prehistoric settlements. It is not possible to deduce anything of the “government” in a village nor of any supraregional connections that may have existed under the domination of one centre. Constructions that could only have been accomplished by the organization of workers in large numbers are first found in Uruk Levels VI to IV: the dimensions of these buildings suggest that they were intended for gatherings of hundreds of people. As for artificial irrigation, which was indispensable for agriculture in south Mesopotamia, the earliest form was probably not the irrigation canal. It is assumed that at first floodwater was dammed up to collect in basins, near which the fields were located. Canals, which led the water farther from the river, would have become necessary when the land in the vicinity of the river could no longer supply the needs of the population.

Mesopotamian protohistory

Attempts have been made by philologists to reach conclusions about the origin of the flowering of civilization in southern Mesopotamia by the analysis of Sumerian words. It has been thought possible to isolate an earlier, non-Sumerian substratum from the Sumerian vocabulary by assigning certain words on the basis of their endings to either a Neolithic or a Chalcolithic language stratum. These attempts are based on the phonetic character of Sumerian at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, which is at least 1,000 years later than the invention of writing. Quite apart, therefore, from the fact that the structure of Sumerian words themselves is far from adequately investigated, the enormous gap in time casts grave doubt on the criteria used to distinguish between Sumerian and “pre-Sumerian” vocabulary.

The earliest peoples of Mesopotamia who can be identified from inscribed monuments and written tradition—people in the sense of speakers of a common language—are, apart from the Sumerians, Semitic peoples (Akkadians or pre-Akkadians) and Subarians (identical with, or near relatives of, the Hurrians, who appear in northern Mesopotamia around the end of the 3rd millennium BCE). Their presence is known, but no definite statements about their past or possible routes of immigration are possible.

At the turn of the 4th to 3rd millennium BCE, the long span of prehistory is over, and the threshold of the historical era is gained, captured by the existence of writing. Names, speech, and actions are fixed in a system that is composed of signs representing complete words or syllables. The signs may consist of realistic pictures, abbreviated representations, and perhaps symbols selected at random. Since clay is not well suited to the drawing of curved lines, a tendency to use straight lines rapidly gained ground. When the writer pressed the reed in harder at the beginning of a stroke, it made a triangular “head,” and thus “wedges” were impressed into the clay. It is the Sumerians who are usually given the credit for the invention of this, the first system of writing in the Middle East. As far as they can be assigned to any language, the inscribed documents from before the dynasty of Akkad (*c.* 2334–*c.* 2154 BCE) are almost exclusively in Sumerian. Moreover, the extension of the writing system to include the creation of syllabograms by the use of the sound of a logogram (sign representing a word), such as *gi*, “a reed stem,” used to render the verb *gi*, “to return,” can only be explained in terms of the Sumerian language. It is most probable, however, that Mesopotamia in the 4th millennium BCE, just as in later times, was composed of many races. This makes it likely that, apart from the Sumerians, the interests and even initiatives of other language groups may have played their part in the formation of the writing system. Many scholars believe that certain clay objects or tokens that are found in prehistoric strata may have been used for some kind of primitive accounting. These tokens, some of which are incised and which have various forms, may thus be three-dimensional predecessors of writing.

Sumerian is an agglutinative language: prefixes and suffixes, which express various grammatical functions and relationships, are attached to a noun or verb root in a “chain.” Attempts to identify Sumerian more closely by comparative methods have as yet been unsuccessful and will very probably remain so, as languages of a comparable type are known only from 500 CE (Georgian) or 1000 CE (Basque)—that is, 3,000 years later. Over so long a time, the rate of change in a language, particularly one that is not fixed in a written norm, is so great that one can no longer determine whether apparent similarity between words goes back to an original relationship or is merely fortuitous. Consequently, it is impossible to obtain any more accurate information as to the language group to which Sumerian may once have belonged.

The most important development in the course of the 4th millennium BCE was the birth of the city. There were precursors, such as the unwalled prepottery settlement at Jericho of about

7000 BCE, but the beginning of cities with a more permanent character came only later. There is no generally accepted definition of a city. In this context, it means a settlement that serves as a centre for smaller settlements, one that possesses one or more shrines of one or more major deities, has extensive granaries, and, finally, displays an advanced stage of specialization in the crafts.

The earliest cities of southern Mesopotamia, as far as their names are known, are Eridu, Uruk, Bad-tibira, Nippur, and Kish (35 miles south-southeast of Baghdad). The surveys of the American archaeologist Robert McCormick Adams and the German archaeologist Hans Nissen have shown how the relative size and number of the settlements gradually shifted: the number of small or very small settlements was reduced overall, whereas the number of larger places grew. The clearest sign of urbanization can be seen at Uruk, with the almost explosive increase in the size of the buildings. Uruk Levels VI to IV had rectangular buildings covering areas as large as 275 by 175 feet. These buildings are described as temples, since the ground plans are comparable to those of later buildings whose sacred character is beyond doubt, but other functions, such as assembly halls for noncultic purposes, cannot be excluded.

The major accomplishments of the period Uruk VI to IV, apart from the first inscribed tablets (Level IV B), are masterpieces of sculpture and of seal engraving and also of the form of wall decoration known as cone mosaics. Together with the everyday pottery of gray or red burnished ware, there is a very coarse type known as the beveled-rim bowl. These are vessels of standard size whose shape served as the original for the sign *sila*, meaning “litre.” It is not too rash to deduce from the mass production of such standard vessels that they served for the issue of rations. This would have been the earliest instance of a system that remained typical of the southern Mesopotamian city for centuries: the maintenance of part of the population by allocations of food from the state.

Historians usually date the beginning of history, as opposed to prehistory and protohistory, from the first appearance of usable written sources. If this is taken to be the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BCE, it must be remembered that this applies only to part of Mesopotamia: the south, the Diyālā region, Susiana (with a later script of its own invented locally), and the district of the middle Euphrates, as well as Iran.

Sumerian civilization

The Sumerians to the end of the Early Dynastic period

Despite the Sumerians' leading role, the historical role of other races should not be underestimated. While with prehistory only approximate dates can be offered, historical periods require a firm chronological framework, which, unfortunately, has not yet been established for the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE. The basis for the chronology after about 1450 BCE is provided by the data in the Assyrian and Babylonian king lists, which can often be checked by dated tablets and the Assyrian lists of eponyms (annual officials whose names served to identify each year). It is, however, still uncertain how much time separated the middle of the 15th century BCE from the end of the 1st dynasty of Babylon, which is therefore variously dated to 1594 BCE ("middle"), 1530 BCE ("short"), or 1730 BCE ("long" chronology). As a compromise, the middle chronology is used here. From 1594 BCE several chronologically overlapping dynasties reach back to the beginning of the 3rd dynasty of Ur, about 2112 BCE. From this point to the beginning of the dynasty of Akkad (*c.* 2334 BCE) the interval can only be calculated to within 40 to 50 years, via the ruling houses of Lagash and the rather uncertain traditions regarding the succession of Gutian viceroys. With Ur-Nanshe (*c.* 2520 BCE), the first king of the 1st dynasty of Lagash, there is a possible variation of 70 to 80 years, and earlier dates are a matter of mere guesswork: they depend upon factors of only limited relevance, such as the computation of occupation or destruction levels, the degree of development in the script (paleography), the character of the sculpture, pottery, and cylinder seals, and their correlation at different sites. In short, the chronology of the first half of the 3rd millennium is largely a matter for the intuition of the individual author. Carbon-14 dates are at present too few and far between to be given undue weight. Consequently, the turn of the 4th to 3rd millennium is to be accepted, with due caution and reservations, as the date of the flourishing of the archaic civilization of Uruk and of the invention of writing.

In Uruk and probably also in other cities of comparable size, the Sumerians led a city life that can be more or less reconstructed as follows: temples and residential districts; intensive agriculture, stock breeding, fishing, and date palm cultivation forming the four mainstays of the economy; and highly specialized industries carried on by sculptors, seal engravers, smiths, carpenters, shipbuilders, potters, and workers of reeds and textiles. Part of the population was supported with rations from a central point of distribution, which relieved people of the necessity of providing their basic food themselves, in return for their work all day and every day, at least for most of the year. The cities kept up active trade with foreign lands.

That organized city life existed is demonstrated chiefly by the existence of inscribed tablets. The earliest tablets contain figures with the items they enumerate and measures with the items they measure, as well as personal names and, occasionally, probably professions. This shows the purely practical origins of writing in Mesopotamia: it began not as a means of magic or as a way for the ruler to record his achievements, for example, but as an aid to memory for an administration that was ever expanding its area of operations. The earliest examples of writing are very difficult to penetrate because of their extremely laconic formulation, which presupposes a knowledge of the context, and because of the still very imperfect rendering of the spoken word. Moreover, many of the archaic signs were pruned away after a short period of use and cannot be traced in the paleography of later periods, so that they cannot be identified.

One of the most important questions that has to be met when dealing with “organization” and “city life” is that of social structure and the form of government; however, it can be answered only with difficulty, and the use of evidence from later periods carries with it the danger of anachronisms. The Sumerian word for ruler par excellence is *lugal*, which etymologically means “big person.” The first occurrence comes from Kish about 2700 BCE, since an earlier instance from Uruk is uncertain because it could simply be intended as a personal name: “Monsieur Legrand.” In Uruk the ruler’s special title was *en*. In later periods this word (etymology unknown), which is also found in divine names such as Enlil and Enki, has a predominantly religious connotation that is translated, for want of a better designation, as “en-priest, en-priestess.” *En*, as the ruler’s title, is encountered in the traditional epics of the Sumerians (Gilgamesh is the “*en* of Kullab,” a district of Uruk) and particularly in personal names, such as “The-*en*-has-abundance,” “The-*en*-occupies-the-throne,” and many others.

It has often been asked if the ruler of Uruk is to be recognized in artistic representations. A man feeding sheep with flowering branches, a prominent personality in seal designs, might thus represent the ruler or a priest in his capacity as administrator and protector of flocks. The same question may be posed in the case of a man who is depicted on a stela aiming an arrow at a lion. These questions are purely speculative, however: even if the “protector of flocks” were identical with the *en*, there is no ground for seeing in the ruler a person with a predominantly religious function.

Literary and other historical sources

The picture offered by the literary tradition of Mesopotamia is clearer but not necessarily historically relevant. The Sumerian king list has long been the greatest focus of interest. This is a literary composition, dating from Old Babylonian times, that describes kingship (*nam-lugal* in Sumerian) in Mesopotamia from primeval times to the end of the 1st dynasty of Isin. According to the theory—or rather the ideology—of this work, there was officially only one kingship in Mesopotamia, which was vested in one particular city at any one time; hence the change in dynasties brought with it the change of the seat of kingship:

Kish–Uruk–Ur–Awan–Kish–Hamazi–Uruk–Ur–

Adab–Mari–Kish–Akshak–Kish–Uruk–Akkad–

Uruk–Gutians–Uruk–Ur–Isin.

The king list gives as coming in succession several dynasties that now are known to have ruled simultaneously. It is a welcome aid to chronology and history, but, so far as the regnal years are concerned, it loses its value for the time before the dynasty of Akkad, for here the lengths of reign of single rulers are given as more than 100 and sometimes even several hundred years. One group of versions of the king list has adopted the tradition of the Sumerian Flood story, according to which Kish was the first seat of kingship after the Flood, whereas five dynasties of primeval kings ruled before the Flood in Eridu, Bad-tibira, Larak, Sippar, and Shuruppak. These kings all allegedly ruled for multiples of 3,600 years (the maximum being 64,800 or, according to one variant, 72,000 years). The tradition of the Sumerian king list is still echoed in Berosus.

It is also instructive to observe what the Sumerian king list does not mention. The list lacks all mention of a dynasty as important as the 1st dynasty of Lagash (from King Ur-Nanshe to UruKAgina) and appears to retain no memory of the archaic florescence of Uruk at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE.

Besides the peaceful pursuits reflected in art and writing, the art also provides the first information about violent contacts: cylinder seals of the Uruk Level IV depict fettered men lying or squatting on the ground, being beaten with sticks or otherwise maltreated by standing figures. They may represent the execution of prisoners of war. It is not known from where these captives came or what form “war” would have taken or how early organized battles were

fought. Nevertheless, this does give the first, albeit indirect, evidence for the wars that are henceforth one of the most characteristic phenomena in the history of Mesopotamia.

Just as with the rule of man over man, with the rule of higher powers over man it is difficult to make any statements about the earliest attested forms of religion or about the deities and their names without running the risk of anachronism. Excluding prehistoric figurines, which provide no evidence for determining whether men or anthropomorphic gods are represented, the earliest testimony is supplied by certain symbols that later became the cuneiform signs for gods' names: the "gatepost with streamers" for Inanna, goddess of love and war, and the "ringed post" for the moon god Nanna. A scene on a cylinder seal—a shrine with an Inanna symbol and a "man" in a boat—could be an abbreviated illustration of a procession of gods or of a cultic journey by ship. The constant association of the "gatepost with streamers" with sheep and of the "ringed post" with cattle may possibly reflect the area of responsibility of each deity. The Sumerologist Thorkild Jacobsen sees in the pantheon a reflex of the various economies and modes of life in ancient Mesopotamia: fishermen and marsh dwellers, date palm cultivators, cowherds, shepherds, and farmers all have their special groups of gods.

Both Sumerian and non-Sumerian languages can be detected in the divine names and place-names. Since the pronunciation of the names is known only from 2000 BCE or later, conclusions about their linguistic affinity are not without problems. Several names, for example, have been reinterpreted in Sumerian by popular etymology. It would be particularly important to isolate the Subarian components (related to Hurrian), whose significance was probably greater than has hitherto been assumed. For the south Mesopotamian city HA.A (the noncommittal transliteration of the signs) there is a pronunciation gloss "shubari," and non-Sumerian incantations are known in the language of HA.A that have turned out to be "Subarian."

There have always been in Mesopotamia speakers of Semitic languages (which belong to the Afro-Asiatic group and also include ancient Egyptian, Berber, and various African languages). This element is easier to detect in ancient Mesopotamia, but whether people began to participate in city civilization in the 4th millennium BCE or only during the 3rd is unknown. Over the last 4,000 years, Semites (Amorites, Canaanites, Aramaeans, and Arabs) have been partly nomadic, ranging the Arabian fringes of the Fertile Crescent, and partly settled; and the transition to settled life can be observed in a constant, though uneven, rhythm. There are, therefore, good grounds for assuming that the Akkadians (and other pre-Akkadian Semitic

tribes not known by name) also originally led a nomadic life to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless, they can only have been herders of domesticated sheep and goats, which require changes of pasturage according to the time of year and can never stray more than a day's march from the watering places. The traditional nomadic life of the Bedouin makes its appearance only with the domestication of the camel at the turn of the 2nd to 1st millennium BCE.

The question arises as to how quickly writing spread and by whom it was adopted in about 3000 BCE or shortly thereafter. At Kish, in northern Babylonia, almost 120 miles northwest of Uruk, a stone tablet has been found with the same repertoire of archaic signs as those found at Uruk itself. This fact demonstrates that intellectual contacts existed between northern and southern Babylonia. The dispersion of writing in an unaltered form presupposes the existence of schools in various cities that worked according to the same principles and adhered to one and the same canonical repertoire of signs. It would be wrong to assume that Sumerian was spoken throughout the area in which writing had been adopted. Moreover, the use of cuneiform for a non-Sumerian language can be demonstrated with certainty from the 27th century BCE.

First historical personalities

The specifically political events in Mesopotamia after the flourishing of the archaic culture of Uruk cannot be pinpointed. Not until about 2700 BCE does the first historical personality appear—historical because his name, Enmebaragesi (Me-baragesi), was preserved in later tradition. It has been assumed, although the exact circumstances cannot be reconstructed, that there was a rather abrupt end to the high culture of Uruk Level IV. The reason for the assumption is a marked break in both artistic and architectural traditions: entirely new styles of cylinder seals were introduced; the great temples (if in fact they were temples) were abandoned, flouting the rule of a continuous tradition on religious sites, and on a new site a shrine was built on a terrace, which was to constitute the lowest stage of the later Eanna ziggurat. On the other hand, since the writing system developed organically and was continually refined by innovations and progressive reforms, it would be overhasty to assume a revolutionary change in the population.

In the quarter or third of a millennium between Uruk Level IV and Enmebaragesi, southern Mesopotamia became studded with a complex pattern of cities, many of which were the

centres of small independent city-states, to judge from the situation in about the middle of the millennium. In these cities, the central point was the temple, sometimes encircled by an oval boundary wall (hence the term temple oval); but nonreligious buildings, such as palaces serving as the residences of the rulers, could also function as centres.

Enmebaragesi, king of Kish, is the oldest Mesopotamian ruler from whom there are authentic inscriptions. These are vase fragments, one of them found in the temple oval of Khafajah (Khafājī). In the Sumerian king list, Enmebaragesi is listed as the penultimate king of the 1st dynasty of Kish; a Sumerian poem, “Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish,” describes the siege of Uruk by Agga, son of Enmebaragesi. The discovery of the original vase inscriptions was of great significance because it enabled scholars to ask with somewhat more justification whether Gilgamesh, the heroic figure of Mesopotamia who has entered world literature, was actually a historical personage. The indirect synchronism notwithstanding, the possibility exists that even remote antiquity knew its “Ninus” and its “Semiramis,” figures onto which a rapidly fading historical memory projected all manner of deeds and adventures. Thus, though the historical tradition of the early 2nd millennium believes Gilgamesh to have been the builder of the oldest city wall of Uruk, such may not have been the case. The palace archives of Shuruppak (modern Tall Faʾrah, 125 miles southeast of Baghdad), dating presumably from shortly after 2600, contain a long list of divinities, including Gilgamesh and his father Lugalbanda. More recent tradition, on the other hand, knows Gilgamesh as judge of the nether world. However that may be, an armed conflict between two Mesopotamian cities such as Uruk and Kish would hardly have been unusual in a country whose energies were consumed, almost without interruption from 2500 to 1500 BCE, by clashes between various separatist forces. The great “empires,” after all, formed the exception, not the rule.

Emergent city-states

Kish must have played a major role almost from the beginning. After 2500, southern Babylonian rulers, such as Mesannepada of Ur and Eannatum of Lagash, frequently called themselves king of Kish when laying claim to sovereignty over northern Babylonia. This does not agree with some recent histories in which Kish is represented as an archaic “empire.” It is more likely to have figured as representative of the north, calling forth perhaps the same geographic connotation later evoked by “the land of Akkad.”

Although the corpus of inscriptions grows richer both in geographic distribution and in point of chronology in the 27th and increasingly so in the 26th century, it is still impossible to find the key to a plausible historical account, and history cannot be written solely on the basis of archaeological findings. Unless clarified by written documents, such findings contain as many riddles as they seem to offer solutions. This applies even to as spectacular a discovery as that of the royal tombs of Ur with their hecatombs (large-scale sacrifices) of retainers who followed their king and queen to the grave, not to mention the elaborate funerary appointments with their inventory of tombs. It is only from about 2520 to the beginnings of the dynasty of Akkad that history can be written within a framework, with the aid of reports about the city-state of Lagash and its capital of Girsu and its relations with its neighbour and rival, Umma.

Sources for this are, on the one hand, an extensive corpus of inscriptions relating to nine rulers, telling of the buildings they constructed, of their institutions and wars, and, in the case of UruKAgina, of their “social” measures. On the other hand, there is the archive of some 1,200 tablets—insofar as these have been published—from the temple of Baba, the city goddess of Girsu, from the period of Lugalanda and UruKAgina (first half of the 24th century). For generations, Lagash and Umma contested the possession and agricultural usufruct of the fertile region of Gu’edena. To begin with, some two generations before Ur-Nanshe, Mesilim (another “king of Kish”) had intervened as arbiter and possibly overlord in dictating to both states the course of the boundary between them, but this was not effective for long. After a prolonged struggle, Eannatum forced the ruler of Umma, by having him take an involved oath to six divinities, to desist from crossing the old border, a dike. The text that relates this event, with considerable literary elaboration, is found on the Stele of Vultures. These battles, favouring now one side, now the other, continued under Eannatum’s successors, in particular Entemena, until, under UruKAgina, great damage was done to the land of Lagash and to its holy places. The enemy, Lugalzagesi, was vanquished in turn by Sargon of Akkad. The rivalry between Lagash and Umma, however, must not be considered in isolation. Other cities, too, are occasionally named as enemies, and the whole situation resembles the pattern of changing coalitions and short-lived alliances between cities of more recent times. Kish, Umma, and distant Mari on the middle Euphrates are listed together on one occasion as early as the time of Eannatum. For the most part, these battles were fought by infantry, although mention is also made of war chariots drawn by onagers (wild asses).

The lords of Lagash rarely fail to call themselves by the title of *ensi*, of as yet undetermined derivation; “city ruler,” or “prince,” are only approximate translations. Only seldom do they call themselves *lugal*, or “king,” the title given the rulers of Umma in their own inscriptions. In all likelihood, these were local titles that were eventually converted, beginning perhaps with the kings of Akkad, into a hierarchy in which the *lugal* took precedence over the *ensi*.

Territorial states

More difficult than describing its external relations is the task of shedding light on the internal structure of a state like Lagash. For the first time, a state consisting of more than a city with its surrounding territory came into being, because aggressively minded rulers had managed to extend that territory until it comprised not only Girsu, the capital, and the cities of Lagash and Nina (Zurghul) but also many smaller localities and even a seaport, Guabba. Yet it is not clear to what extent the conquered regions were also integrated administratively. On one occasion UruKAgina used the formula “from the limits of Ningirsu [that is, the city god of Girsu] to the sea,” having in mind a distance of up to 125 miles. It would be unwise to harbour any exaggerated notion of well-organized states exceeding that size.

For many years, scholarly views were conditioned by the concept of the Sumerian temple city, which was used to convey the idea of an organism whose ruler, as representative of his god, theoretically owned all land, privately held agricultural land being a rare exception. The concept of the temple city had its origin partly in the overinterpretation of a passage in the so-called reform texts of UruKAgina, that states “on the field of the *ensi* [or his wife and the crown prince], the city god Ningirsu [or the city goddess Baba and the divine couple’s son]” had been “reinstated as owners.” On the other hand, the statements in the archives of the temple of Baba in Girsu, dating from Lugalanda and UruKAgina, were held to be altogether representative. Here is a system of administration, directed by the *ensi*’s spouse or by a *sangu* (head steward of a temple), in which every economic process, including commerce, stands in a direct relationship to the temple: agriculture, vegetable gardening, tree farming, cattle raising and the processing of animal products, fishing, and the payment in merchandise of workers and employees.

The conclusion from this analogy proved to be dangerous because the archives of the temple of Baba provide information about only a portion of the total temple administration and that portion, furthermore, is limited in time. Understandably enough, the private sector, which of

course was not controlled by the temple, is scarcely mentioned at all in these archives. The existence of such a sector is nevertheless documented by bills of sale for land purchases of the pre-Sargonic period and from various localities. Written in Sumerian as well as in Akkadian, they prove the existence of private land ownership or, in the opinion of some scholars, of lands predominantly held as undivided family property. Although a substantial part of the population was forced to work for the temple and drew its pay and board from it, it is not yet known whether it was year-round work.

It is probable, if unfortunate, that there will never exist a detailed and numerically accurate picture of the demographic structure of a Sumerian city. It is assumed that in the oldest cities the government was in a position to summon sections of the populace for the performance of public works. The construction of monumental buildings or the excavation of long and deep canals could be carried out only by means of such a levy. The large-scale employment of indentured persons and of slaves is of no concern in this context. Evidence of male slavery is fairly rare before Ur III, and even in Ur III and in the Old Babylonian period slave labour was never an economically relevant factor. It was different with female slaves. According to one document, the temple of Baba employed 188 such women; the temple of the goddess Nanshe employed 180, chiefly in grinding flour and in the textile industry, and this continued to be the case in later times. For accuracy's sake it should be added that the terms male slave and female slave are used here in the significance they possessed about 2000 BCE and later, designating persons in bondage who were bought and sold and who could not acquire personal property through their labour. A distinction is made between captured slaves (prisoners of war and kidnapped persons) and others who had been sold.

In one inscription, Entemena of Lagash boasts of having "allowed the sons of Uruk, Larsa, and Bad-tibira to return to their mothers" and of having "restored them into the hands" of the respective city god or goddess. Read in the light of similar but more explicit statements of later date, this laconic formula represents the oldest known evidence of the fact that the ruler occasionally endeavoured to mitigate social injustices by means of a decree. Such decrees might refer to the suspension or complete cancellation of debts or to exemption from public works. Whereas a set of inscriptions of the last ruler from the 1st dynasty of Lagash, UruKAgina, has long been considered a prime document of social reform in the 3rd millennium, the designation "reform texts" is only partly justified. Reading between the lines, it is possible to discern that tensions had arisen between the "palace"—the ruler's residence

with its annex, administrative staff, and landed properties—and the "clergy"—that is, the stewards and priests of the temples. In seeming defiance of his own interests, UruKAgina, who in contrast to practically all of his predecessors lists no genealogy and has therefore been suspected of having been a usurper, defends the clergy, whose plight he describes somewhat tearfully.

If the foregoing passage about restoring the *ensi*'s fields to the divinity is interpreted carefully, it would follow that the situation of the temple was ameliorated and that palace lands were assigned to the priests. Along with these measures, which resemble the policies of a newcomer forced to lean on a specific party, are found others that do merit the designation of "measures taken toward the alleviation of social injustices"—for instance, the granting of delays in the payment of debts or their outright cancellation and the setting up of prohibitions to keep the economically or socially more powerful from forcing his inferior to sell his house, his ass's foal, and the like. Besides this, there were tariff regulations, such as newly established fees for weddings and burials, as well as the precise regulation of the food rations of garden workers.

These conditions, described on the basis of source materials from Girsu, may well have been paralleled elsewhere, but it is equally possible that other archives, yet to be found in other cities of pre-Sargonic southern Mesopotamia, may furnish entirely new historical aspects. At any rate, it is wiser to proceed cautiously, keeping to analysis and evaluation of the available material rather than making generalizations.

Ur-Nanshe of Lagash

This, then, is the horizon of Mesopotamia shortly before the rise of the Akkadian empire. In Mari, writing was introduced at the latest about the mid-26th century BCE, and from that time this city, situated on the middle Euphrates, forms an important centre of cuneiform civilization, especially in regard to its Semitic component. Ebla (and probably many other sites in ancient Syria) profited from the influence of Mari scribal schools. Reaching out across the Diyālā region and the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamian influences extended to Iran, where Susa is mentioned along with Elam and other, not yet localized, towns. In the west the Amanus Mountains were known, and under Lugalzagesi the "upper sea"—in other words, the Mediterranean—is mentioned for the first time. To the east the inscriptions of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash name the isle of Dilmun (modern Bahrain), which may have been even then a

transshipment point for trade with the Oman coast and the Indus region, the Magan and Meluhha of more recent texts. Trade with Anatolia and Afghanistan was nothing new in the 3rd millennium, even if these regions are not yet listed by their names. It was the task of the Akkadian dynasty to unite within these boundaries a territory that transcended the dimensions of a state of the type represented by Lagash.

Sumer and Akkad from 2350 to 2000 BCE

bronze head of a king

There are several reasons for taking the year 2350 as a turning point in the history of Mesopotamia. For the first time, an empire arose on Mesopotamian soil. The driving force of that empire was the Akkadians, so called after the city of Akkad, which Sargon chose for his capital (it has not yet been identified but was presumably located on the Euphrates between Sippar and Kish). The name Akkad became synonymous with a population group that stood side by side with the Sumerians. Southern Mesopotamia became known as the “land of Sumer and Akkad”; Akkadian became the name of a language; and the arts rose to new heights. However, even this turning point was not the first time the Akkadians had emerged in history. Semites—whether Akkadians or a Semitic language group that had settled before them—may have had a part in the urbanization that took place at the end of the 4th millennium. The earliest Akkadian names and words occur in written sources of the 27th century. The names of several Akkadian scribes are found in the archives of Tall Abū Ṣalābīkh, near Nippur in central Babylonia, synchronous with those of Shuruppak (shortly after 2600). The Sumerian king list places the 1st dynasty of Kish, together with a series of kings bearing Akkadian names, immediately after the Flood. In Mari the Akkadian language was probably written from the very beginning. Thus, the founders of the dynasty of Akkad were presumably members of a people who had been familiar for centuries with Mesopotamian culture in all its forms.

Sargon’s reign

According to the Sumerian king list, the first five rulers of Akkad (Sargon, Rimush, Manishtusu, Naram-Sin, and Shar-kali-sharri) ruled for a total of 142 years; Sargon alone ruled for 56. Although these figures cannot be checked, they are probably trustworthy, because the king list for Ur III, even if 250 years later, did transmit dates that proved to be accurate.

As stated in an annotation to his name in the king list, Sargon started out as a cupbearer to King Ur-Zababa of Kish. There is an Akkadian legend about Sargon, describing how he was exposed after birth, brought up by a gardener, and later beloved by the goddess Ishtar. Nevertheless, there are no historical data about his career. Yet it is feasible to assume that in his case a high court office served as springboard for a dynasty of his own. The original inscriptions of the kings of Akkad that have come down to posterity are brief, and their geographic distribution generally is more informative than is their content. The main sources for Sargon's reign, with its high points and catastrophes, are copies made by Old Babylonian scribes in Nippur from the very extensive originals that presumably had been kept there. They are in part Akkadian, in part bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian texts. According to these texts, Sargon fought against the Sumerian cities of southern Babylonia, threw down city walls, took prisoner 50 *ensi*s, and "cleansed his weapons in the sea." He is also said to have captured Lugalzagesi of Uruk, the former ruler of Umma, who had vigorously attacked UruKAgina in Lagash, forcing his neck under a yoke and leading him thus to the gate of the god Enlil at Nippur. "Citizens of Akkad" filled the offices of *ensi* from the "nether sea" (the Persian Gulf) upward, which was perhaps a device used by Sargon to further his dynastic aims. Aside from the 34 battles fought in the south, Sargon also tells of conquests in northern Mesopotamia: Mari, Tuttul on the Balīkh, where he venerated the god Dagan (Dagon), Ebla (Tall Mardīkh in Syria), the "cedar forest" (Amanus or Lebanon), and the "silver mountains"; battles in Elam and the foothills of the Zagros are mentioned. Sargon also relates that ships from Meluhha (Indus region), Magan (possibly the coast of Oman), and Dilmun (Bahrain) made fast in the port of Akkad.

Impressive as they are at first sight, these reports have only a limited value because they cannot be arranged chronologically, and it is not known whether Sargon built a large empire. Akkadian tradition itself saw it in this light, however, and a learned treatise of the late 8th or the 7th century lists no fewer than 65 cities and lands belonging to that empire. Yet, even if Magan and Kapturu (Crete) are given as the eastern and western limits of the conquered territories, it is impossible to transpose this to the 3rd millennium.

Sargon appointed one of his daughters priestess of the moon god in Ur. She took the name of Enheduanna and was succeeded in the same office by Enmenanna, a daughter of Naram-Sin. Enheduanna must have been a very gifted woman; two Sumerian hymns by her have been

preserved, and she is also said to have been instrumental in starting a collection of songs dedicated to the temples of Babylonia.

Sargon died at a very old age. The inscriptions, also preserved only in copies, of his son Rimush are full of reports about battles fought in Sumer and Iran, just as if there had never been a Sargonic empire. It is not known in detail how rigorously Akkad wished to control the cities to the south and how much freedom had been left to them; but they presumably clung tenaciously to their inherited local autonomy. From a practical point of view, it was probably in any case impossible to organize an empire that would embrace all Mesopotamia.

Since the reports (i.e., copies of inscriptions) left by Manishtusu, Naram-Sin, and Shar-kali-sharri speak time and again of rebellions and victorious battles and since Rimush, Manishtusu, and Shar-kali-sharri are themselves said to have died violent deaths, the problem of what remained of Akkad's greatness obtrudes. Wars and disturbances, the victory of one and the defeat of another, and even regicide constitute only some of the aspects suggested to us by the sources. Whenever they extended beyond the immediate Babylonian neighbourhood, the military campaigns of the Akkadian kings were dictated primarily by trade interests instead of being intended to serve the conquest and safeguarding of an empire. Akkad, or more precisely the king, needed merchandise, money, and gold in order to finance wars, buildings, and the system of administration that he had instituted.

On the other hand, the original inscriptions that have been found so far of a king like Naram-Sin are scattered at sites covering a distance of some 620 miles as the crow flies, following the Tigris downriver: Diyarbakır on the upper Tigris, Nineveh, Tall Birāk (Tell Brak) on the upper Khābūr River (which had an Akkadian fortress and garrison), Susa in Elam, as well as Marad, Puzrish-Dagan, Adab (Bismāyah), Nippur, Ur, and Girsu in Babylonia. Even if all this was not part of an empire, it surely constituted an impressive sphere of influence.

Also to be considered are other facts that weigh more heavily than high-sounding reports of victories that cannot be verified. After the first kings of the dynasty had borne the title of king of Kish, Naram-Sin assumed the title "king of the four quarters of the earth"—that is, of the universe. As if he were in fact divine, he also had his name written with the cuneiform sign "god," the divine determinative that was customarily used in front of the names of gods; furthermore, he assumed the title of "god of Akkad." It is legitimate to ask whether the concept of deification may be used in the sense of elevation to a rank equal to that of the gods.

At the very least it must be acknowledged that, in relation to his city and his subjects, the king saw himself in the role played by the local divinity as protector of the city and guarantor of its well-being. In contemporary judicial documents from Nippur, the oath is often taken “by Naram-Sin,” with a formula identical with that used in swearing by a divinity. Documents from Girsu contain Akkadian date formulas of the type “in the year in which Naram-Sin laid the foundations of the Enlil temple at Nippur and of the Inanna temple at Zabalam.” As evidenced by the dating procedures customary in Ur III and in the Old Babylonian period, the use of such formulas presupposes that the respective city acknowledged as its overlord the ruler whose name is invoked.

Ascendancy of Akkad

Under Akkad, the Akkadian language acquired a literary prestige that made it the equal of Sumerian. Under the influence, perhaps, of an Akkadian garrison at Susa, it spread beyond the borders of Mesopotamia. After having employed for several centuries an indigenous script patterned after cuneiform writing, Elam adopted Mesopotamian script during the Akkadian period and with a few exceptions used it even when writing in Elamite rather than Sumerian or Akkadian. The so-called Old Akkadian manner of writing is extraordinarily appealing from the aesthetic point of view; as late as the Old Babylonian era it served as a model for monumental inscriptions. Similarly, the plastic and graphic arts, especially sculpture in the round, relief work, and cylinder seals, reached a high point of perfection.

Thus the reign of the five kings of Akkad may be considered one of the most productive periods of Mesopotamian history. Although separatist forces opposed all unifying tendencies, Akkad brought about a broadening of political horizons and dimensions. The period of Akkad fascinated historiographers as did few other eras. Having contributed its share to the storehouse of legend, it has never disappeared from memory. With phrases such as “There will come a king of the four quarters of the earth,” liver omens (soothsaying done by analyzing the shape of a sheep’s liver) of the Old Babylonian period express the yearning for unity at a time when Babylonia had once again disintegrated into a dozen or more small states.

The end of the dynasty

Of the kings after Shar-kali-sharri (*c.* 2217–*c.* 2193), only the names and a few brief inscriptions have survived. Quarrels arose over the succession, and the dynasty went under, although modern scholars know as little about the individual stages of this decline as about the

rise of Akkad. Two factors contributed to its downfall: the invasion of the nomadic Amurrus (Amorites), called Martu by the Sumerians, from the northwest, and the infiltration of the Gutians, who came, apparently, from the region between the Tigris and the Zagros Mountains to the east. This argument, however, may be a vicious circle, as these invasions were provoked and facilitated by the very weakness of Akkad. In Ur III the Amorites, in part already sedentary, formed one ethnic component along with Sumerians and Akkadians. The Gutians, on the other hand, played only a temporary role, even if the memory of a Gutian dynasty persisted until the end of the 17th century BCE. As a matter of fact, the wholly negative opinion that even some modern historians have of the Gutians is based solely on a few stereotyped statements by the Sumerians and Akkadians, especially on the victory inscription of Utu-hegal of Uruk (*c.* 2116–*c.* 2110). While Old Babylonian sources give the region between the Tigris and the Zagros Mountains as the home of the Gutians, these people probably also lived on the middle Euphrates during the 3rd millennium. According to the Sumerian king list, the Gutians held the "kingship" in southern Mesopotamia for about 100 years. It has long been recognized that there is no question of a whole century of undivided Gutian rule and that some 50 years of this rule coincided with the final half century of Akkad. From this period there has also been preserved a record of a "Gutian interpreter." As it is altogether doubtful whether the Gutians had made any city of southern Mesopotamia their "capital" instead of controlling Babylonia more or less informally from outside, scholars cautiously refer to "viceroys" of this people. The Gutians have left no material records, and the original inscriptions about them are so scanty that no binding statements about them are possible.

The Gutians' influence probably did not extend beyond Umma. The neighbouring state of Lagash enjoyed a century of complete independence, between Shar-kali-sharri and the beginning of Ur III, during which time it showed expansionist tendencies and had widely ranging trade connections. Of the *ensi* Gudea, a contemporary of Ur-Nammu of Ur III, there are extant writings, exclusively Sumerian in language, which are of inestimable value. He had the time, power, and means to carry out an extensive program of temple construction during his reign, and in a hymn divided into two parts and preserved in two clay cylinders 12 inches (30 centimetres) high he describes explicitly the reconstruction of Eninnu, the temple of the god Ningirsu. Comprising 1,363 lines, the text is second in length only to Eannatum's Stele of Vultures among the literary works of the Sumerians up to that time. While Gudea forges a link, in his literary style, with his country's pre-Sargonic period, his work also bears the

unmistakable stamp of the period of Akkad. Thus, the regions that furnish him building materials reflect the geographic horizon of the empire of Akkad, and the *ensi*'s title "god of his city" recalls the "god of Akkad" (Naram-Sin). The building hymn contains interesting particulars about the work force deployed. "Levies" were organized in various parts of the country, and the city of Girsu itself "followed the *ensi* as though it were a single man." Unfortunately lacking are synchronous administrative archives of sufficient length to provide less summarily compiled information about the social structure of Lagash at the beginning of the 3rd dynasty of Ur. After the great pre-Sargonic archives of the Baba temple at Girsu, only the various administrative archives of the kings of Ur III give a closer look at the functioning of a Mesopotamian state.

The 3rd dynasty of Ur

Utu-hegal of Uruk is given credit for having overthrown Gutian rule by vanquishing their king Tiriqan along with two generals. Utu-hegal calls himself lord of the four quarters of the earth in an inscription, but this title, adopted from Akkad, is more likely to signify political aspiration than actual rule. Utu-hegal was a brother of the Ur-Nammu who founded the 3rd dynasty of Ur ("3rd" because it is the third time that Ur is listed in the Sumerian king list). Under Ur-Nammu and his successors Shulgi, Amar-Su'ena, Shu-Sin, and Ibbi-Sin, this dynasty lasted for a century (*c.* 2112–*c.* 2004). Ur-Nammu was at first "governor" of the city of Ur under Utu-hegal. How he became king is not known, but there may well be some parallels between his rise and the career of Ishbi-Erra of Isin or, indeed, that of Sargon. By eliminating the state of Lagash, Ur-Nammu caused the coveted overseas trade (Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha) to flow through Ur. As evidenced by a new royal title that he was the first to bear—that of "king of Sumer and Akkad"—he had built up a state that comprised at least the southern part of Mesopotamia. Like all great rulers, he built much, including the very impressive ziggurats of Ur and Uruk, which acquired their final monumental dimensions in his reign.

Assyriologists have given the name of Code of Ur-Nammu to a literary monument that is the oldest known example of a genre extending through the Code of Lipit-Ishtar in Sumerian to the Code of Hammurabi, written in Akkadian. (Some scholars have attributed it to Ur-Nammu's son Shulgi.) It is a collection of sentences or verdicts mostly following the pattern of "If A [assumption], it follows that B [legal consequence]." The collection is framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The original was most likely a stela, but all that is known of the

Code of Ur-Nammu so far are Old Babylonian copies. The term code as used here is conventional terminology and should not give the impression of any kind of “codified” law; furthermore, the content of the Code of Ur-Nammu is not yet completely known. It deals, among other things, with adultery by a married woman, the defloration of someone else’s female slave, divorce, false accusation, the escape of slaves, bodily injury, and the granting of security, as well as with legal cases arising from agriculture and irrigation.

Before its catastrophic end under Ibbi-Sin, the state of Ur III does not seem to have suffered setbacks and rebellions as grievous as those experienced by Akkad. There are no clear indications pointing to inner unrest, although it must be remembered that the first 20 years of Shulgi’s reign are still hidden in darkness. However, from that point on until the beginning of Ibbi-Sin’s reign, or for a period of 50 years at least, the sources give the impression of peace enjoyed by a country that lived undisturbed by encroachments from abroad. Some expeditions were sent into foreign lands, to the region bordering on the Zagros, to what later became Assyria, and to the vicinity of Elam, in order to secure the importation of raw materials, in a fashion reminiscent of Akkad. Force seems to have been employed only as a last resort, and every attempt was made to bring about peaceful conditions on the other side of the border through the dispatch of embassies or the establishment of family bonds—for example, by marrying the king’s daughters to foreign rulers.

Shulgi, too, called himself king of the four quarters of the earth. Although he resided in Ur, another important centre was in Nippur, whence—according to the prevailing ideology—Enlil, the chief god in the Sumerian state pantheon, had bestowed on Shulgi the royal dignity. Shulgi and his successors enjoyed divine honours, as Naram-Sin of Akkad had before them; by now, however, the process of deification had taken on clearer outlines in that sacrifices were offered and chapels built to the king and his throne, while the royal determinative turned up in personal names. Along with an Utu-hegal (“The Sun God Is Exuberance”) there appears a Shulgi-hegal (“Shulgi Is Exuberance”), and so forth.

Administration

The highest official of the state was the *sukkal-mah*, literally “supreme courier,” whose position may be described as “(state) chancellor.” The empire was divided into some 40 provinces ruled by as many *ensi*s, who, despite their far-reaching authority (civil administration and judicial powers), were no longer autonomous, even if only indirectly,

although the office was occasionally handed down from father to son. They could not enter into alliances or wage wars on their own. The *ensi*s were appointed by the king and could probably also be transferred by him to other provinces. Each of these provinces was obliged to pay a yearly tribute, the amount of which was negotiated by emissaries. Of special significance in this was a system called *bala*, “cycle” or “rotation,” in which the *ensi*s of the southern provinces took part; among other things, they had to keep the state stockyards supplied with sacrificial animals. Although the “province” often corresponded to a former city-state, many others were no doubt newly established. The so-called land-register text of Ur-Nammu describes four such provinces north of Nippur, giving the precise boundaries and ending in each case with the statement, “King Ur-Nammu has confirmed the field of the god XX for the god XX.” In some cities, notably in Uruk, Mari, or Dēr (near Badrah, Iraq), the administration was in the hands of a *šakkana*, a man whose title is rendered partly by “governor” and partly by “general.”

The available histories are practically unanimous in seeing in Ur III a strongly centralized state marked by the king’s position as absolute ruler. Nevertheless, some caution is indicated. For one thing, the need to deal as carefully as possible with the *ensi*s must not be underestimated. A further question arises from the borders between and relative extent of the “public” and the “private” sector; the latter’s importance may have been underrated as well. What is meant by “private” sector is a population group with land of its own and with revenues not directly granted by a temple or a “palace,” such as by the king’s or an *ensi*’s household. The traditional picture is derived from the sources, the state archives of Puzrish-Dagan, a gigantic “stockyard” situated outside the gates of Nippur, which supplied the city’s temples with sacrificial animals but inevitably also comprised a major wool and leather industry; other such archives are those of Umma, Girsu, Nippur, and Ur. All these activities were overseen by a finely honed bureaucracy that stressed the use of official channels, efficient administration, and precise accounting. The various administrative organs communicated with one another by means of a smoothly functioning network of messengers. Although almost 24,000 documents referring to the economy of Ur III have so far been published, the majority of them are still waiting to be properly evaluated. Nor is there yet a serviceable typology for them; only when that has been drawn up will it be possible to write a book entitled “The Economic System of Ur III.” Represented in the main by contracts (loans, leases of temple land, the purchase of slaves, and the like), the “private” sector makes up only a small part of this mass of textual material. Neither can the sites at which discoveries have been made so far be taken as representative. In

northern Babylonia, for example, scarcely any contemporary written documents have yet been recovered.

Ethnic, geographic, and intellectual constituents

From the ethnic point of view, Mesopotamia was as heterogeneous at the end of the 3rd millennium as it had been earlier. The Akkadian element predominated, and the proportion of speakers of Akkadian to speakers of Sumerian continued to change in favour of the former. The third group, first mentioned under Shar-kali-sharri of Akkad, are the Amorites. In Ur III some members of this people are already found in the higher echelons of the administration, but most of them, organized in tribes, still led a nomadic life. Their great days came in the Old Babylonian period. While clearly differing linguistically from Akkadian, the Amorite language, which can be reconstructed to some extent from more than a thousand proper names, is fairly closely related to the so-called Canaanite branch of the Semitic languages, of which it may in fact represent an older form. The fact that King Shu-Sin had a regular wall built clear across the land, the “wall that keeps out the Tidnum” (the name of a tribe), shows how strong the pressure of the nomads was in the 21st century and what efforts were made to check their influx. The fourth major ethnic group was the Hurrians, who were especially important in northern Mesopotamia and in the vicinity of modern Kirkūk.

It is likely that the geographic horizon of the empire of Ur III did not materially exceed that of the empire of Akkad. No names of localities in the interior of Anatolia have been found, but there was much coming and going of messengers between Mesopotamia and Iran, far beyond Elam. There is also one mention of Gubla (Byblos) on the Mediterranean coast. Oddly enough, there is no evidence of any relations with Egypt, either in Ur III or in the Old Babylonian period. It is odd if no contacts existed at the end of the 3rd millennium between the two great civilizations of the ancient Middle East.

Intellectual life at the time of Ur III must have been very active in the cultivation and transmission of older literature, as well as in new creations. Although its importance as a spoken tongue was slowly diminishing, Sumerian still flourished as a written language, a state of affairs that continued into the Old Babylonian period. As shown by the hymn to the deified king, new literary genres arose in Ur III. If Old Babylonian copies are any indication, the king’s correspondence with leading officials was also of a high literary level.

In the long view, the 3rd dynasty of Ur did not survive in historical memory as vigorously as did Akkad. To be sure, Old Babylonian historiography speaks of Ur III as *bala-Šulgi*, the "(reigning) cycle of Shulgi"; however, there is nothing that would correspond to the epic poems about Sargon and Naram-Sin. The reason is not clear, but it is conceivable that the later, purely Akkadian population felt a closer identification with Akkad than with a state that to a large extent still made use of the Sumerian language.

Ur III in decline

The decline of Ur III is an event in Mesopotamian history that can be followed in greater detail than other stages of that history thanks to sources such as the royal correspondence, two elegies on the destruction of Ur and Sumer, and an archive from Isin that shows how Ishbi-Erra, as usurper and king of Isin, eliminated his former overlord in Ur. Ibbi-Sin was waging war in Elam when an ambitious rival came forward in the person of Ishbi-Erra from Mari, presumably a general or high official. By emphasizing to the utmost the danger threatening from the Amorites, Ishbi-Erra urged the king to entrust to him the protection of the neighbouring cities of Isin and Nippur. Ishbi-Erra's demand came close to extortion, and his correspondence shows how skillfully he dealt with the Amorites and with individual *ensi*s, some of whom soon went over to his side. Ishbi-Erra also took advantage of the depression that the king suffered because the god Enlil "hated him," a phrase presumably referring to bad omens resulting from the examination of sacrificed animals, on which procedure many rulers based their actions (or, as the case may be, their inaction). Ishbi-Erra fortified Isin and, in the 10th year of Ibbi-Sin's reign, began to employ his own dating formulas on documents, an act tantamount to a renunciation of loyalty. Ishbi-Erra, for his part, believed himself to be the favourite of Enlil, the more so as he ruled over Nippur, where the god had his sanctuary. In the end he claimed suzerainty over all of southern Mesopotamia, including Ur.

While Ishbi-Erra purposefully strengthened his domains, Ibbi-Sin continued for 14 more years to rule over a decreasing portion of the land. The end of Ur came about through a concatenation of misfortunes: A famine broke out, and Ur was besieged, taken, and destroyed by the invading Elamites and their allies among the Iranian tribes. Ibbi-Sin was led away captive, and no more was heard of him. The elegies record in moving fashion the unhappy end of Ur, the catastrophe that had been brought about by the wrath of Enlil.

The Old Babylonian period

Isin and Larsa

During the collapse of Ur III, Ishbi-Erra established himself in Isin and founded a dynasty there that lasted from 2017 to 1794. His example was followed elsewhere by local rulers, as in Dēr, Eshnunna, Sippar, Kish, and Larsa. In many localities an urge was felt to imitate the model of Ur; Isin probably took over unchanged the administrative system of that state. Ishbi-Erra and his successors had themselves deified, as did one of the rulers of Dēr, on the Iranian border. For almost a century Isin predominated within the mosaic of states that were slowly reemerging. Overseas trade revived after Ishbi-Erra had driven out the Elamite garrison from Ur, and under his successor, Shu-ilishu, a statue of the moon god Nanna, the city god of Ur, was recovered from the Elamites, who had carried it off. Up to the reign of Lipit-Ishtar (*c.* 1934–*c.* 1924), the rulers of Isin so resembled those of Ur, as far as the king's assessment of himself in the hymns is concerned, that it seems almost arbitrary to postulate a break between Ibbi-Sin and Ishbi-Erra. As a further example of continuity it might be added that the Code of Lipit-Ishtar stands exactly midway chronologically between the Code of Ur-Nammu and the Code of Hammurabi. Yet it is much closer to the former in language and especially in legal philosophy than to Hammurabi's compilation of judgments. For example, the Code of Lipit-Ishtar does not know the lex talionis ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"), the guiding principle of Hammurabi's penal law.

Political fragmentation

It is probable that the definitive separation from Ur III came about through changing components of the population, from "Sumerians and Akkadians" to "Akkadians and Amorites." An Old Babylonian liver omen states that "he of the steppes will enter, and chase out the one in the city." This is indeed an abbreviated formula for an event that took place more than once: the usurpation of the king's throne in the city by the "sheikh" of some Amorite tribe. These usurpations were regularly carried out as part of the respective tribes became settled, although this was not so in the case of Isin because the house of Ishbi-Erra came from Mari and was of Akkadian origin, to judge by the rulers' names. By the same linguistic token the dynasty of Larsa was Amorite. The fifth ruler of the latter dynasty, Gungunum (ruled *c.* 1932–*c.* 1906), conquered Ur and established himself as the equal and rival of Isin; at this stage—the end of the 20th century BCE—if not before, Ur had certainly outlived itself. From Gungunum until the temporary unification of Mesopotamia under Hammurabi, the political picture was determined by the disintegration of the balance of power,

by incessant vacillation of alliances, by the presumption of the various rulers, by the fear of encroachments by the Amorite nomads, and by increasingly wretched social conditions. The extensive archive of correspondence from the royal palace of Mari (*c.* 1810–1750) is the best source of information about the political and diplomatic game and its rules, whether honoured or broken; it covers treaties, the dispatch and reception of embassies, agreements about the integration of allied armies, espionage, and "situation reports" from "foreign" courts. Devoid of exaggeration or stylization, these letters, dealing as they do with everyday events, are preferable to the numerous royal inscriptions on buildings, even when the latter contain historical allusions.

Literary texts and increasing decentralization

Another indirect but far from negligible source for the political and socioeconomic situation in the 20th–18th centuries BCE is the literature of omens. These are long compendiums in which the condition of a sheep's liver or some other divinatory object (for instance, the behaviour of a drop of oil in a beaker filled with water, the appearance of a newborn baby, and the shape of rising clouds of incense) is described at length and commented on with the appropriate prediction: "The king will kill his dignitaries and distribute their houses and property among the temples"; "A powerful man will ascend the throne in a foreign city"; "The land that rose up against its 'shepherd' will continue to be ruled by that 'shepherd'"; "The king will depose his chancellor"; and "They will lock the city gate and there will be a calamity in the city."

Beginning with Gungunum of Larsa, the texts allow greater insight into the private sector than in any other previous period. There is a considerable increase in the number of private contracts and private correspondences. Especially frequent among the private contracts are those concluded about loans of silver or grain (barley), illustrating the common man's plight, especially when driven to seek out a creditor, the first step on a road that in many instances led to ruin. The rate of interest, fixed at 20 percent in the case of silver and 33 percent in that of grain, increased further if the deadline for repayment, usually at harvest time, was not kept. Insolvency resulted in imprisonment for debt, slavery by mortgage, and even the sale of children and the debtor's own person. Many private letters contain entreaties for the release of family members from imprisonment at the creditor's hands. Yet considerable fortunes were also made, in "liquid" capital as well as landed property. As these tendencies threatened to end in economic disaster, the kings prescribed as a corrective the liquidation of debts, by way of

temporary alleviation at least. The exact wording of one such decree is known from the time of Ammiṣaduqa of Babylon.

Until the Ur III period, the only archives so far recovered dealt with temples or the palace. However, belonging to the Old Babylonian period, along with documents pertaining to civil law, were an increasing number of administrative records of privately managed households, inns, and farms: settlements of accounts, receipts, and notes on various transactions. Here was clearly a regular bourgeoisie, disposing of its own land and possessing means independent of temple and palace. Trade, too, was now chiefly in private hands; the merchant traveled (or sent his partners) at his own risk, not on behalf of the state. Among the civil-law contracts there was a substantial increase in records of land purchases. Also significant for the economic situation in the Old Babylonian era was a process that might be summarized as “secularization of the temples,” even if all the stages of this development cannot be traced. The palace had probably possessed for centuries the authority to dispose of temple property, but, whereas UruKAgina of Lagash had still branded the tendency as leading to abuses, the citizen’s relationship to the temple now took on individual traits. Revenues from certain priestly offices —benefices, in other words—went to private individuals and were sold and inherited. The process had begun in Ur, where the king bestowed benefices, although the recipients could not own them. The archives of the “canonesses” of the sun god of Sippar furnish a particularly striking example of the fusion of religious service and private economic interest. These women, who lived in a convent called *gagûm*, came from the city’s leading families and were not allowed to marry. With their property, consisting of land and silver, they engaged in a lively and remunerative business by granting loans and leasing out fields.

The tendency toward decentralization had begun in the Old Babylonian period with Isin. It concluded with the 72-year reign of the house of Kudur-Mabuk in Larsa (*c.* 1834–*c.* 1763). Kudur-Mabuk, sheikh of the Amorite tribe of the Jamutbal, despite his Elamite name, helped his son Warad-Sin to secure the throne. This usurpation allowed Larsa, which had passed through a period of internal unrest, to flourish one more time. Under Warad-Sin and in the long reign of his brother Rim-Sin, large portions of southern Babylonia, including Nippur, were once again united in one state of Larsa in 1794. Larsa was conquered by Hammurabi in 1763.

Early history of Assyria

Strictly speaking, the use of the name “Assyria” for the period before the latter half of the 2nd millennium BCE is anachronistic; Assyria—as against the city-state of Ashur—did not become an independent state until about 1400 BCE. For convenience, however, the term is used throughout this section.

In contrast to southern Mesopotamia or the mid-Euphrates region (Mari), written sources in Assyria do not begin until very late, shortly before Ur III. By Assyria—a region that does not lend itself to precise geographic delineation—is understood the territory on the Tigris north of the river’s passage through the mountains of the Jabal Ḥamrīn to a point north of Nineveh, as well as the area between Little and Great Zab (a tributary of the Tigris in northeast Iraq) and to the north of the latter. In the north, Assyria was later bordered by the mountain state of Urartu; to the east and southeast its neighbour was the region around ancient Nuzi (near modern Kirkūk, “Arrapchitis” [Arrapkha] of the Greeks). In the early 2nd millennium the main cities of this region were Ashur (160 miles north-northwest of modern Baghdad), the capital (synonymous with the city god and national divinity); Nineveh, lying opposite modern Mosul; and Urbilum, later Arbela (modern Irbīl, some 200 miles north of Baghdad).

In Assyria, inscriptions were composed in Akkadian from the beginning. Under Ur III, Ashur was a provincial capital. Assyria as a whole, however, is not likely to have been a permanently secured part of the empire, since two date formulas of Shulgi and Amar-Su’ena mention the destruction of Urbilum. Ideas of the population of Assyria in the 3rd millennium are necessarily very imprecise. It is not known how long Semitic tribes had been settled there. The inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia called Assyria Shubir in Sumerian and Subartu in Akkadian; these names may point to a Subarean population that was related to the Hurrians. Gasur, the later Nuzi, belonged to the Akkadian language region about the year 2200 but was lost to the Hurrians in the first quarter of the 2nd millennium. The Assyrian dialect of Akkadian found in the beginning of the 2nd millennium differs strongly from the dialect of Babylonia. These two versions of the Akkadian language continue into the 1st millennium.

In contrast to the kings of southern Mesopotamia, the rulers of Ashur styled themselves not king but partly *iššiakum*, the Akkadian equivalent of the Sumerian word *ensi*, partly *rubā’um*, or “great one.” Unfortunately, the rulers cannot be synchronized precisely with the kings of southern Mesopotamia before Shamshi-Adad I (*c.* 1813–*c.* 1781 BCE). For instance, it has not yet been established just when Ilushuma’s excursion toward the southeast, recorded in an inscription, actually took place. Ilushuma boasts of having freed of taxes the “Akkadians and

their children.” While he mentions the cities of Nippur and Ur, the other localities listed were situated in the region east of the Tigris. The event itself may have taken place in the reign of Ishme-Dagan of Isin (*c.* 1953–*c.* 1935 BCE), although how far Ilushuma’s words correspond to the truth cannot be checked. In the Babylonian texts, at any rate, no reference is made to Assyrian intervention. The whole problem of dating is aggravated by the fact that the Assyrians did not, unlike the Babylonians, use date formulas that often contain interesting historical details; instead, every year was designated by the name of a high official (eponymic dating). The conscious cultivation of an old tradition is mirrored in the fact that two rulers of 19th-century Assyria called themselves Sargon and Naram-Sin after famous models in the Akkadian dynasty.

Aside from the generally scarce reports on projected construction, there is at present no information about the city of Ashur and its surroundings. There exists, however, unexpectedly rewarding source material from the trading colonies of Ashur in Anatolia. The texts come mainly from Kanesh (modern Kültepe, near Kayseri, in Turkey) and from Hattusa (modern Boğazköy, Turkey), the later Hittite capital. In the 19th century BCE three generations of Assyrian merchants engaged in a lively commodity trade (especially in textiles and metal) between the homeland and Anatolia, also taking part profitably in internal Anatolian trade. Like their contemporaries in southern Mesopotamia, they did business privately and at their own risk, living peacefully and occasionally intermarrying with the “Anatolians.” As long as they paid taxes to the local rulers, the Assyrians were given a free hand.

Clearly these forays by Assyrian merchants led to some transplanting of Mesopotamian culture into Anatolia. Thus the Anatolians adopted cuneiform writing and used the Assyrian language. While this influence doubtless already affected the first Hittites arriving in Anatolia, a direct line from the period of these trading colonies to the Hittite empire cannot yet be traced.

From about 1813 to about 1781 Assyria was ruled by Shamshi-Adad I, a contemporary of Hammurabi and a personality in no way inferior to him. Shamshi-Adad’s father—an Amorite, to judge by the name—had ruled near Mari. The son, not being of Assyrian origin, ascended the throne of Assyria as a foreigner and on a detour, as it were, after having spent some time as an exile in Babylonia. He had his two sons rule as viceroys, in Ekallātum on the Tigris and in Mari, respectively, until the older of the two, Ishme-Dagan, succeeded his father on the throne. Through the archive of correspondence in the palace at Mari, scholars are particularly well

informed about Shamshi-Adad's reign and many aspects of his personality. Shamshi-Adad's state had a common border for some time with the Babylonia of Hammurabi. Soon after Shamshi-Adad's death, Mari broke away, regaining its independence under an Amorite dynasty that had been living there for generations; in the end, Hammurabi conquered and destroyed Mari. After Ishme-Dagan's death, Assyrian history is lost sight of for more than 100 years.

The Old Babylonian empire

Political fortunes

Hammurabi (*c.* 1792–*c.* 1750 BCE) is surely the most impressive and by now the best-known figure of the ancient Middle East of the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE. He owes his posthumous reputation to the great stela into which the Code of Hammurabi was carved and indirectly also to the fact that his dynasty has made the name of Babylon famous for all time. In much the same way in which pre-Sargonic Kish exemplified the non-Sumerian area north of Sumer and Akkad lent its name to a country and a language, Babylon became the symbol of the whole country that the Greeks called Babylonia. This term is used anachronistically by Assyriologists as a geographic concept in reference to the period before Hammurabi. Originally the city's name was probably Babilla, which was reinterpreted in popular etymology as Bāb-ili ("Gate of the God").

The 1st dynasty of Babylon rose from insignificant beginnings. The history of the erstwhile province of Ur is traceable from about 1894 onward, when the Amorite Sumuabum came to power there. What is known of these events fits altogether into the modest proportions of the period when Mesopotamia was a mosaic of small states. Hammurabi played skillfully on the instrument of coalitions and became more powerful than his predecessors had been. Nonetheless, it was only in the 30th year of his reign, after his conquest of Larsa, that he gave concrete expression to the idea of ruling all of southern Mesopotamia by "strengthening the foundations of Sumer and Akkad," in the words of that year's dating formula. In the prologue to the Code of Hammurabi the king lists the following cities as belonging to his dominions: Eridu near Ur, Ur, Lagash and Girsu, Zabalam, Larsa, Uruk, Adab, Isin, Nippur, Keshi, Dilbat, Borsippa, Babylon itself, Kish, Malgium, Mashkan-shapir, Kutha, Sippar, Eshnunna in the Diyālā region, Mari, Tuttul on the lower Balīkh (a tributary of the Euphrates), and finally Ashur and Nineveh. This was on a scale reminiscent of Akkad or Ur III. Yet Ashur and

Nineveh cannot have formed part of this empire for long because at the end of Hammurabi's reign mention is made again of wars against Subartu—that is, Assyria.

Under Hammurabi's son Samsuiluna (*c.* 1749–*c.* 1712 BCE) the Babylonian empire greatly shrank in size. Following what had almost become a tradition, the south rose up in revolt. Larsa regained its autonomy for some time, and the walls of Ur, Uruk, and Larsa were leveled. Eshnunna, which evidently had also seceded, was vanquished about 1730. Later chronicles mention the existence of a state in the Sealand, with its own dynasty (by "Sealand" is understood the marshlands of southern Babylonia). Knowledge of this new dynasty is unfortunately very vague, only one of its kings being documented in contemporary texts. About 1741 Samsuiluna mentions the Kassites for the first time; about 1726 he constructed a stronghold, "Fort Samsuiluna," as a bulwark against them on the Diyālā near its confluence with the Tigris.

Like the Gutians before them, the Kassites were at first prevented from entering Babylonia and pushed into the mid-Euphrates region; there, in the kingdom of Khana (centred on Mari and Terqa, both below the junction with the Khābūr River), a king appears with the Kassite name of Kashtiliashu, who ruled toward the end of the Babylonian dynasty. From Khana the Kassites moved south in small groups, probably as harvest workers. After the Hittite invasion under Mursilis I, who is said to have dethroned the last king of Babylon, Samsuditana, in 1595, the Kassites assumed the royal power in Babylonia. So far, the contemporary sources do not mention this epoch, and the question remains unresolved as to how the Kassite rulers named in king lists mesh with the end of the 2nd millennium BCE.

Babylonian law

Code of Hammurabi

The Code of Hammurabi is the most frequently cited cuneiform document in specialized literature. Its first scholarly publication in 1902 led to the development of a special branch of comparative jurisprudence, the study of cuneiform law. Following the division made by the first editor, Jean-Vincent Scheil, the Code of Hammurabi contains 280 judgments, or "paragraphs," on civil and criminal law, dealing in the main with cases from everyday life in such a manner that it becomes obvious that the "lawgiver" or compiler had no intention of covering all possible

contingencies. In broad outline, the themes treated in the Code of Hammurabi are libel; corrupt administration of justice; theft, receiving stolen goods, robbery, looting, and burglary; murder, manslaughter, and bodily injury; abduction; judicature of tax lessees; liability for negligent damage to fields and crop damage caused by grazing cattle; illegal felling of palm trees; legal problems of trade enterprises, in particular, the relationship between the merchant and his employee traveling overland, and embezzlement of merchandise; trust monies; the proportion of interest to loan money; the legal position of the female publican; slavery and ransom, slavery for debt, runaway slaves, the sale and manumission of slaves, and the contesting of slave status; the rent of persons, animals, and ships and their respective tariffs, offenses committed by hired labourers, and the vicious bull; family law: the price of a bride, dowry, the married woman's property, wife and concubine, and the legal position of the respective issue, divorce, adoption, the wet nurse's contract, and inheritance; and the legal position of certain priestesses.

A similar if much shorter compendium of judgments, probably antedating that of Hammurabi by a generation or two, has been discovered in Eshnunna.

Hammurabi, who called his own work *dīnāt mīŷarim*, or "verdicts of the just order," states in the epilogue that it was intended as legal aid for persons in search of advice. Whether these judgments were meant to have binding force in the sense of modern statutes, however, is a matter of controversy. The Code of Hammurabi differs in many respects from the Code of Lipit-Ishtar, which was written in Sumerian. Its most striking feature lies in the extraordinary severity of its penalties and in the principle of the lex talionis. The same attitude is reflected in various Old Babylonian contracts in which defaulters are threatened with bodily punishment. It is often said, and perhaps rightly so, that this severity, which so contrasts with Sumerian judicial tradition, can be traced back to the Amorite influence.

There is yet another way in which the Code of Hammurabi has given rise to much discussion. Many of its "paragraphs" vary according to whether the case concerns an *awīlum*, a *muškēnum*, or a *wardum*. A threefold division of the populace had been postulated on the basis of these distinctions. The *wardum* is the least problematic: he is the slave—that is, a person in bondage who could be bought and sold, unless he was able to regain his freedom under certain conditions as a debtor-slave. The *muškēnum* were, under King Hammurabi at least, persons employed by the palace who could be given land in usufruct without receiving it as property. *Awīlum* were the citizens who owned land in their own right and depended neither on the

palace nor on the temple. As the Soviet scholar Igor M. Diakonov has pointed out, the distinction cannot have been very sharply drawn, because the classes *awīlum* and *muškēnum* are not mutually exclusive: a man in high palace office could fairly easily purchase land as private property, whereas the free citizen who got into debt as a result of a bad harvest or some other misfortune had one foot in the slave class. Still unanswered is the question as to which segment of the population could be conscripted to do public works, a term that included the levy in case of war.

Ammiṣaduqa (*c.* 1646–*c.* 1626 BCE) comes a century and a half after Hammurabi. His edict, already referred to, lists, among others, the following social and economic factors: private debts in silver and grain, if arising out of loans, were canceled; also canceled were back taxes that certain officials owed the palace and that had to be collected from the people; the female publican had to renounce the collection of outstanding debts in beer and barley and was, in turn, excused from paying amounts of silver and barley to the king; taxes on leased property were reduced; debt slaves who had formerly been free (as against slaves made over from debtor to creditor) were ransomed; and high officials were forbidden on pain of death to press those who held property in fee into harvest work by prepayment of wages. The phrase "because the king gave the land a just order" serves as a rationale for many of these instances. In contrast to the codes, about whose binding force there is much doubt, edicts such as those of Ammiṣaduqa had legal validity since there are references to the edicts of other kings in numerous legal documents of the Old Babylonian period.

Babylonian literature

The literature and the literary languages of Babylonia during the three centuries following Ur III deserve attention. When commenting on literary and historical texts such as the inscriptions of the kings of Akkad, it was pointed out that these were not originals but copies of Old Babylonian vintage. So far, such copies are the main source for Sumerian literature. Yet, while the Old Babylonian period witnessed the creation of much literature (royal hymns of the kings of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon and elegies), it was above all a time of intensive cultivation of traditional literature. The great Sumerian poems, whose origins or first written version, respectively, can now be traced back to about 2600, were copied again and again. After 2000, when Sumerian as a spoken language rapidly receded to isolated regions and eventually disappeared altogether, texts began to be translated, line by line, into Akkadian until there came to be bilingual versions. An important part of this, especially in the instructional

program in schools, were the so-called lexicographical texts. Sumerian word lists are almost as old as cuneiform writing itself; they formed the perfect material for those learning to write. In the Old Babylonian period, the individual lexical entries were translated and often annotated with phonetic signs. This led to the creation of “dictionaries,” the value of which to the modern philologist cannot be exaggerated. Since Sumerian had to be taught much more than before, regular “grammatical treatises” also came into being: so far as it was possible, in view of the radically different structures of the two languages, Sumerian pronouns, verb forms, and the like were translated into Akkadian, including entire “paradigms” of individual verbs.

In belles lettres, Sumerian still predominates, although there is no lack of Akkadian masterpieces, including the oldest Akkadian version of the epic of Gilgamesh. The very high prestige still enjoyed by Sumerian should not be underestimated, and it continued to be used for inscriptions on buildings and the yearly dating formulas. Aside from being the language of practical affairs (i.e., letters and contracts), there was a high incidence of Akkadian in soothsaying and divinatory literature. To be sure, the Sumerians also practiced foretelling the future from the examination of animal entrails, but as far as is known they did not write down the results. In Akkadian, on the other hand, there are extensive and “scientifically” arranged compendiums of omens based on the liver (as well as other omens), reflecting the importance that the divination of the future had in religion, in politics, and in all aspects of daily life.

Judging by its increasingly refined juridical thought, its ability to master in writing ever more complicated administrative procedures, its advanced knowledge of mathematics, and the fact that it marks the beginning of the study of astronomy, the Old Babylonian period appears to have been a time of exceedingly active intellectual endeavour—despite, if not because of, its lack of political cohesiveness.

The Hurrians

The Hurrians enter the orbit of ancient Middle Eastern civilization toward the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. They arrived in Mesopotamia from the north or the east, but it is not known how long they had lived in the peripheral regions. There is a brief inscription in Hurrian language from the end of the period of Akkad, while that of King Arishen (or Atalshen) of Urkish and Nawar is written in Akkadian. The language of the Hurrians must have belonged to a widespread group of ancient Middle Eastern languages. The relationship between Hurrian and Subarean has already been mentioned, and the language of the Urartians, who played an

important role from the end of the 2nd millennium to the 8th century BCE, is likewise closely related to Hurrian. According to the Soviet scholars Igor M. Diakonov and Sergei A. Starostin, the Eastern Caucasian languages are an offshoot of the Hurrian-Urartian group.

It is not known whether the migrations of the Hurrians ever took the form of aggressive invasion; 18th-century-BCE texts from Mari speak of battles with the Hurrian tribe of Turukku south of Lake Urmia (some 150 miles from the Caspian Sea's southwest corner), but these were mountain campaigns, not the warding off of an offensive. Proper names in cuneiform texts, their frequency increasing in the period of Ur III, constitute the chief evidence for the presence of Hurrians. Nevertheless, there is no clear indication that the Hurrians had already advanced west of the Tigris at that time. An entirely different picture results from the 18th-century palace archives of Mari and from texts originating near the upper Khābūr River. Northern Mesopotamia, west of the Tigris, and Syria appear settled by a population that is mainly Amorite and Hurrian; and the latter had already reached the Mediterranean littoral, as shown by texts from Alalakh on the Orontes. In Mari, literary texts in Hurrian also have been found, indicating that Hurrian had by then become a fully developed written language as well.

The high point of the Hurrian period was not reached until about the middle of the 2nd millennium. In the 15th century, Alalakh was heavily Hurrianized; and in the empire of Mitanni the Hurrians represented the leading and perhaps the most numerous population group.

Dietz O. Edzard

Mesopotamia to the end of the Achaemenian period

The Kassites, the Mitanni, and the rise of Assyria

About 150 years after the death of Hammurabi, his dynasty was destroyed by an invasion of new peoples. Because there are very few written records from this era, the time from about 1560 BCE to about 1440 BCE (in some areas until 1400 BCE) is called the dark ages. The remaining Semitic states, such as the state of Ashur, became minor states within the sphere of influence of the new states of the Kassites and the Hurrians/Mitanni. The languages of the older cultures, Akkadian and Sumerian, continued or were soon reestablished, however. The cuneiform script persisted as the only type of writing in the entire area. Cultural continuity was not broken off, either, particularly in Babylonia. A matter of importance was the emergence of

new Semitic leading classes from the ranks of the priesthood and the scribes. These gained increasing power.

The Kassites in Babylonia

The Kassites had settled by 1800 BCE in what is now western Iran in the region of Hamadan-Kermanshah. The first to feel their forward thrust was Samsuiluna, who had to repel groups of Kassite invaders. Increasing numbers of Kassites gradually reached Babylonia and other parts of Mesopotamia. There they founded principalities, of which little is known. No inscription or document in the Kassite language has been preserved. Some 300 Kassite words have been found in Babylonian documents. Nor is much known about the social structure of the Kassites or their culture. There seems to have been no hereditary kingdom. Their religion was polytheistic; the names of some 30 gods are known.

The beginning of Kassite rule in Babylonia cannot be dated exactly. A king called Agum II ruled over a state that stretched from western Iran to the middle part of the Euphrates valley; 24 years after the Hittites had carried off the statue of the Babylonian god Marduk, he regained possession of the statue, brought it back to Babylon, and renewed the cult, making the god Marduk the equal of the corresponding Kassite god, Shuqamuna. Meanwhile, native princes continued to reign in southern Babylonia. It may have been Ulamburiash who finally annexed this area around 1450 and began negotiations with Egypt in Syria. Karaindash built a temple with bas-relief tile ornaments in Uruk (Erech) around 1420. A new capital west of Baghdad, Dūr Kurigalzu, competing with Babylon, was founded and named after Kurigalzu I (*c.* 1400–*c.* 1375). His successors Kadashman-Enlil I (*c.* 1375–*c.* 1360) and Burnaburiash II (*c.* 1360–*c.* 1333) were in correspondence with the Egyptian rulers Amenhotep III and Akhenaton (Amenhotep IV). They were interested in trading their lapis lazuli and other items for gold as well as in planning political marriages. Kurigalzu II (*c.* 1332–*c.* 1308) fought against the Assyrians but was defeated by them. His successors sought to ally themselves with the Hittites in order to stop the expansion of the Assyrians. During the reign of Kashtiliash IV (*c.* 1232–*c.* 1225), Babylonia waged war on two fronts at the same time—against Elam and Assyria—ending in the catastrophic invasion and destruction of Babylon by Tukulti-Ninurta I. Not until the time of the kings Adad-shum-uṣur (*c.* 1216–*c.* 1187) and Melishipak (*c.* 1186–*c.* 1172) was Babylon able to experience a period of prosperity and peace. Their successors were again forced to fight, facing the conqueror King Shutruk-Nahhunte of Elam (*c.* 1185–*c.* 1155). Cruel

and fierce, the Elamites finally destroyed the dynasty of the Kassites during these wars (about 1155). Some poetical works lament this catastrophe.

Letters and documents of the time after 1380 show that many things had changed after the Kassites took power. The Kassite upper class, always a small minority, had been largely "Babylonianized." Babylonian names were to be found even among the royalty, and they predominated among the civil servants and the officers. The new feudal character of the social structure showed the influence of the Kassites. Babylonian town life had revived on the basis of commerce and handicrafts. The Kassitic nobility, however, maintained the upper hand in the rural areas, their wealthiest representatives holding very large landed estates. Many of these holdings came from donations of the king to deserving officers and civil servants, considerable privileges being connected with such grants. From the time of Kurigalzu II these were registered on stone tablets or, more frequently, on boundary stones called *kudurru*s. After 1200 the number of these increased substantially, because the kings needed a steadily growing retinue of loyal followers. The boundary stones had pictures in bas-relief, very often a multitude of religious symbols, and frequently contained detailed inscriptions giving the borders of the particular estate; sometimes the deserts of the recipient were listed and his privileges recorded; finally, trespassers were threatened with the most terrifying curses. Agriculture and cattle husbandry were the main pursuits on these estates, and horses were raised for the light war chariots of the cavalry. There was an export trade in horses and vehicles in exchange for raw material. As for the king, the idea of the social-minded ruler continued to be valid.

The decline of Babylonian culture at the end of the Old Babylonian period continued for some time under the Kassites. Not until approximately 1420 did the Kassites develop a distinctive style in architecture and sculpture. Kurigalzu I played an important part, especially in Ur, as a patron of the building arts. Poetry and scientific literature developed only gradually after 1400. The existence of earlier work is clear from poetry, philological lists, and collections of omens and signs that were in existence by the 14th century or before and that have been discovered in the Hittite capital of Hattusa, in the Syrian capital of Ugarit, and even as far away as Palestine. Somewhat later, new writings appear: medical diagnoses and recipes, more Sumero-Akkadian word lists, and collections of astrological and other omens and signs with their interpretations. Most of these works are known today only from copies of more recent date. The most important is the Babylonian epic of the creation of the world, *Enuma elish*. Composed by an

unknown poet, probably in the 14th century, it tells the story of the god Marduk. He began as the god of Babylon and was elevated to be king over all other gods after having successfully accomplished the destruction of the powers of chaos. For almost 1,000 years this epic was recited during the New Year's festival in the spring as part of the Marduk cult in Babylon. The literature of this time contains very few Kassitic words. Many scholars believe that the essential groundwork for the development of the subsequent Babylonian culture was laid during the later epoch of the Kassite era.

The Hurrian and Mitanni kingdoms

The weakening of the Semitic states in Mesopotamia after 1550 enabled the Hurrians to penetrate deeper into this region, where they founded numerous small states in the eastern parts of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Syria. The Hurrians came from northwestern Iran, but until recently very little was known about their early history. After 1500, isolated dynasties appeared with Indo-Aryan names, but the significance of this is disputed. The presence of Old Indian technical terms in later records about horse breeding and the use of the names of Indian gods (such as, for example, Indra and Varuna) in some compacts of state formerly led several scholars to assume that numerous groups of Aryans, closely related to the Indians, pushed into Anatolia from the northeast. They were also credited with the introduction of the light war chariot with spoked wheels. This conclusion, however, is by no means established fact. So far it has not been possible to appraise the numbers and the political and cultural influence of the Aryans in Anatolia and Mesopotamia relative to those of the Hurrians.

Some time after 1500 the kingdom of Mitanni (or Mittani) arose near the sources of the Khābūr River in Mesopotamia. Since no record or inscription of their kings has been unearthed, little is known about the development and history of the Mitanni kingdom before King Tushratta. The Mitanni empire was known to the Egyptians under the name of Naharina, and Thutmose III fought frequently against it after 1460 BCE. By 1420 the domain of the Mitanni king Saustatar (Saushatar) stretched from the Mediterranean all the way to the northern Zagros Mountains, in western Iran, including Alalakh, in northern Syria, as well as Nuzi, Kurrukhanni, and Arrapkha. The northern boundary dividing Mitanni from the Hittites and the other Hurrian states was never fixed, even under Saustatar's successors Artatama I and Shuttarna II, who married their daughters to the pharaohs Thutmose IV (1400–1390) and Amenhotep III (1390–1353). Tushratta (*c.* 1365–*c.* 1330), the son of Shuttarna, was able to maintain the kingdom he had inherited for many years. In his sometimes very long letters—

one of them written in Hurrian—to Amenhotep III and Akhenaton (1353–1336), he wrote about commerce, his desire for gold, and marriage. Weakened by internal strife, the Mitanni kingdom eventually became a pawn between the rising kingdoms of the Hittites and the Assyrians.

The kingdom of Mitanni was a feudal state led by a warrior nobility of Aryan or Hurrian origin. Frequently horses were bred on their large landed estates. Documents and contract agreements in Syria often mention a chariot-warrior caste that also constituted the social upper class in the cities. The aristocratic families usually received their landed property as an inalienable fief. Consequently, no documents on the selling of landed property are to be found in the great archives of Akkadian documents and letters discovered in Nuzi, near Kirkūk. The prohibition against selling landed property was often dodged, however, with a stratagem: the previous owner “adopted” a willing buyer against an appropriate sum of money. The wealthy lord Tehiptilla was “adopted” almost 200 times, acquiring tremendous holdings of landed property in this way without interference by the local governmental authorities. He had gained his wealth through trade and commerce and through a productive two-field system of agriculture (in which each field was cultivated only once in two years). For a long time, Prince Shilwa-Teshub was in charge of the royal governmental administration in the district capital. Sheep breeding was the basis for a woolen industry, and textiles collected by the palace were exported on a large scale. Society was highly structured in classes, ranks, and professions. The judiciary, patterned after the Babylonian model, was well organized; the documents place heavy emphasis on correct procedure.

Native sources on the religion of the Hurrians of the Mitanni kingdom are limited; about their mythology, however, much is known from related Hittite and Ugaritic myths. Like the other peoples of the ancient Middle East, the Hurrians worshiped gods of various origins. The king of the gods was the weather god Teshub. According to the myths, he violently deposed his father Kumarbi; in this respect he resembled the Greek god Zeus, who deposed his father Kronos. The war chariot of Teshub was drawn by the bull gods Seris (“Day”) and Hurris (“Night”). Major sanctuaries of Teshub were located at Arrapkha (modern Kirkūk) and at Halab (modern Aleppo) in Syria. In the east his consort was the goddess of love and war Shaushka, and in the west the goddess Hebat (Hepat); both were similar to the Ishtar-Astarte of the Semites.

The sun god Shimegi and the moon god Kushuh, whose consort was Nikkal, the Ningal of the Sumerians, were of lesser rank. More important was the position of the Babylonian god of war and the underworld, Nergal. In northern Syria the god of war Astapi and the goddess of oaths Ishara are attested as early as the 3rd millennium BCE.

In addition, a considerable importance was attributed to impersonal numina such as heaven and earth as well as to deities of mountains and rivers. In the myths the terrible aspect of the gods often prevails over indications of a benevolent attitude. The cults of sacrifices and other rites are similar to those known from the neighbouring countries; many Hurrian rituals were found in Hittite Anatolia. There is abundant evidence for magic and oracles.

Temple monuments of modest dimensions have been unearthed; in all probability, specific local traditions were a factor in their design. The dead were probably buried outside the settlement. Small artifacts, particularly seals, show a peculiar continuation of Babylonian and Assyrian traditions in their preference for the naturalistic representation of figures. There were painted ceramics with finely drawn decorations (white on a dark background). The strong position of the royal house was evident in the large palaces, existing even in district capitals. The palaces were decorated with frescoes. Because only a few Mitanni settlements have been unearthed in Mesopotamia, knowledge of Mitanni arts and culture is as yet insufficient.

The rise of Assyria

Very little can be said about northern Assyria during the 2nd millennium BCE. Information on the old capital, Ashur, located in the south of the country, is somewhat more plentiful. The old lists of kings suggest that the same dynasty ruled continuously over Ashur from about 1600. All the names of the kings are given, but little else is known about Ashur before 1420. Almost all the princes had Akkadian names, and it can be assumed that their sphere of influence was rather small. Although Assyria belonged to the kingdom of the Mitanni for a long time, it seems that Ashur retained a certain autonomy. Located close to the boundary with Babylonia, it played that empire off against Mitanni whenever possible. Puzur-Ashur III concluded a border treaty with Babylonia about 1480, as did Ashur-bel-nisheshu about 1405. Ashur-nadin-ahhe II (*c.* 1392–*c.* 1383) was even able to obtain support from Egypt, which sent him a consignment of gold.

Ashur-uballiṭ I (*c.* 1354–*c.* 1318) was at first subject to King Tushratta of Mitanni. After 1340, however, he attacked Tushratta, presumably together with Suppiluliumas I of the Hittites. Taking away from Mitanni parts of northeastern Mesopotamia, Ashur-uballiṭ now called himself “Great King” and socialized with the king of Egypt on equal terms, arousing the indignation of the king of Babylonia. Ashur-uballiṭ was the first to name Assyria the Land of Ashur, because the old name, Subartu, was often used in a derogatory sense in Babylonia. He ordered his short inscriptions to be partly written in the Babylonian dialect rather than the Assyrian, since this was considered refined. Marrying his daughter to a Babylonian, he intervened there energetically when Kassite nobles murdered his grandson. Future generations came to consider him rightfully as the real founder of the Assyrian empire. His son Enlil-nirari (*c.* 1326–*c.* 1318) also fought against Babylonia. Arik-den-ili (*c.* 1308–*c.* 1297) turned westward, where he encountered Semitic tribes of the so-called Akhlamu group.

Still greater successes were achieved by Adad-nirari I (*c.* 1295–*c.* 1264). Defeating the Kassite king Nazimaruttash, he forced him to retreat. After that he defeated the kings of Mitanni, first Shattuara I, then Wasashatta. This enabled him for a time to incorporate all Mesopotamia into his empire as a province, although in later struggles he lost large parts to the Hittites. In the east, he was satisfied with the defense of his lands against the mountain tribes.

Adad-nirari’s inscriptions were more elaborate than those of his predecessors and were written in the Babylonian dialect. In them he declares that he feels called to these wars by the gods, a statement that was to be repeated by other kings after him. Assuming the old title of great king, he called himself “King of All.” He enlarged the temple and the palace in Ashur and also developed the fortifications there, particularly at the banks of the Tigris River. He worked on large building projects in the provinces.

His son Shalmaneser I (Shulmanu-asharidu; *c.* 1263–*c.* 1234) attacked Uruatru (later called Urartu) in southern Armenia, which had allegedly broken away. Shattuara II of Hanigalbat, however, put him into a difficult situation, cutting his forces off from their water supplies. With courage born of despair, the Assyrians fought themselves free. They then set about reducing what was left of the Mitanni kingdom into an Assyrian province. The king claimed to have blinded 14,400 enemies in one eye—psychological warfare of a similar kind was used more and more as time went by. The Hittites tried in vain to save Hanigalbat. Together with the Babylonians they fought a commercial war against Ashur for many years. Like his father,

Shalmaneser was a great builder. At the juncture of the Tigris and Great Zab rivers, he founded a strategically situated second capital, Kalakh (biblical Calah; modern Nimrūd).

His son was Tukulti-Ninurta (*c.* 1233–*c.* 1197), the Ninus of Greek legends. Gifted but extravagant, he made his nation a great power. He carried off thousands of Hittites from eastern Anatolia. He fought particularly hard against Babylonia, deporting Kashtiliash IV to Assyria. When the Babylonians rebelled again, he plundered the temples in Babylon, an act regarded as a sacrilege, even in Assyria. The relationship between the king and his capital deteriorated steadily. For this reason the king began to build a new city, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, on the other side of the Tigris River. Ultimately, even his sons rebelled against him and laid siege to him in his city; in the end he was murdered. His victorious wars against Babylonia were glorified in an epic poem, but his empire broke up soon after his death. Assyrian power declined for a time, while that of Babylonia rose.

Assyria had suffered under the oppression of both the Hurrians and the Mitanni kingdom. Its struggle for liberation and the bitter wars that followed had much to do with its development into a military power. In his capital of Ashur, the king depended on the citizen class and the priesthood, as well as on the landed nobility that furnished him with the war-chariot troops.

Documents and letters show the important role that agriculture played in the development of the state. Assyria was less dependent on artificial irrigation than was Babylonia. The breeding of horses was carried on intensively; remnants of elaborate directions for their training are extant. Trade and commerce also were of notable significance: metals were imported from Anatolia or Armenia, tin from northwestern Iran, and lumber from the west. The opening up of new trade routes was often a cause and the purpose of war.

Assyrian architecture, derived from a combination of Mitannian and Babylonian influences, developed early quite an individual style. The palaces often had colourful wall decorations. The art of seal cutting, taken largely from Mitanni, continued creatively on its own. The schools for scribes, where all the civil servants were trained, taught both the Babylonian and the Assyrian dialects of the Akkadian language. Babylonian works of literature were assimilated into Assyrian, often reworked into a different form. The Hurrian tradition remained strong in the military and political sphere while at the same time influencing the vocabulary of language.

Assyria and Babylonia at the end of the 2nd millennium

Babylonia under the 2nd dynasty of Isin

In a series of heavy wars about which not much is known, Marduk-kabit-ahheshu (*c.* 1152–*c.* 1135) established what came to be known as the 2nd dynasty of Isin. His successors were often forced to continue the fighting. The most famous king of the dynasty was Nebuchadrezzar I (Nabu-kudurri-uṣur; *c.* 1119–*c.* 1098). He fought mainly against Elam, which had conquered and ravaged a large part of Babylonia. His first attack miscarried because of an epidemic among his troops, but in a later campaign he conquered Susa, the capital of Elam, and returned the previously removed statue of the god Marduk to its proper place. Soon thereafter the king of Elam was assassinated, and his kingdom once again fell apart into small states. This enabled Nebuchadrezzar to turn west, using the later years of peace to start extensive building projects. After him, his son became king, succeeded by his brother Marduk-nadin-ahhe (*c.* 1093–*c.* 1076). At first successful in his wars against Assyria, he later experienced heavy defeat. A famine of catastrophic proportions triggered an attack from Aramaean tribes, the ultimate blow. His successors made peace with Assyria, but the country suffered more and more from repeated attacks by Aramaeans and other Semitic nomads. Even though some of the kings still assumed grand titles, they were unable to stem the progressive disintegration of their empire. There followed the era known as the 2nd dynasty of the Sealand (*c.* 1020–*c.* 1000), which included three usurpers. The first of these had the Kassitic name of Simbar-Shihu (or Simbar-Shipak; (*c.* 1020–*c.* 1003).

Toward the end of its reign, the dynasty of the Kassites became completely Babylonianized. The changeover to the dynasty of Isin, actually a succession of kings from different families, brought no essential transformation of the social structure. The feudal order remained. New landed estates came into existence in many places through grants to deserving officers; many boundary stones (*kudurru*s) have been found that describe them. The cities of Babylonia retained much of their former autonomy. The border provinces, however, were administered by royally appointed governors with civil and military functions.

In the literary arts this was a period of creativity; thus the later Babylonians with good reason regarded the time of Nebuchadrezzar I as one of the great eras of their history. A heroic epic, modeled upon older epics, celebrates the deeds of Nebuchadrezzar I, but unfortunately little of it is extant. Other material comes from the ancient myths. The poet of the later version of the epic of Gilgamesh, Sin-leqe-unnini (*c.* 1150–?) of Uruk, is known by name. This version of the epic is known as the Twelve-Tablet Poem; it contains about 3,000 verses. It is

distinguished by its greater emphasis on the human qualities of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu; this quality makes it one of the great works of world literature.

Another poet active at about the same time was the author of a poem of 480 verses called *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* (“Let Me Praise the Possessor of Wisdom”). The poem meditates on the workings of divine justice, which sometimes appear strange and inexplicable to suffering human beings; this subject had acquired an increasing importance in the contemporary religion of Babylon. The poem describes the multifarious sufferings of a high official and his subsequent salvation by the god Marduk.

The gradual reduction of the Sumerian pantheon of about 2,000 gods by the identification and integration of originally distinct gods and goddesses of similar functions resulted in a growing number of surnames or compound names for the main gods (Marduk, for example, had about 50 such names) and later in a conception of “the god” and “the goddess” with interchangeable names in the cults of the great temples. There was a theology of identifications of gods, which was documented by god lists in two columns with hundreds of entries in the form “Enzag = Nabû of (the island of) Dilmun,” as well as by many hymns and prayers of the time and by later compositions.

As a consequence of the distinction of an enormous number of multifarious sins, the concept of a universal sinfulness of mankind is increasingly observed in this period and later. All human beings, therefore, were believed to be in need of the forgiveness afforded by the deities to sincere worshipers. Outside of Israel, the concept of sinfulness can be found in ancient times only in Babylonia and Assyria.

Assyria between 1200 and 1000 BCE

After a period of decline following Tukulti-Ninurta I, Assyria was consolidated and stabilized under Ashur-dan I (*c.* 1179–*c.* 1134) and Ashur-resh-ishi I (*c.* 1133–*c.* 1116). Several times forced to fight against Babylonia, the latter was even able to defend himself against an attack by Nebuchadrezzar I. According to the inscriptions, most of his building efforts were in Nineveh, rather than in the old capital of Ashur.

His son Tiglath-pileser I (Tukulti-apil-Esharra; (*c.* 1115–*c.* 1077) raised the power of Assyria to new heights. First he turned against a large army of the Mushki that had entered into southern Armenia from Anatolia, defeating them decisively. After this, he forced the small

Hurrian states of southern Armenia to pay him tribute. Trained in mountain warfare themselves and helped by capable pioneers, the Assyrians were now able to advance far into the mountain regions. Their main enemies were the Aramaeans, the Semitic Bedouin nomads whose many small states often combined against the Assyrians. Tiglath-pileser I also went to Syria and even reached the Mediterranean, where he took a sea voyage. After 1100 these campaigns led to conflicts with Babylonia. Tiglath-pileser conquered northern Babylonia and plundered Babylon, without decisively defeating Marduk-nadin-ahhe. In his own country the king paid particular attention to agriculture and fruit growing, improved the administrative system, and developed more thorough methods of training scribes.

Three of his sons reigned after Tiglath-pileser, including Ashur-bel-kala (*c.* 1074–*c.* 1057). Like his father, he fought in southern Armenia and against the Aramaeans with Babylonia as his ally. Disintegration of the empire could not be delayed, however. The grandson of Tiglath-pileser, Ashurnasirpal I (*c.* 1050–*c.* 1032), was sickly and unable to do more than defend Assyria proper against his enemies. Fragments of three of his prayers to Ishtar are preserved; among them is a penitential prayer in which he wonders about the cause of so much adversity. Referring to his many good deeds but admitting his guilt at the same time, he asks for forgiveness and health. According to the king, part of his guilt lay in neglecting to teach his subjects the fear of god. After him, little is known for 100 years.

State and society during the time of Tiglath-pileser were not essentially different from those of the 13th century. Collections of laws, drafts, and edicts of the court exist that go back as far as the 14th century BCE. Presumably, most of these remained in effect. One tablet defining the marriage laws shows that the social position of women in Assyria was lower than in Babylonia or Israel or among the Hittites. A man was allowed to send away his wife at his own pleasure with or without divorce money. In the case of adultery, he was permitted to kill or maim her. Outside her house the woman was forced to observe many restrictions, such as the wearing of a veil. It is not clear whether these regulations carried the weight of law, but they seem to have represented a reaction against practices that were more favourable to women. Two somewhat older marriage contracts, for example, granted equal rights to both partners, even in divorce. The women of the king’s harem were subject to severe punishment, including beating, maiming, and death, along with those who guarded and looked after them. The penal laws of the time were generally more severe in Assyria than in other countries of the East. The death penalty was not uncommon. In less serious cases the penalty was forced labour after flogging.

In certain cases there was trial by ordeal. One tablet treats the subject of landed property rights. Offenses against the established boundary lines called for extremely severe punishment. A creditor was allowed to force his debtor to work for him, but he could not sell him.

The greater part of Assyrian literature was either taken over from Babylonia or written by the Assyrians in the Babylonian dialect, who modeled their works on Babylonian originals. The Assyrian dialect was used in legal documents, court and temple rituals, and collections of recipes—as, for example, in directions for making perfumes. A new art form was the picture tale: a continuing series of pictures carved on square stelae of stone. The pictures, showing war or hunting scenes, begin at the top of the stela and run down around it, with inscriptions under the pictures explaining them. These and the finely cut seals show that the fine arts of Assyria were beginning to surpass those of Babylonia. Architecture and other forms of the monumental arts also began a further development, such as the double temple with its two towers (ziggurat). Colourful enameled tiles were used to decorate the facades.

Assyria and Babylonia from *c.* 1000 to *c.* 750 BCE

Assyria and Babylonia until Ashurnasirpal II

The most important factor in the history of Mesopotamia in the 10th century was the continuing threat from the Aramaean seminomads. Again and again, the kings of both Babylonia and Assyria were forced to repel their invasions. Even though the Aramaeans were not able to gain a foothold in the main cities, there are evidences of them in many rural areas. Ashur-dan II (934–912) succeeded in suppressing the Aramaeans and the mountain people, in this way stabilizing the Assyrian boundaries. He reintroduced the use of the Assyrian dialect in his written records.

Adad-nirari II (*c.* 911–891) left detailed accounts of his wars and his efforts to improve agriculture. He led six campaigns against Aramaean intruders from northern Arabia. In two campaigns against Babylonia he forced Shamash-mudammiq (*c.* 930–904) to surrender extensive territories. Shamash-mudammiq was murdered, and a treaty with his successor, Nabu-shum-ukin (*c.* 904–888), secured peace for many years. Tukulti-Ninurta II (*c.* 890–884), the son of Adad-nirari II, preferred Nineveh to Ashur. He fought campaigns in southern Armenia. He was portrayed on stelae in blue and yellow enamel in the late Hittite style, showing him under a winged sun—a theme adopted from Egyptian art. His son Ashurnasirpal II (883–859) continued the policy of conquest and expansion. He left a detailed account of his

campaigns, which were impressive in their cruelty. Defeated enemies were impaled, flayed, or beheaded in great numbers. Mass deportations, however, were found to serve the interests of the growing empire better than terror. Through the systematic exchange of native populations, conquered regions were denationalized. The result was a submissive, mixed population in which the Aramaean element became the majority. This provided the labour force for the various public works in the metropolitan centres of the Assyrian empire. Ashurnasirpal II rebuilt Kalakh, founded by Shalmaneser I, and made it his capital. Ashur remained the centre of the worship of the god Ashur—in whose name all the wars of conquest were fought. A third capital was Nineveh.

Ashurnasirpal II was the first to use cavalry units to any large extent in addition to infantry and war-chariot troops. He also was the first to employ heavy, mobile battering rams and wall breakers in his sieges. Following after the conquering troops came officials from all branches of the civil service, because the king wanted to lose no time in incorporating the new lands into his empire. The supremacy of Assyria over its neighbouring states owed much to the proficiency of the government service under the leadership of the minister Gabbilani-eresh. The campaigns of Ashurnasirpal II led him mainly to southern Armenia and Mesopotamia. After a series of heavy wars, he incorporated Mesopotamia as far as the Euphrates River. A campaign to Syria encountered little resistance. There was no great war against Babylonia. Ashurnasirpal, like other Assyrian kings, may have been moved by religion not to destroy Babylonia, which had almost the same gods as Assyria. Both empires must have profited from mutual trade and cultural exchange. The Babylonians, under the energetic Nabu-apla-iddina (*c.* 887–855) attacked the Aramaeans in southern Mesopotamia and occupied the valley of the Euphrates River to about the mouth of the Khābūr River.

Ashurnasirpal, so brutal in his wars, was able to inspire architects, structural engineers, and artists and sculptors to heights never before achieved. He built and enlarged temples and palaces in several cities. His most impressive monument was his own palace in Kalakh, covering a space of 269,000 square feet (25,000 square metres). Hundreds of large limestone slabs were used in murals in the staterooms and living quarters. Most of the scenes were done in relief, but painted murals also have been found. Most of them depict mythological themes and symbolic fertility rites, with the king participating. Brutal war pictures were aimed to discourage enemies. The chief god of Kalakh was Ninurta, god of war and the hunt. The tower of the temple dedicated to Ninurta also served as an astronomical observatory. Kalakh soon

became the cultural centre of the empire. Ashurnasirpal claimed to have entertained 69,574 guests at the opening ceremonies of his palace.

Shalmaneser III and Shamshi-Adad V of Assyria

The son and successor of Ashurnasirpal was Shalmaneser III (858–824). His father's equal in both brutality and energy, he was less realistic in his undertakings. His inscriptions, in a peculiar blend of Assyrian and Babylonian, record his considerable achievements but are not always able to conceal his failures. His campaigns were directed mostly against Syria. While he was able to conquer northern Syria and make it a province, in the south he could only weaken the strong state of Damascus and was unable, even after several wars, to eliminate it. In 841 he laid unsuccessful siege to Damascus. Also in 841 King Jehu of Israel was forced to pay tribute. In his invasion of Cilicia, Shalmaneser had only partial success. The same was true of the kingdom of Urartu in Armenia, from which, however, the troops returned with immense quantities of lumber and building stone. The king and, in later years, the general Dayyan-Ashur went several times to western Iran, where they found such states as Mannai in northwestern Iran and, farther away in the southeast, the Persians. They also encountered the Medes during these wars. Horse tribute was collected.

In Babylonia, Marduk-zakir-shumi I ascended the throne about the year 855. His brother Marduk-bel-usati rebelled against him, and in 851 the king was forced to ask Shalmaneser for help. Shalmaneser was only too happy to oblige; when the usurper had been finally eliminated (850), Shalmaneser went to southern Babylonia, which at that time was almost completely dominated by Aramaeans. There he encountered, among others, the Chaldeans, mentioned for the first time in 878 BCE, who were to play a leading role in the history of later times; Shalmaneser made them tributaries.

During his long reign he built temples, palaces, and fortifications in Assyria as well as in the other capitals of his provinces. His artists created many statues and stelae. Among the best known is the Black Obelisk, which includes a picture of Jehu of Israel paying tribute. The bronze doors from the town of Imgur-Enlil (Balawat) in Assyria portray the course of his campaigns and other undertakings in rows of pictures, often very lifelike. Hundreds of delicately carved ivories were carried away from Phoenicia, and many of the artists along with them; these later made Kalakh a centre for the art of ivory sculpture.

In the last four years of the reign of Shalmaneser, the crown prince Ashur-da'in-apla led a rebellion. The old king appointed his younger son Shamshi-Adad as the new crown prince. Forced to flee to Babylonia, Shamshi-Adad V (823–811) finally managed to regain the kingship with the help of Marduk-zakir-shumi I under humiliating conditions. As king he campaigned with varying success in southern Armenia and Azerbaijan, later turning against Babylonia. He won several battles against the Babylonian kings Marduk-balassu-iqbi and Baba-aha-iddina (about 818–12) and pushed through to Chaldea. Babylonia remained independent, however.

Adad-nirari III and his successors

Shamshi-Adad V died while Adad-nirari III (810–783) was still a minor. His Babylonian mother, Sammu-ramat, took over the regency, governing with great energy until 806. The Greeks, who called her Semiramis, credited her with legendary accomplishments, but historically little is known about her. Adad-nirari later led several campaigns against the Medes and also against Syria and Palestine. In 804 he reached Gaza, but Damascus proved invincible. He also fought in Babylonia, helping to restore order in the north.

Shalmaneser IV (*c.* 783–773) fought against Urartu, then at the height of its power under King Argishti (*c.* 780–755). He successfully defended eastern Mesopotamia against attacks from Armenia. On the other hand, he lost most of Syria after a campaign against Damascus in 773. The reign of Ashur-dan III (772–755) was shadowed by rebellions and by epidemics of plague. Of Ashur-nirari V (754–746) little is known.

In Assyria the feudal structure of society remained largely unchanged. Many of the conquered lands were combined to form large provinces. The governors of these provinces sometimes acquired considerable independence, particularly under the weaker monarchs after Adad-nirari III. Some of them even composed their own inscriptions. The influx of displaced peoples into the cities of Assyria created large metropolitan centres. The spoils of war, together with an expanding trade, favoured the development of a well-to-do commercial class. The dense population of the cities gave rise to social tensions that only the strong kings were able to contain. A number of the former capitals of the conquered lands remained important as capitals of provinces. There was much new building. A standing occupational force was needed in the provinces, and these troops grew steadily in proportion to the total military forces. There are no records on the training of officers or on military logistics. The civil

service also expanded, the largest administrative body being the royal court, with thousands of functionaries and craftsmen in the several residential cities.

The cultural decline about the year 1000 was overcome during the reigns of Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III. The arts in particular experienced a tremendous resurgence. Literary works continued to be written in Assyrian and were seldom of great importance. The literature that had been taken over from Babylonia was further developed with new writings, although one can rarely distinguish between works written in Assyria and works written in Babylonia. In religion, the official cults of Ashur and Ninurta continued, while the religion of the common people went its separate way.

In Babylonia not much was left of the feudal structure; the large landed estates almost everywhere fell prey to the inroads of the Aramaeans, who were at first half nomadic. The leaders of their tribes and clans slowly replaced the former landlords. Agriculture on a large scale was no longer possible except on the outskirts of metropolitan areas. The predominance of the Babylonian schools for scribes may have prevented the emergence of an Aramaean literature. In any case, the Aramaeans seem to have been absorbed into the Babylonian culture. The religious cults in the cities remained essentially the same. The Babylonian empire was slowly reduced to poverty, except perhaps in some of the cities.

In 764, after an epidemic, the Erra epic, the myth of Erra (the god of war and pestilence), was written by Kabti-ilani-Marduk. He invented an original plot, which diverged considerably from the old myths; long discourses of the gods involved in the action form the most important part of the epic. There is a passage in the epic claiming that the text was divinely revealed to the poet during a dream.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (746–609)

For no other period of Assyrian history is there an abundance of sources comparable to those available for the interval from roughly 745 to 640. Aside from the large number of royal inscriptions, about 2,400 letters, most of them more or less fragmentary, have been published. Usually the senders and recipients of these letters are the king and high government officials. Among them are reports from royal agents about foreign affairs and letters about cultic matters. Treaties, oracles, queries to the sun god about political matters, and prayers of or for

kings contain a great deal of additional information. Last but certainly not least are paintings and wall reliefs, which are often very informative.

Tiglath-pileser III and Shalmaneser V

The decline of Assyrian power after 780 was notable; Syria and considerable lands in the north were lost. A military coup deposed King Ashur-nirari V and raised a general to the throne. Under the name of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727), he brought the empire to its greatest expanse. He reduced the size of the provinces in order to break the partial independence of the governors. He also invalidated the tax privileges of cities such as Ashur and Harran in order to distribute the tax load more evenly over the entire realm. Military equipment was improved substantially. In 746 he went to Babylonia to aid Nabu-naṣir (747–734) in his fight against Aramaean tribes. Tiglath-pileser defeated the Aramaeans and then made visits to the large cities of Babylonia. There he tried to secure the support of the priesthood by patronizing their building projects. Babylonia retained its independence.

His next undertaking was to check Urartu. His campaigns in Azerbaijan were designed to drive a wedge between Urartu and the Medes. In 743 he went to Syria, defeating there an army of Urartu. The Syrian city of Arpad, which had formed an alliance with Urartu, did not surrender so easily. It took Tiglath-pileser three years of siege to conquer Arpad, whereupon he massacred the inhabitants and destroyed the city. In 738 a new coalition formed against Assyria under the leadership of Sam’al (modern Zincirli) in northern Syria. It was defeated, and all the princes from Damascus to eastern Anatolia were forced to pay tribute. Another campaign in 735, this time directed against Urartu itself, was only partly successful. In 734 Tiglath-pileser invaded southern Syria and the Philistine territories in Palestine, going as far as the Egyptian border. Damascus and Israel tried to organize resistance against him, seeking to bring Judah into their alliance. Ahaz of Judah, however, asked Tiglath-pileser for help. In 733 Tiglath-pileser devastated Israel and forced it to surrender large territories. In 732 he advanced upon Damascus, first devastating the gardens outside the city and then conquering the capital and killing the king, whom he replaced with a governor. The queen of southern Arabia, Samsil, was now obliged to pay tribute, being permitted in return to use the harbour of the city of Gaza, which was in Assyrian hands.

The death of King Nabonassar of Babylonia caused a chaotic situation to develop there, and the Aramaean Ukin-zer crowned himself king. In 731 Tiglath-pileser fought and beat him and

his allies, but he did not capture Ukin-zer until 729. This time he did not appoint a new king for Babylonia but assumed the crown himself under the name Pulu (Pul in the Hebrew Bible). In his old age he abstained from further campaigning, devoting himself to the improvement of his capital, Kalakh. He rebuilt the palace of Shalmaneser III, filled it with treasures from his wars, and decorated the walls with bas-reliefs. The latter were almost all of warlike character, as if designed to intimidate the onlooker with their presentation of gruesome executions. These pictorial narratives on slabs, sometimes painted, have also been found in Syria, at the sites of several provincial capitals of ancient Assyria.

Tiglath-pileser was succeeded by his son Shalmaneser V (726–722), who continued the policy of his father. As king of Babylonia, he called himself Ululai. Almost nothing is known about his enterprises, since his successor destroyed all his inscriptions. The Hebrew Bible relates that he marched against Hoshea of Israel in 724 after Hoshea had rebelled. He was probably assassinated during the long siege of Samaria. His successor maintained that the god Ashur had withdrawn his support of Shalmaneser V for acts of disrespect.

Sargon II (721–705) and Marduk-apal-iddina of Babylonia

spirit holding a poppy flower

It was probably a younger brother of Shalmaneser who ascended the throne of Assyria in 721. Assuming the old name of Sharru-kin (Sargon in the Bible), meaning “Legitimate King,” he assured himself of the support of the priesthood and the merchant class by restoring privileges they had lost, particularly the tax exemptions of the great temples. The change of sovereign in Assyria triggered another crisis in Babylonia. An Aramaean prince from the south, Marduk-apal-iddina II (the biblical Merodach-Baladan), seized power in Babylon in 721 and was able to retain it until 710 with the help of Humbanigash I of Elam. A first attempt by Sargon to recover Babylonia miscarried when Elam defeated him in 721. During the same year the protracted siege of Samaria was brought to a close. The Samarian upper class was deported, and Israel became an Assyrian province. Samaria was repopulated with Syrians and Babylonians. Judah remained independent by paying tribute. In 720 Sargon squelched a rebellion in Syria that had been supported by Egypt. Then he defeated both Hanunu of Gaza and an Egyptian army near the Egyptian border. In 717 and 716 he campaigned in northern Syria, making the hitherto independent state of Carchemish one of his provinces. He also went

to Cilicia in an effort to prevent further encroachments of the Phrygians under King Midas (Assyrian: Mitā).

In order to protect his ally, the state of Mannai, in Azerbaijan, Sargon embarked on a campaign in Iran in 719 and incorporated parts of Media as provinces of his empire; however, in 716 another war became necessary. At the same time, he was busy preparing a major attack against Urartu. Under the leadership of the crown prince Sennacherib, armies of agents infiltrated Urartu, which was also threatened from the north by the Cimmerians. Many of their messages and reports have been preserved. The longest inscription ever composed by the Assyrians about a year's enterprise (430 very long lines) is dedicated to this Urartu campaign of 714. Phrased in the style of a first report to the god Ashur, it is interspersed with stirring descriptions of natural scenery. The strong points of Urartu must have been well fortified. Sargon tried to avoid them by going through the province of Mannai and attacking the Median principalities on the eastern side of Lake Urmia. In the meantime, hoping to surprise the Assyrian troops, Rusa of Urartu had closed the narrow pass lying between Lake Urmia and Sahand Mount. Sargon, anticipating this, led a small band of cavalry in a surprise charge that developed into a great victory for the Assyrians. Rusa fled and died. The Assyrians pushed forward, destroying all the cities, fortifications, and even irrigation works of Urartu. They did not conquer Tushpa (the capital) but took possession of the mountain city of Muṣaṣir. The spoils were immense. The following years saw only small campaigns in Media and eastern Anatolia and against Ashdod, in Palestine. King Midas of Phrygia and some cities on Cyprus were quite ready to pay tribute.

Sargon was now free to settle accounts with Marduk-apal-iddina of Babylonia. Abandoned by his ally Shutruk-Nahhunte II of Elam, Marduk-apal-iddina found it best to flee, first to his native land on the Persian Gulf and later to Elam. Because the Aramaean prince had made himself very unpopular with his subjects, Sargon was hailed as the liberator of Babylonia. He complied with the wishes of the priesthood and at the same time put down the Aramaean nobility. He was satisfied with the modest title of governor of Babylonia.

At first Sargon resided in Kalakh, but he then decided to found an entirely new capital north of Nineveh. He called the city Dur-Sharrukin—"Sargonsburg" (modern Khorsabad, Iraq). He erected his palace on a high terrace in the northeastern part of the city. The temples of the

lamassu from Dur Sharrukin, Iraq

main gods, smaller in size, were built within the palatial rectangle, which was surrounded by a special wall. This arrangement enabled Sargon to supervise the priests better than had been possible in the old, large temple complexes. One consequence of this design was that the figure of the king pushed the gods somewhat into the background, thereby gaining in importance. Desiring that his palace match the vastness of his empire, Sargon planned it in monumental dimensions. Stone reliefs of two winged bulls with human heads flanked the entrance; they were much larger than anything comparable built before. The walls were decorated with long rows of bas-reliefs showing scenes of war and festive processions. A comparison with a well-executed stela of the Babylonian king Marduk-apal-iddina shows that the fine arts of Assyria had far surpassed those of Babylonia. Sargon never completed his capital, though from 713 to 705 BCE tens of thousands of labourers and hundreds of artisans worked on the great city. Yet, with the exception of some magnificent buildings for public officials, only a few durable edifices were completed in the residential section. In 705, in a campaign in northwestern Iran, Sargon was ambushed and killed. His corpse remained unburied, to be devoured by birds of prey. Sargon's son Sennacherib, who had quarreled with his father, was inclined to believe with the priests that his death was a punishment from the neglected gods of the ancient capitals.

Sennacherib

Sennacherib (Assyrian: Sin-ahhe-eriba; 704–681) was well prepared for his position as sovereign. With him Assyria acquired an exceptionally clever and gifted, though often extravagant, ruler. His father, interestingly enough, is not mentioned in any of his many inscriptions. He left the new city of Dur-Sharrukin at once and resided in Ashur for a few years, until in 701 he made Nineveh his capital.

Sennacherib had considerable difficulties with Babylonia. In 703 Marduk-apal-iddina again crowned himself king with the aid of Elam, proceeding at once to ally himself with other enemies of Assyria. After nine months he was forced to withdraw when Sennacherib defeated a coalition army consisting of Babylonians, Aramaeans, and Elamites. The new puppet king of Babylonia was Bel-ibni (702–700), who had been raised in Assyria.

In 702 Sennacherib launched a raid into western Iran. In 701 there followed his most famous campaign, against Syria and Palestine, with the purpose of gaining control over the main road from Syria to Egypt in preparation for later campaigns against Egypt itself. When

Sennacherib's army approached, Sidon immediately expelled its ruler, Luli, who was hostile to Assyria. The other allies either surrendered or were defeated. An Egyptian army was defeated at Eltekeh in Judah. Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem, and the king of Judah, Hezekiah, was called upon to surrender, but he did not comply. An Assyrian officer tried to incite the people of Jerusalem against Hezekiah, but his efforts failed. In view of the difficulty of surrounding a mountain stronghold such as Jerusalem, and of the minor importance of this town for the main purpose of the campaign, Sennacherib cut short the attack and left Palestine with his army, which according to the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 19:35) had been decimated by an epidemic. The number of Assyrian dead is reported to have risen to 185,000. Nevertheless, Hezekiah is reported to have paid tribute to Sennacherib on at least one occasion.

Bel-ibni of Babylonia seceded from the union with Assyria in 700. Sennacherib moved quickly, defeating Bel-ibni and replacing him with Sennacherib's oldest son, Ashur-nadin-shumi. The next few years were relatively peaceful. Sennacherib used this time to prepare a decisive attack against Elam, which time and again had supported Babylonian rebellions. The overland route to Elam had been cut off and fortified by the Elamites. Sennacherib had ships built in Syria and at Nineveh. The ships from Syria were moved on rollers from the Euphrates to the Tigris. The fleet sailed downstream and was quite successful in the lagoons of the Persian Gulf and along the southern coastline of Elam. The Elamites launched a counteroffensive by land, occupying Babylonia and putting a man of their choice on the throne. Not until 693 were the Assyrians again able to fight their way through to the north. Finally, in 689, Sennacherib had his revenge. Babylon was conquered and completely destroyed, the temples plundered and leveled. The waters of the Arakhtu Canal were diverted over the ruins, and the inner city remained almost totally uninhabited for eight years. Even many Assyrians were indignant at this, believing that the Babylonian god Marduk must be grievously offended at the destruction of his temple and the carrying off of his image. Marduk was also an Assyrian deity, to whom many Assyrians turned in time of need. A political-theological propaganda campaign was launched to explain to the people that what had taken place was in accord with the wish of most of the gods. A story was written in which Marduk, because of a transgression, was captured and brought before a tribunal. Only a part of the commentary to this botched piece of literature is extant. Even the great poem of the creation of the world, the *Enuma elish*, was altered: the god Marduk was replaced by the god Ashur. Sennacherib's boundless energies brought no gain to his empire, however, and probably weakened it. The tenacity of this king can be seen in his building projects; for example, when

Nineveh needed water for irrigation, Sennacherib had his engineers divert the waters of a tributary of the Great Zab River. The canal had to cross a valley at Jerwan. An aqueduct was constructed, consisting of about two million blocks of limestone, with five huge, pointed archways over the brook in the valley. The bed of the canal on the aqueduct was sealed with cement containing magnesium. Parts of this aqueduct are still standing today. Sennacherib wrote of these and other technological accomplishments in minute detail, with illustrations.

Sennacherib built a huge palace in Nineveh, adorned with reliefs, some of them depicting the transport of colossal bull statues by water and by land. Many of the rooms were decorated with pictorial narratives in bas-relief telling of war and of building activities. Considerable advances can be noted in artistic execution, particularly in the portrayal of landscapes and animals. Outstanding are the depictions of the battles in the lagoons, the life in the military camps, and the deportations.

In 681 BCE there was a rebellion. Sennacherib was assassinated by one or two of his sons in the temple of the god Ninurta at Kalakh. This god, along with the god Marduk, had been badly treated by Sennacherib, and the event was widely regarded as punishment of divine origin.

Esarhaddon

Ignoring the claims of his older brothers, an imperial council appointed Esarhaddon (Ashur-aha-iddina; 680–669) as Sennacherib’s successor. The choice is all the more difficult to explain in that Esarhaddon, unlike his father, was friendly toward the Babylonians. It can be assumed that his energetic and designing mother, Zakutu (Naqia), who came from Syria or Judah, used all her influence on his behalf to override the national party of Assyria. The theory that he was a partner in plotting the murder of his father is rather improbable; at any rate, he was able to procure the loyalty of his father’s army. His brothers had to flee to Urartu. In his inscriptions, Esarhaddon always mentions both his father and grandfather.

Defining the destruction of Babylon explicitly as punishment by the god Marduk, the new king soon ordered the reconstruction of the city. He referred to himself only as governor of Babylonia and through his policies obtained the support of the cities of Babylonia. At the beginning of his reign the Aramaean tribes were still allied with Elam against him, but Urtaku of Elam (675–664) signed a peace treaty and freed him for campaigning elsewhere. In 679 he stationed a garrison at the Egyptian border, because Egypt, under the Ethiopian king Taharqa,

was planning to intervene in Syria. He put down with great severity a rebellion of the combined forces of Sidon, Tyre, and other Syrian cities. The time was ripe to attack Egypt, which was suffering under the rule of the Ethiopians and was by no means a united country. Esarhaddon's first attempt in 674–673 miscarried. In 671 BCE, however, his forces took Memphis, the Egyptian capital. Assyrian consultants were assigned to assist the princes of the 22 provinces, their main duty being the collection of tribute.

Occasional threats came from the mountainous border regions of eastern Anatolia and Iran. Pushed forward by the Scythians, the Cimmerians in northern Iran and Transcaucasia tried to gain a foothold in Syria and western Iran. Esarhaddon allied himself with the Scythian king Partatua by giving him one of his daughters in marriage. In so doing he checked the movement of the Cimmerians. Nevertheless, the apprehensions of Esarhaddon can be seen in his many offerings, supplications, and requests to the sun god. These were concerned less with his own enterprises than with the plans of enemies and vassals and the reliability of civil servants. The priestesses of Ishtar had to reassure Esarhaddon constantly by calling out to him, "Do not be afraid." Previous kings, as far as is known, had never needed this kind of encouragement.

At home Esarhaddon was faced with serious difficulties from factions in the court. His oldest son had died early. The national party suspected his second son, Shamash-shum-ukin, of being too friendly with the Babylonians; he may also have been considered unequal to the task of kingship. His third son, Ashurbanipal, was given the succession in 672, Shamash-shum-ukin remaining crown prince of Babylonia. This arrangement caused much dissension, and some farsighted civil servants warned of disastrous effects. Nevertheless, the Assyrian nobles, priests, and city leaders were sworn to just such an adjustment of the royal line; even the vassal princes had to take very detailed oaths of allegiance to Ashurbanipal, with many curses against perjurers.

Another matter of deep concern for Esarhaddon was his failing health. He regarded eclipses of the moon as particularly alarming omens, and, in order to prevent a fatal illness from striking him at these times, he had substitute kings chosen who ruled during the three eclipses that occurred during his 12-year reign. The replacement kings died or were put to death after their brief term of office. During his off-terms Esarhaddon called himself "Mister Peasant." This practice implied that the gods could not distinguish between the real king and a false one—quite contrary to the usual assumptions of the religion.

Esarhaddon enlarged and improved the temples in both Assyria and Babylonia. He also constructed a palace in Kalakh, using many of the picture slabs of Tiglath-pileser III. The works that remain are not on the level of those of either his predecessors or of Ashurbanipal. He died while on an expedition to put down a revolt in Egypt.

Ashurbanipal (668–627) and Shamash-shum-ukin (668–648)

Although the death of his father occurred far from home, Ashurbanipal assumed the kingship as planned. He may have owed his fortunes to the intercession of his grandmother Zakutu, who had recognized his superior capacities. He tells of his diversified education by the priests and his training in armour-making as well as in other military arts. He may have been the only king in Assyria with a scholarly background. As crown prince he also had studied the administration of the vast empire. The record notes that the gods granted him a record harvest during the first year of his reign. There were also good crops in subsequent years. During these first years he also was successful in foreign policy, and his relationship with his brother in Babylonia was good.

In 668 he put down a rebellion in Egypt and drove out King Taharqa, but in 664 the nephew of Taharqa, Tanutamon, gathered forces for a new rebellion. Ashurbanipal went to Egypt, pursuing the Ethiopian prince far into the south. His decisive victory moved Tyre and other parts of the empire to resume regular payments of tribute. Ashurbanipal installed Psamtik (Greek: Psammetichos) as prince over the Egyptian region of Sais. In 656 Psamtik dislodged the Assyrian garrisons with the aid of Carian and Ionian mercenaries, making Egypt again independent. Ashurbanipal did not attempt to reconquer it. A former ally of Assyria, Gyges of Lydia, had aided Psamtik in his rebellion. In return, Assyria did not help Gyges when he was attacked by the Cimmerians. Gyges lost his throne and his life. His son Ardys decided that the payment of tribute to Assyria was a lesser evil than conquest by the Cimmerians.

Graver difficulties loomed in southern Babylonia, which was attacked by Elam in 664. Another attack came in 653, whereupon Ashurbanipal sent a large army that decisively defeated the Elamites. Their king was killed, and some of the Elamite states were encouraged to secede. Elam was no longer strong enough to assume an active part on the international scene. This victory had serious consequences for Babylonia. Shamash-shum-ukin had grown weary of being patronized by his domineering brother. He formed a secret alliance in 656 with the Iranians, Elamites, Aramaeans, Arabs, and Egyptians, directed against Ashurbanipal. The

withdrawal of defeated Elam from this alliance was probably the reason for a premature attack by Shamash-shum-ukin at the end of the year 652, without waiting for the promised assistance from Egypt. Ashurbanipal, taken by surprise, soon pulled his troops together. The Babylonian army was defeated, and Shamash-shum-ukin was surrounded in his fortified city of Babylon. His allies were not able to hold their own against the Assyrians. Reinforcements of Arabian camel troops also were defeated. The city of Babylon was under siege for three years. It fell in 648 amid scenes of horrible carnage, Shamash-shum-ukin dying in his burning palace.

After 648 the Assyrians made a few punitive attacks on the Arabs, breaking the forward thrust of the Arab tribes for a long time to come. The main objective of the Assyrians, however, was a final settlement of their relations with Elam. The refusal of Elam in 647 to extradite an Aramaean prince was used as pretext for a new attack that drove deep into its territory. The assault on the solidly fortified capital of Susa followed, probably in 646. The Assyrians destroyed the city, including its temples and palaces. Vast spoils were taken. As usual, the upper classes of the land were exiled to Assyria and other parts of the empire, and Elam became an Assyrian province. Assyria had now extended its domain to southwestern Iran. Cyrus I of Persia sent tribute and hostages to Nineveh, hoping perhaps to secure protection for his borders with Media. Little is known about the last years of Ashurbanipal’s reign.

Ashurbanipal left more inscriptions than any of his predecessors. His campaigns were not always recorded in chronological order but clustered in groups according to their purpose. The accounts were highly subjective. One of his most remarkable accomplishments was the founding of the great palace library in Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik), which is today one of the most important sources for the study of ancient Mesopotamia. The king himself supervised its construction. Important works were kept in more than one copy, some intended for the king’s personal use. The work of arranging and cataloging drew upon the experience of centuries in the management of collections in huge temple archives such as the one in Ashur. In his inscriptions Ashurbanipal tells of becoming an enthusiastic hunter of big game, acquiring a taste for it during a fight with marauding lions. In his palace at Nineveh the long rows of hunting scenes show what a masterful artist can accomplish in bas-relief; with these reliefs Assyrian art reached its peak. In the series depicting his wars, particularly the wars fought in Elam, the scenes are overloaded with human figures. Those portraying the battles with the Arabian camel troops are magnificent in execution.

One reason for the durability of the Assyrian empire was the practice of deporting large numbers of people from conquered areas and resettling others in their place. This kept many of the conquered nationalities from regaining their power. Equally important was the installation in conquered areas of a highly developed civil service under the leadership of trained officers. The highest ranking civil servant carried the title of *tartān*, a Hurrian word. The *tartān*s also represented the king during his absence. In descending rank were the palace overseer, the main cupbearer, the palace administrator, and the governor of Assyria. The generals often held high official positions, particularly in the provinces. The civil service numbered about 100,000, many of them former inhabitants of subjugated provinces. Prisoners became slaves but were later often freed.

No laws are known for the empire, although documents point to the existence of rules and standards for justice. Those who broke contracts were subject to severe penalties, even in cases of minor importance: the sacrifice of a son or the eating of a pound of wool and drinking of a great deal of water afterward, which led to a painful death. The position of women was inferior, except for the queen and some priestesses.

As yet there are no detailed studies of the economic situation during this period. The landed nobility still played an important role, in conjunction with the merchants in the cities. The large increase in the supply of precious metals—received as tribute or taken as spoils—did not disrupt economic stability in many regions. Stimulated by the patronage of the kings and the great temples, the arts and crafts flourished during this period. The policy of resettling Aramaeans and other conquered peoples in Assyria brought many talented artists and artisans into Assyrian cities, where they introduced new styles and techniques. High-ranking provincial civil servants, who were often very powerful, saw to it that the provincial capitals also benefited from this economic and cultural growth.

Harran became the most important city in the western part of the empire; in the neighbouring settlement of Huzirina (modern Sultantepe, in northern Syria), the remains of an important library have been discovered. Very few Aramaic texts from this period have been found; the climate of Mesopotamia is not conducive to the preservation of the papyrus and parchment on which these texts were written. There is no evidence that a literary tradition existed in any of the other languages spoken within the borders of the Assyrian empire at this time, except in peripheral areas of Syria and Palestine.

Culturally and economically, Babylonia lagged behind Assyria in this period. The wars with Assyria—particularly the catastrophic defeats of 689 and 648—together with many smaller tribal wars disrupted trade and agricultural production. The great Babylonian temples fared best during this period, since they continued to enjoy the patronage of the Assyrian monarchs. Only a few documents from the temples have been preserved, however. There is evidence that the scribal schools continued to operate, and “Sumerian” inscriptions were even composed for Shamash-shum-ukin. In comparison with the Assyrian developments, the pictorial arts were neglected, and Babylonian artists may have found work in Assyria.

During this period people began to use the names of ancestors as a kind of family name; this increase in family consciousness is probably an indication that the number of old families was growing smaller. By this time the process of “Aramaicization” had reached even the oldest cities of Babylonia and Assyria.

Apparently this era was not very fruitful for literature either in Babylonia or in Assyria. In Assyria numerous royal inscriptions, some as long as 1,300 lines, were among the most important texts; some of them were diverse in content and well composed. Most of the hymns and prayers were written in the traditional style. Many oracles, often of unusual content, were proclaimed in the Assyrian dialect, most often by the priestesses of the goddess Ishtar of Arbela. In Assyria as in Babylonia, the beginnings of a real historical literature are observed; most of the authors have remained anonymous up to the present.

The many gods of the tradition were worshiped in Babylonia and Assyria in large and small temples, as in earlier times. Very detailed rituals regulated the sacrifices, and the interpretations of the ritual performances in the cultic commentaries were rather different and sometimes very strange.

On some of the temple towers (ziggurats), astronomical observatories were installed. The earliest of these may have been the observatory of the Ninurta temple at Kalakh in Assyria, which dates back to the 9th century BCE; it was destroyed with the city in 612. The most important observatory in Babylonia from about 580 was situated on the ziggurat Etemenanki, a temple of Marduk in Babylon. In Assyria the observation of the Sun, Moon, and stars had already reached a rather high level; the periodic recurrence of eclipses was established. After 600, astronomical observation and calculations developed steadily, and they reached their high point after 500, when Babylonian and Greek astronomers began their fruitful collaboration.

Incomplete astronomical diaries, beginning in 652 and covering some 600 years, have been preserved.

Decline of the Assyrian empire

Few historical sources remain for the last 30 years of the Assyrian empire. There are no extant inscriptions of Ashurbanipal after 640 BCE, and the few surviving inscriptions of his successors contain only vague allusions to political matters. In Babylonia the silence is almost total until 625 BCE, when the chronicles resume. The rapid downfall of the Assyrian empire was formerly attributed to military defeat, although it was never clear how the Medes and the Babylonians alone could have accomplished this. More recent work has established that after 635 a civil war occurred, weakening the empire so that it could no longer stand up against a foreign enemy. Ashurbanipal had twin sons. Ashur-etel-ilani was appointed successor to the throne, but his twin brother Sin-shar-ishkun did not recognize him. The fight between them and their supporters forced the old king to withdraw to Harran, in 632 at the latest, perhaps ruling from there over the western part of the empire until his death in 627. Ashur-etel-ilani governed in Assyria from about 633, but a general, Sin-shum-lisher, soon rebelled against him and proclaimed himself counter-king. Some years later (629?) Sin-shar-ishkun finally succeeded in obtaining the kingship. In Babylonian documents dates can be found for all three kings. To add to the confusion, until 626 there are also dates of Ashurbanipal and a king named Kandalanu. In 626 the Chaldean Nabopolassar (Nabu-apal-uṣur) revolted from Uruk and occupied Babylon. There were several changes in government. King Ashur-etel-ilani was forced to withdraw to the west, where he died sometime after 625.

About the year 626 the Scythians laid waste to Syria and Palestine. In 625 the Medes became united under Cyaxares and began to conquer the Iranian provinces of Assyria. One chronicle relates of wars between Sin-shar-ishkun and Nabopolassar in Babylonia in 625–623. It was not long until the Assyrians were driven out of Babylonia. In 616 the Medes struck against Nineveh, but, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, were driven back by the Scythians. In 615, however, the Medes conquered Arrapkha (Kirkūk), and in 614 they took the old capital of Ashur, looting and destroying the city. Now Cyaxares and Nabopolassar made an alliance for the purpose of dividing Assyria. In 612 Kalakh and Nineveh succumbed to the superior strength of the allies. The revenge taken on the Assyrians was terrible: 200 years later Xenophon found the country still sparsely populated.

Sin-shar-ishkun, king of Assyria, found death in his burning palace. The commander of the Assyrian army in the west crowned himself king in the city of Harran, assuming the name of the founder of the empire, Ashur-uballiṭ II (611–609 BCE). Ashur-uballiṭ had to face both the Babylonians and the Medes. They conquered Harran in 610, without, however, destroying the city completely. In 609 the remaining Assyrian troops had to capitulate. With this event Assyria disappeared from history. The great empires that succeeded it learned a great deal from the hated Assyrians, both in the arts and in the organization of their states.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire

The Chaldeans, who inhabited the coastal area near the Persian Gulf, had never been entirely pacified by the Assyrians. About 630 Nabopolassar became king of the Chaldeans. In 626 he forced the Assyrians out of Uruk and crowned himself king of Babylonia. He took part in the wars aimed at the destruction of Assyria. At the same time, he began to restore the dilapidated network of canals in the cities of Babylonia, particularly those in Babylon itself. He fought against the Assyrian Ashur-uballiṭ II and then against Egypt, his successes alternating with misfortunes. In 605 Nabopolassar died in Babylon.

Nebuchadrezzar II

Nabopolassar had named his oldest son, Nabu-kudurri-uṣur, after the famous king of the second dynasty of Isin, trained him carefully for his prospective kingship, and shared responsibility with him. When the father died in 605, Nebuchadrezzar was with his army in Syria; he had just crushed the Egyptians near Carchemish in a cruel, bloody battle and pursued them into the south. On receiving the news of his father’s death, Nebuchadrezzar returned immediately to Babylon. In his numerous building inscriptions he tells but rarely of his many wars; most of them end with prayers. The Babylonian chronicle is extant only for the years 605–594, and not much is known from other sources about the later years of this famous king. He went very often to Syria and Palestine, at first to drive out the Egyptians. In 604 he took the Philistine city of Ashkelon. In 601 he tried to push forward into Egypt but was forced to pull back after a bloody, undecided battle and to regroup his army in Babylonia. After smaller incursions against the Arabs of Syria, he attacked Palestine at the end of 598. King Jehoiakim of Judah had rebelled, counting on help from Egypt. According to the chronicle, Jerusalem was taken on March 16, 597. Jehoiakim had died during the siege, and his son, King Johoiachin, together with at least 3,000 Jews, was led into exile in Babylonia. They were

treated well there, according to the documents. Zedekiah was appointed the new king. In 596, when danger threatened from the east, Nebuchadrezzar marched to the Tigris River and induced the enemy to withdraw. After a revolt in Babylonia had been crushed with much bloodshed, there were other campaigns in the west.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Judah rebelled again in 589, and Jerusalem was placed under siege. The city fell in 587/586 and was completely destroyed. Many thousands of Jews were forced into “Babylonian exile,” and their country was reduced to a province of the Babylonian empire. The revolt had been caused by an Egyptian invasion that pushed as far as Sidon. Nebuchadrezzar laid siege to Tyre for 13 years without taking the city, because there was no fleet at his disposal. In 568/567 he attacked Egypt, again without much success, but from that time on the Egyptians refrained from further attacks on Palestine. Nebuchadrezzar lived at peace with Media throughout his reign and acted as a mediator after the Median-Lydian war of 590–585.

The Babylonian empire under Nebuchadrezzar extended to the Egyptian border. It had a well-functioning administrative system. Though he had to collect extremely high taxes and tributes in order to maintain his armies and carry out his building projects, Nebuchadrezzar made Babylonia one of the richest lands in western Asia—the more astonishing because it had been rather poor when it was ruled by the Assyrians. Babylon was the largest city of the “civilized world.” Nebuchadrezzar maintained the existing canal systems and built many supplementary canals, making the land even more fertile. Trade and commerce flourished during his reign.

Nebuchadrezzar’s building activities surpassed those of most of the Assyrian kings. He fortified the old double walls of Babylon, adding another triple wall outside the old wall. In addition, he erected another wall, the Median Wall, north of the city between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. According to Greek estimates, the Median Wall may have been about 100 feet high. He enlarged the old palace and added many wings, so that hundreds of rooms with large inner courts were now at the disposal of the central offices of the empire. Colourful glazed-tile bas-reliefs decorated the walls. Terrace gardens, called the Hanging Gardens in later accounts, were added. Hundreds of thousands of workers must have been required for these projects. The temples were objects of special concern. He devoted himself first and foremost to the completion of Etemenanki, the “Tower of Babel.” Construction of this building began in the time of Nebuchadrezzar I, about 1110. It stood as a “building ruin” until the reign of Esarhaddon of Assyria, who resumed building about 680 but did not finish.

Nebuchadrezzar II was able to complete the whole building. The mean dimensions of Etemenanki are to be found in the Esagila Tablet, which has been known since the late 19th century. Its base measured about 300 feet on each side, and it was 300 feet in height. There were five terracelike gradations surmounted by a temple, the whole tower being about twice the height of those of other temples. The wide street used for processions led along the eastern side by the inner city walls and crossed at the enormous Ishtar Gate with its world-renowned bas-relief tiles. Nebuchadrezzar also built many smaller temples throughout the country.

The last kings of Babylonia

Awil-Marduk (called Evil-Merodach in the Hebrew Bible; 561–560), the son of Nebuchadrezzar, was unable to win the support of the priests of Marduk. His reign did not last long, and he was soon eliminated. His brother-in-law and successor, Nergal-shar-uṣur (called Neriglissar in classical sources; 559–556), was a general who undertook a campaign in 557 into the “rough” Cilician land, which may have been under the control of the Medes. His land forces were assisted by a fleet. His still-minor son Labashi-Marduk was murdered not long after that, allegedly because he was not suitable for his job.

The next king was the Aramaean Nabonidus (Nabu-naʾid 556–539) from Harran, one of the most interesting and enigmatic figures of ancient times. His mother, Addagoppe, was a priestess of the god Sin in Harran; she came to Babylon and managed to secure responsible offices for her son at court. The god of the moon rewarded her piety with a long life—she lived to be 103—and she was buried in Harran with all the honours of a queen in 547. It is not clear which powerful faction in Babylon supported the kingship of Nabonidus; it may have been one opposing the priests of Marduk, who had become extremely powerful. Nabonidus raided Cilicia in 555 and secured the surrender of Harran, which had been ruled by the Medes. He concluded a treaty of defense with Astyages of Media against the Persians, who had become a growing threat since 559 under their king Cyrus II. He also devoted himself to the renovation of many temples, taking an especially keen interest in old inscriptions. He gave preference to his god Sin and had powerful enemies in the priesthood of the Marduk temple. Modern excavators have found fragments of propaganda poems written against Nabonidus and also in support of him. Both traditions continued in Judaism.

Internal difficulties and the recognition that the narrow strip of land from the Persian Gulf to Syria could not be defended against a major attack from the east induced Nabonidus to leave

Babylonia around 552 and to reside in Taima (Taymāʾ) in northern Arabia. There he organized an Arabian province with the assistance of Jewish mercenaries. His viceroy in Babylonia was his son Bel-shar-uṣur, the Belshazzar of the Book of Daniel in the Bible. Cyrus turned this to his own advantage by annexing Media in 550. Nabonidus, in turn, allied himself with Croesus of Lydia in order to fight Cyrus. Yet, when Cyrus attacked Lydia and annexed it in 546, Nabonidus was not able to help Croesus. Cyrus bode his time. In 542 Nabonidus returned to Babylonia, where his son had been able to maintain good order in external matters but had not overcome a growing internal opposition to his father. Consequently, Nabonidus's career after his return was short-lived, though he tried hard to regain the support of the Babylonians. He appointed his daughter to be high priestess of the god Sin in Ur, thus returning to the Sumerian-Old Babylonian religious tradition. The priests of Marduk looked to Cyrus, hoping to have better relations with him than with Nabonidus; they promised Cyrus the surrender of Babylon without a fight if he would grant them their privileges in return. In 539 Cyrus attacked northern Babylonia with a large army, defeating Nabonidus, and entered the city of Babylon without a battle. The other cities did not offer any resistance either. Nabonidus surrendered, receiving a small territory in eastern Iran. Tradition has confused him with his great predecessor Nebuchadrezzar II. The Bible refers to him as Nebuchadrezzar in the Book of Daniel.

Babylonia's peaceful submission to Cyrus saved it from the fate of Assyria. It became a territory under the Persian crown but kept its cultural autonomy. Even the racially mixed western part of the Babylonian empire submitted without resistance.

By 620 the Babylonians had grown tired of Assyrian rule. They were also weary of internal struggle. They were easily persuaded to submit to the order of the Chaldean kings. The result was a surprisingly rapid social and economic consolidation, helped along by the fact that after the fall of Assyria no external enemy threatened Babylonia for more than 60 years. In the cities the temples were an important part of the economy, having vast benefices at their disposal. The business class regained its strength, not only in the trades and commerce but also in the management of agriculture in the metropolitan areas. Livestock breeding—sheep, goats, beef cattle, and horses—flourished, as did poultry farming. The cultivation of corn, dates, and vegetables grew in importance. Much was done to improve communications, both by water and land, with the western provinces of the empire. The collapse of the Assyrian empire had

the consequence that many trade arteries were rerouted through Babylonia. Another result of the collapse was that the city of Babylon became a world centre.

The immense amount of documentary material and correspondence that has survived has not yet been fully analyzed. No new system of law or administration seems to have developed during that time. The Babylonian dialect gradually became Aramaicized; it was still written primarily on clay tablets that often bore added material in Aramaic lettering. Parchment and papyrus documents have not survived. In contrast to advances in other fields, there is no evidence of much artistic creativity. Aside from some of the inscriptions of the kings, especially Nabonidus, which were not comparable from a literary standpoint with those of the Assyrians, the main efforts were devoted to the rewriting of old texts. In the fine arts, only a few monuments have any suggestion of new tendencies.

Mesopotamia under the Persians

Cyrus II, the founder of the Achaemenian Empire, united Babylonia with his country in a personal union, assuming the title of “King of Babylonia, King of the Lands.” His son Cambyses was appointed vice-king and resided in Sippar. The Persians relied on the support of the priests and the business class in the cities. In a Babylonian inscription, Cyrus relates with pride his peaceful, bloodless conquest of the city of Babylon. At the same time, he speaks of Marduk as the king of gods. His moderation and restraint were rewarded: Babylonia became the richest province of his empire. There is no indication of any national rebellion in Babylonia under Cyrus and Cambyses (529–522). That there must have been an accumulation of discontent became clear at the ascension to the throne of Darius I (522–486), when a usurper seized the throne of Babylonia under the name of Nebuchadrezzar (III) only to lose both the throne and his life after 10 weeks. Darius waived any punitive action. He had to take more drastic measures in 521, when a new Nebuchadrezzar incited another rebellion. This usurper’s reign lasted two months. Executions and plundering followed; Darius ordered that the inner walls of Babylon be demolished, and he reformed the organization of the state. Babylon, however, remained the capital of the new satrapy and also became the administrative headquarters for the satrapies of Assyria and Syria. One result was that the palace had to be enlarged.

Babylonia remained a wealthy and prosperous land, in contrast to Assyria, which was still a poor country. At the same time, the administration of the kingdom was more and more in the

hands of the Persians, and the tax burdens grew heavier. This produced discontent, centring especially on the large temples in Babylon. Xerxes (486–465) had his residence in Babylon while he was crown prince, and he knew the country very well. When he assumed his kingship, he immediately curtailed the autonomy of the satrapies. This, in turn, gave rise to many rebellions. In Babylonia there were two short interim governments of Babylonian pretenders during 484–482. Xerxes retaliated by desecrating and partially destroying the holy places of the god Marduk and the Tower of Babel in the city of Babylon. Priests were executed, and the statue of Marduk was melted down.

The members of the royal family still resided in the palaces of the city of Babylon, but Aramaic became more and more the language of the official administration. One source of information for this period are the clay-tablet archives of the commercial house of Murashu and Sons of Nippur for the years of 455–403, which tell much about the important role the Iranians played in the country. The state domains were largely in their hands. They controlled many minor feudal tenants, grouped into social classes according to ancestry and occupation. The business people were predominantly Babylonians and Aramaeans, but there were also Jews.

The documents become increasingly sparse after 400. The cultural life of Babylon became concentrated in a few central cities, particularly Babylon and Uruk; Ur and Nippur were also important centres. The work of astronomers continued, as evidenced in records of observations. Nabu-rimanni, living and working around 500, and Kidinnu, 5th or 4th century BCE, were known to the Greeks; both astronomers are famous for their methods of calculating the courses of the Moon and the planets. In the field of literature, religious poetic works as well as texts of omens and Sumero-Akkadian word lists were constantly copied, often with commentaries.

For additional discussion of the Achaemenians and their successors, *see* Iran, history of.

Wolfram Th. von Soden

Mesopotamia from *c.* 320 BCE to *c.* 620 CE

The political history of Mesopotamia between about 320 BCE and 620 CE is divided among three periods of foreign rule: the Seleucids to 141 BCE, the Parthians to 224 CE, and the Sasanians until the Arab invasions of the 7th century CE. Sources are scarce, consisting mainly of a few notices in the works of Classical authors such as Strabo, Pliny, Polybius, and

Ptolemy, while the cuneiform sources are mainly incantations, accounts of religious rites, and copies of ancient religious texts.

The Seleucid period

Mesopotamia in the Seleucid and Parthian periods

At the end of the Achaemenian Empire, Mesopotamia was partitioned into the satrapy of Babylonia in the south, while the northern part of Mesopotamia was joined with Syria in another satrapy. It is not known how long this division lasted, but, by the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the north was removed from Syria and made a separate satrapy.

In the wars between the successors of Alexander, Mesopotamia suffered much from the passage and the pillaging of armies. When Alexander's empire was divided in 321 BCE, one of his generals, Seleucus (later Seleucus I Nicator), received the satrapy of Babylonia to rule. From about 315 to about 312 BCE, however, Antigonus I Monophthalmus ("One-Eyed") took over the satrapy as ruler of all Mesopotamia, and Seleucus had to flee and accept refuge with Ptolemy of Egypt. With the aid of Ptolemy, Seleucus was able to enter Babylon in 312 BCE (311 by the Babylonian reckoning) and hold it for a short time against the forces of Antigonus before marching to the east, where he consolidated his power. It is uncertain when he returned to Babylonia and reestablished his rule there; it may have been in 308, but by 305 BCE he had assumed the title of king. With the defeat and death of Antigonus at the Battle of Ipsus in 301, Seleucus became the ruler of a large empire stretching from modern Afghanistan to the Mediterranean Sea. He founded a number of cities, the most important of which were Seleucia, on the Tigris, and Antioch, on the Orontes River in Syria. The latter, named after his father or his son, both of whom were called Antiochus, became the principal capital, while Seleucia became the capital of the eastern provinces. The dates of the founding of these two cities are unknown, but presumably Seleucus founded Seleucia after he became king, while Antioch was built after the defeat of Antigonus.

Mesopotamia is scarcely mentioned in the Greek sources relating to the Seleucids, because the Seleucid rulers were occupied with Greece and Anatolia and with wars with the Ptolemies of Egypt in Palestine and Syria. Even the political division of Mesopotamia is uncertain, especially since Alexander, Seleucus, and Seleucus's son Antiochus I Soter all founded cities

that were autonomous, like the Greek polis. The political division of the land into 19 or 20 small satrapies, which is found later, under the Parthians, began under the Seleucids. Geographically, however, Mesopotamia can be divided into four areas: Characene, also called Mesene, in the south; Babylonia, later called Asūristān, in the middle; northern Mesopotamia, where there was later a series of small states such as Gordyene, Osroene, Adiabene, and Garamea; and finally the desert areas of the upper Euphrates, in Sasanian times called Arabistān. These four areas had different histories down to the Arab conquest in the 7th century, although all of them were subject first to the Seleucids and then to the Parthians and Sasanians. At times, however, several of the areas were fully independent, in theory as well as in fact, while the relations of certain cities with provincial governments and with the central government varied. From cuneiform sources it is known that traditional religious practices and forms of government as well as other customs continued in Mesopotamia; there were only a few Greek centres, such as Seleucia and the island of Ikaros (modern Faylakah, near Kuwait), where the practices of the Greek polis held sway. Otherwise, native cities had a few Greek officials or garrisons but continued to function as they had in the past.

Seleucia on the Tigris was not only the eastern capital but also an autonomous city ruled by an elected senate, and it replaced Babylon as the administrative and commercial centre of the old province of Babylonia. In the south several cities, such as Furat and Charax, grew rich on the maritime trade with India; Charax became the main entrepôt for trade after the fall of the Seleucids. In the north there was no principal city, but several towns, such as Arbela (modern Irbīl) and Nisibis (modern Nusaybin), later became important centres. In the desert region, “caravan cities” such as Hatra and Palmyra began their rise in the Seleucid period and had their heyday under the Parthians.

The only time that the Seleucid kings lost control of Mesopotamia was from 222 to 220 BCE, when Molon, the governor of Media, revolted and marched to the west. When the new Seleucid king, Antiochus III, moved against him from Syria, however, Molon’s forces deserted him, and the revolt ended. The Parthians, under their able king Mithradates I, conquered Seleucid territory in Iran and entered Seleucia in 141 BCE. After the death of Mithradates I in 138 BCE, Antiochus VII began a campaign to recover the Seleucid domains in the east. This campaign was successful until Antiochus VII lost his life in Iran in 129 BCE. His death ended Seleucid rule in Mesopotamia and marked the beginning of small principalities in both the south and north of Mesopotamia.

Seleucid rule brought changes to Mesopotamia, especially in the cities where Greeks and Macedonians were settled. In these cities the king usually made separate agreements with the Greek officials of the city regarding civil and military authority, immunity from taxes or corvée, or the like. Native cities continued with their old systems of local government, much as they had under the Achaemenians. Greek gods were worshiped in temples dedicated to them in the Greek cities, and native Mesopotamian gods had temples dedicated to them in the native cities. In time, however, syncretism and identification of the foreign and local deities developed. Although the policy of Hellenization was not enforced upon the population, Greek ideas did influence the local educated classes, just as local practices were gradually adopted by the Greeks. As in Greece and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, in Mesopotamia the philosophies of the Stoics and other schools probably had an impact, as did mystery religions; both were hallmarks of the Hellenistic Age. Unfortunately there is no evidence from the east on the popularity of Greek beliefs among the local population, and scholars can only speculate on the basis of the fragmentary notices in authors such as Strabo. The Seleucid rulers respected the native priesthoods of Mesopotamia, and there is no record of any persecutions. On the contrary, the rulers seem to have favoured local religious practices, and ancient forms of worship continued. Cuneiform writing by priests, who copied incantations and old religious texts, continued into the Parthian period.

The administrative institutions of the countryside of Mesopotamia remained even more traditional than those of the cities; the old taxes were simply paid to new masters. The satrapy, much reduced in size from Achaemenian times, was the basis for Seleucid control of the countryside. A satrap or strategus (a military title) headed each satrapy, and the satrapies were divided into hyparchies or eparchies; the sources that use these and other words, such as toparchy, are unclear about the subdivisions of the satrapy. There was a great variety of smaller units of administration. In the capital and in the provincial centres, both Greek and Aramaic were used as the written languages of the government. The use of cuneiform in government documents ceased sometime during the Achaemenian period, but it continued in religious texts until the 1st century of the Common era. The archives were managed both in the capital and in provincial cities by an official called a *bibliophylax*. There were many financial officials (*oikonomoi*); some of them oversaw royal possessions, and others managed local taxes and other economic matters. The legal system in the Seleucid empire is not well understood, but presumably both local Mesopotamian laws and Greek laws, which had absorbed or replaced old Achaemenian imperial laws, were in force. Excavations at Seleucia

have uncovered thousands of seal impressions on clay, evidence of a developed system of controls and taxes on commodities of trade. Many of the sealings are records of payment of a salt tax. Most of the tolls and tariffs, however, were local assessments rather than royal taxes.

Artistic remains from the Seleucid period are exceedingly scarce, and, in contrast to Achaemenian art, no royal or monumental art has been recovered. One might characterize the objects that can be dated to the Seleucid era as popular or private art, such as seals, statuettes, and clay figurines. Both Greek and local styles are found, with an amalgam of styles prevalent at the end of Seleucid rule, evidence of a syncretism in cultures. The numerous statues and statuettes of Heracles found in the east testify to the great popularity of the Greek deity, in Mesopotamia identified with the local god Nergal.

Aramaic was the “official” written language of the Achaemenian Empire; after the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek, the language of the conquerors, replaced Aramaic. Under the Seleucids, however, both Greek and Aramaic were used throughout the empire, although Greek was the principal language of government. Gradually Aramaic underwent changes in different parts of the empire, and in Mesopotamia in the time of the Parthians it evolved into Syriac, with dialectical differences from western Syriac, used in Syria and Palestine. In southern Mesopotamia, other dialects evolved, one of which was Mandaic, the scriptural language of the Mandaean religion.

Literature in local languages is nonexistent, except for copies of ancient religious texts in cuneiform writing and fragments of Aramaic writing. There were authors who wrote in Greek, but little of their work has survived and that only as excerpts in later works. The most important of these authors was Berosus, a Babylonian priest who wrote about the history of his country, probably under Antiochus I (reigned 281–261 BCE). Although the excerpts of his work that are preserved deal with the ancient, mythological past and with astrology and astronomy, the fact that they are in Greek is indicative of interest among local Greek colonists in the culture of their neighbours. Another popular author was Apollodorus of Artemita (a town near Seleucia), who wrote under the Parthians a history of Parthia in Greek as well as other works on geography. Greek continued to be a lingua franca used by educated people in Mesopotamia well into the Parthian period.

Under the Seleucid system of dating, as far as is known, a fixed year became the basis for continuous dating for the first time in the Middle East. The year chosen was the year of entry

of Seleucus into Babylon, 311 BCE according to the Mesopotamian reckoning and 312 BCE according to the Syrians. Before this time, dating had been only according to the regnal years of the ruling monarch (e.g., “fourth year of Darius”). The Parthians, following the Seleucids, sought to institute their own system of reckoning based on some event in their past that scholars can only surmise—possibly the assumption of the title of king by the first ruler of the Parthians, Arsaces.

Since Greece was overpopulated at the beginning of Seleucid rule, it was not difficult to persuade colonists to come to the east, especially when they were given plots of land (*cleroii*) from royal domains that they could pass on to their descendants; if they had no descendants, the land would revert to the king. Theoretically all land belonged to the ruler, but actually local interests prevailed. As time passed, however, the influx of Greek colonists diminished and then ended when the wars of the Hellenistic kings interrupted this movement. Nonetheless, Greek influences continued, and it is fascinating to find in cuneiform documents records of families where the father has a local name and his son a Greek one and vice versa. Inasmuch as Mesopotamia was peaceful under the Seleucids, the processes of accommodation and assimilation among the people appear to have flourished.

The Parthian period

The coming of the Parthians changed Mesopotamia even less than the establishment of the Seleucid kingdom had, for as early as the middle of the 2nd century BCE local dynasts had proclaimed their independence. There is no evidence indicating whether the cities of Mesopotamia surrendered piecemeal or all at once or whether they submitted voluntarily or after fighting. In any case, Seleucia was treated better by the Parthians than it had been by the Seleucids, and the local government retained its autonomy. Parthian troops did not occupy Seleucia but remained in a garrison site called Ctesiphon near Seleucia; it later grew into a city and replaced Seleucia as the capital. In Characene in southern Mesopotamia a Seleucid satrap with an Iranian name, Hyspaosines, issued coins about 125 BCE, a sign of his independence; the actual date for this may have been earlier. He changed the name of the city Antiochia on the lower Tigris to Spasinou Charax, meaning “The Fort of Hyspaosines,” and made it his capital. All the coins issued from his capital have Greek legends. His troops moved north and occupied Babylon and Seleucia probably sometime in 127 BCE, when the Parthians were fighting nomadic invaders in the eastern part of their territory. His rule there must have been short, however, for the Parthian governor of Babylon and the north, Himerus, was back in

Seleucia and Babylon by 126. Himerus could not have been a rebel, since he struck coins in the name of the Parthian rulers Phraates II and Artabanus II, both of whom were killed in fighting in eastern Iran. Himerus abused his power and is said to have oppressed the cities of Mesopotamia, plundering them and killing their inhabitants. Cuneiform documents from Babylon stop after this date, indicating that the city did not survive the depredations of Himerus. He vanished, however, and Parthian sovereignty was restored by the ninth Arsacid king, Mithradates II, who came to the throne about 124 BCE; he was the son of Artabanus II. Mithradates II recovered all Mesopotamia and conquered Characene, overstriking coins of Hyspaosines and driving him from his capital in 122 or 121 BCE. By 113, if not earlier, Dura-Europus on the Euphrates was in Parthian hands. In 95 BCE the Armenian Tigranes II, a hostage at the court of Mithradates, was placed on the throne of Armenia by his Parthian overlord, and the small kingdoms of northern Mesopotamia—Adiabene, Gordyene, and Osroene—gave allegiance to Mithradates. Mithradates II died about 87 BCE, although he may have died earlier, since the period after 90 BCE is dark and a usurper named Gotarzes may have ruled for a few years in Mesopotamia. During the reign of Mithradates II the first contacts with Rome, under Lucius Cornelius Sulla, were made, and portents of future struggles were evident in the lack of any agreement between the two powers. Sulla was sent to the east by the Roman Senate to govern Cilicia in Anatolia. In 92 BCE Orobazes, an ambassador from Mithradates II, came to him seeking a treaty, but nothing was concluded, since instructions from Rome did not include negotiations with the Parthian power.

Tigranes II took advantage of struggles between several claimants to the Parthian throne to expand Armenian territory into Mesopotamia, and the small states in the north gave him their allegiance. It was not until 69 BCE, when the Roman general Lucius Licinius Lucullus captured Tigranokerta, Tigranes' capital, that Mesopotamia returned to Parthian rule. Thereafter wars between the Romans and the Parthians were to dominate the political history of Mesopotamia.

The Parthians left the local administrations and rulers intact when they conquered Mesopotamia. According to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* VI, 112) the Parthian empire consisted of 18 kingdoms, 11 of which were called the upper kingdoms (or satrapies), while 7 were called lower kingdoms, meaning that they were located on the plains of Mesopotamia. The centre of the lower kingdoms was ancient Babylonia, called Beth Aramaye in Aramaic, and it was governed directly by the Parthian ruler. In the south was Characene, while to the

northeast of Ctesiphon, which had supplanted Seleucia as the Parthian capital, was Garamea, with its capital at modern Kirkūk. Adiabene had Arbela as its capital, and farther north was a province called Beth Nuhadra in Aramaic, which seems to have been governed by a general who was directly responsible to the Parthian king, because this province bore the brunt of Roman invasions. Nisibis was the main city of the desert area of Arabistān, but at the end of the Parthian period the desert caravan city of Hatra claimed hegemony over this area. There were other principalities in the northwest: Sophene, where Tigranes' capital was located; Gordyene and Zabdicene (near modern Çölemerik in eastern Turkey), located to the east of Sophene; and Osroene, with its capital Edessa (modern Urfa, Turkey), which lay inside the Roman sphere of influence. Rule over so many small kingdoms gave Mithradates II the title "King of Kings," also borne by later Parthian rulers.

The defeat of the Roman legions under Marcus Licinius Crassus by the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae (Carrhae is the Roman name for Harran) in 53 BCE heralded a period of Parthian power and expansion in the Middle East, but the tide turned under Mark Antony in 36–34 BCE, and thereafter the power structure in the east remained volatile, with the two great states, Rome and Parthia, contending for predominance in the region. Armenia was a perennial bone of contention between the two powers, each of which sought to put its candidate on the throne.

Parthian rule was not firm over all Mesopotamia; thus, for example, during the reign of Artabanus III (12–38 CE) the Jewish brigands Asinaeus and Anilaeus set up a free state north of Ctesiphon that lasted 15 years before it was overcome by the Parthians. With the end of cuneiform records and with the attention of classical sources turned to the wars between the Romans and the Parthians, information about internal affairs in Mesopotamia becomes almost nonexistent. Hellenism continued to flourish, for many Parthian kings had the epithet "Philhellene" placed on their coins, but during the last two centuries of Parthian rule Greek influences declined in favour of Iranian ones, while central authority suffered from the usurpations of powerful nobles and local kings. From coinage it is known that the city of Seleucia revolted against central control at the end of Artabanus' reign and maintained its independence for a number of years. Peace was broken by the Roman emperor Nero, who sought to put his client on the throne of Armenia, but, after several years of conflict, peace was arranged in 63. Vologeses I (*c.* 51–80 CE) founded the city Vologesias, near Seleucia, as his capital, but the whole area (including Ctesiphon and Seleucia) became an urban complex called Māḥōzē in Aramaic and Al-Madāʾin in Arabic; both names mean "The Cities."

Internal rivalries in the Parthian state gave the Romans an opportunity to attack, and control over Armenia was the casus belli for the Roman emperor Trajan's advance into Mesopotamia in 116. Adiabene, as well as the entire Tigris-Euphrates basin of northern Mesopotamia, was incorporated as a province into the Roman Empire. Trajan advanced to the Persian Gulf, but he died of illness and his successor Hadrian made peace, abandoning the conquests in Mesopotamia, although client states remained.

The second century of the Common era was a dark period in Parthian history, but it was a time of growth in wealth and influence of the caravan cities of Palmyra, Hatra, and Mesene (formerly Characene, situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates). Armenia continued to be a bone of contention between the two great powers, and hostilities occasionally flared up. In 164–165 the Roman general Gaius Avidius Cassius captured the capital cities Ctesiphon and Seleucia, but an epidemic forced the Romans to retreat and peace was restored. Returning soldiers spread the disease throughout the Roman Empire, with devastating consequences. The terms of peace favoured the Romans, who secured control of Nisibis and the Khābūr River valley. The next great war was the invasion of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus to punish the Parthians, who had supported his rival Pescennius Niger and had annexed some territory in Mesopotamia in return for their support. Severus took and sacked Ctesiphon in 198. Because the devastated countryside contained no supplies for the Romans, they were soon compelled to retreat. A siege of Hatra in 199 by Severus failed, and peace was made. Conflict between two claimants to the Parthian throne, Vologeses IV or V and Artabanus V, gave the Roman emperor Caracalla an excuse to invade Adiabene, but in 217 he was assassinated on the road from Edessa to Carrhae, and the Romans made peace. The end of the Parthian kingdom was near, and the advent of the Sasanians brought a new phase in the history of Mesopotamia.

Parthian rule brought little change in the administration and institutions of Mesopotamia as it had existed under the Seleucids, except for a general weakening of central authority under the feudal Parthians. The Parthians instituted a new era, beginning in 247 BCE, but it paralleled rather than replaced the Seleucid era of reckoning, and the Parthian vanished at the end of the dynasty. As far as can be determined, Hellenism was never proscribed under the Parthians, although it grew weaker toward the end of Parthian rule. From archaeological surveys around Susa, located in the kingdom of Elymais in modern Khūzestān, and from the Diyālā plain northeast of Ctesiphon, it seems that the population of the land increased greatly under the

Parthians, as did trade and commerce. The coinage of the later Parthian rulers became more and more debased, probably as a result of the many internecine wars and the lack of control by the central authority. Local rulers also issued their own coinages in Persis, Elymais, Mesene, and elsewhere.

Changes took place in the demography of Mesopotamia under the Parthians, and perhaps the most striking development among the population was the increase of Arab infiltration from the desert, which resulted in Arab dynasties in the oasis settlements of Palmyra and Hatra. Similarly, an influx of Armenian settlers in the north changed the composition of the local population. After the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70, many Jews fled to Mesopotamia, where they joined their coreligionists; Nehardea, north of Ctesiphon, became a centre of Jewish population. Naturally also many migrants from the east came to Mesopotamia in the wake of the Parthian occupation. With many merchants from east and west passing through or remaining in Mesopotamia, the population became more diverse than it had previously been.

During the Parthian occupation the ancient religion and cults of Mesopotamia came to an end and were replaced by mixed Hellenic and Oriental mystery religions and Iranian cults. Local Semitic cults of Bel, Allat, and other deities flourished alongside temples dedicated to Greek gods such as Apollo. The sun deity Shamash was worshiped at Hatra and elsewhere, but the henotheism of the ancient Middle East was giving way to acceptance of universalist religions, if the prevalent view cannot yet be called one of monotheism. In Mesopotamia, in particular, the influence of Jewish monotheism, with the beginning of rabbinic schools and the organization of the community under a leader, the exilarch (*resh galuta* in Aramaic), must have had a significant influence on the local population. Toward the end of the reign of Artabanus III, the royal family of Adiabene converted to Judaism. In the first two centuries of the Common era, Christianity and various baptismal sects also began to expand into Mesopotamia. So far no Mithraeums (underground temples for the worship of the god Mithra), such as existed in the Roman Empire, have been found in Mesopotamia, except at Dura-Europus, where Roman troops were stationed. Many local cults and shrines, such as that of the Sabians and their moon deity at Harran, however, continued to exist until the Islamic conquest. Parthian Zoroastrianism reinforced local Zoroastrian communities in Mesopotamia left from the time of the Achaemenians, and one of the gnostic baptismal religions, Mandaeanism, which is still in existence, had its beginning at this time. Although Christian missionaries were

active in Mesopotamia in the Parthian period, no centres, such as the one established later at Nisibis, have been reported, and it may be supposed that their activity at first was mainly confined to Jewish communities.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the Parthians had a more marked influence on art and architecture. Local schools of art flourished, and at first Greek ideals predominated, but in the last two centuries of Parthian rule a “Parthian style” is evident in the art recovered from Mesopotamia and other regions. Whereas Achaemenian and Sasanian art are royal or imperial and monumental, Parthian art, like Seleucid art, can be characterized as “popular.” Parthian works of art reflect the many currents of culture among the populace, and one may say that it is expressionist and stylized, in contrast with Greek and Roman naturalistic or realistic art. The characteristics of Parthian art in Mesopotamia are total frontality (i.e., the representation of figures in full face) in portraits, along with an otherworldly quality. In Middle Eastern art from previous periods, figures were almost always shown in profile. Another new feature of Parthian art is the frequent portrayal of the “flying gallop” in sculpture and painting, not unexpected in view of the importance of cavalry and mounted archers in the Parthian armies. Likewise, Parthian costume, with baggy trousers, became the mode over much of the Middle East and is portrayed in painting and sculpture. In architecture the use of *ayvan*s (arches in porticoes) and domed vaults is attributed to the Parthian period; they may have originated in Mesopotamia. Parthian art influenced that of the Nabataeans in Roman territory, as it did others throughout the Middle East.

Parthian was an Iranian language written in the Aramaic alphabet. It had an enormous number of words and even phrases that were borrowed from Aramaic, and scribal training was necessary to learn these. Syriac, being a Semitic language with emphasis on consonants, evolved several alphabets based on the Aramaic alphabet. The Aramaic alphabet was better suited to Syriac than to Parthian phonology. Parthian was therefore difficult to read and was mainly used by scribes or priests for official or religious writings.

The largest lacuna is in literature from the Parthian period. The largely oral literature of the Parthians, famous for their minstrels and poetry, does not seem to have found many echoes in Mesopotamia, where the settled society contrasted with the heroic, chivalric, and feudal society of the Iranian nomads that continued to dominate Parthian mores even after they had settled in Mesopotamia. Nonetheless, the end of the Parthian period saw the beginning of Syriac literature, which is Christian Aramaic, and some of early Syriac literature, such as the

"Song of the Pearl," contains Parthian elements. In the realm of language, rather than literature, the writing of Aramaic changes to Parthian in the 2nd century CE, as can be seen from a bilingual (Greek and Parthian) inscription on a bronze statue from Seleucia dated 150–151 CE. It tells how Vologeses III defeated the king of Mesene and took over the entire country. After this period one no longer speaks of Aramaic, but of Parthian and Syriac written in a new cursive alphabet.

The Sasanian period

The Sasanian period marks the end of the ancient and the beginning of the medieval era in the history of the Middle East. Universalist religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism, and even Zoroastrianism and Judaism absorbed local religions and cults at the beginning of the 3rd century. Both the Sasanian and the Roman empires ended by adopting an official state religion, Zoroastrianism for the former and Christianity for the latter. In Mesopotamia, however, older cults such as that of the Mandaeans, the moon cult of Harran, and others continued alongside the great religions. The new rulers were not as tolerant as the Seleucids and Parthians had been, and persecutions occurred under Sasanian rule.

After Ardashīr I, the first of the Sasanians, consolidated his position in Persis (modern Fārs province), he moved into southern Mesopotamia, and Mesene submitted. In 224 he defeated and killed the last Parthian ruler, Artabanus V, after which Mesopotamia quickly fell before him and Ctesiphon became the main capital of the Sasanian empire. In 230 Ardashīr besieged Hatra but failed to take it. Hatra called on Roman aid, and in 232 the Roman emperor Severus Alexander launched a campaign that halted Ardashīr's progress. At the death of Severus Alexander in 235 the Sasanians took the offensive, and probably in 238 Nisibis and Harran came under their control. Hatra was probably captured in early 240, after which Ardashīr's son Shāpūr was made coregent; Ardashīr himself died soon afterward. The Roman emperor Gordian III led a large army against Shāpūr I in 243. The Romans retook Harran and Nisibis and defeated the Sasanians at a battle near Resaina, but at Anbār, renamed Pērōz-Shāpūr ("Victorious Is Shāpūr"), the Sasanians inflicted a defeat on the Romans, who lost their emperor. His successor, Philip the Arabian, made peace, giving up Roman conquests in northern Mesopotamia. Osroene, however, which had been returned to the local ruling family of Abgar by Gordian, remained a vassal state of the Romans. Shāpūr renewed his attacks and took many towns, including Dura-Europus, in 256 and later moved into northern Syria and Anatolia. The defeat and capture of the Roman emperor Valerian at the gates of Edessa,

probably in 259, was the high point of his conquests in the west. On Shāpūr's return to Ctesiphon the ruler of Palmyra, Septimius Odaenathus (also called Odainath), attacked and defeated his army, seizing booty. Odeanathus took the title of emperor, conquered Harran and Nisibis, and threatened Ctesiphon in 264–266. His murder relieved the Sasanians, and in 273 the Roman emperor Aurelian sacked Palmyra and restored Roman authority in northern Mesopotamia. Peace between the two empires lasted until 283, when the Roman emperor Carus invaded Mesopotamia and advanced on Ctesiphon, but the Roman army was forced to withdraw after Carus' sudden death. In 296 Narseh I, the seventh Sasanian king, took the field and defeated a Roman force near Harran, but in the following year he was defeated and his family was taken captive. As a result, the Romans secured Nisibis and made it their strongest fortress against the Sasanians. The Roman province of Mesopotamia, which was the land between the Euphrates and Tigris in the northern foothills, became in effect a military area with *limes* (the fortified frontiers of the Roman Empire) and highly fortified towns.

Under Shāpūr II the Sasanians again took the offensive, and the first war lasted from 337 to 350; it ended with no result as Nisibis was successfully defended by the Romans. In 359 Shāpūr again invaded Roman territory and captured the Roman fortress Amida after a long and costly siege. In 363 the emperor Julian advanced almost to Ctesiphon, where he died, and his successor Jovian had to give up Nisibis and other territories in the north to the Sasanians. The next war lasted from 502 to 506 and ended with no change. War broke out again in 527, lasting until 531, and even the Byzantine general Belisarius was not able to prevail; as usual, the boundaries remained unchanged. In 540 the Sasanian king Khosrow (Chosroes) I invaded Syria and even took Antioch, although many fortresses behind him in northern Mesopotamia remained in Byzantine hands. After much back-and-forth fighting, peace was made in 562. War with the Byzantine Empire resumed 10 years later, and it continued under Khosrow's successor, Hormizd IV. Only in 591, in return for their assistance in the restoration to the Sasanian throne of Khosrow II, who had been deposed and had fled to Byzantine territory, did the Byzantines regain territory in northern Mesopotamia. With the murder in 602 of the Byzantine emperor Maurice, who had been Khosrow's benefactor, and the usurpation of Phocas, Khosrow II saw a golden opportunity to enlarge Sasanian domains and to take revenge for Maurice. Persian armies took all northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Anatolia. By 615, Sasanian forces were in Chalcedon, opposite Constantinople. The situation changed completely with the new Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who, in a daring expedition into the heart of enemy territory in 623–624, defeated the Sasanians in Media. In 627–628 he

advanced toward Ctesiphon, but, after sacking the royal palaces at Dastagird, northeast of Ctesiphon, he retreated.

After the death of Khosrow II, Mesopotamia was devastated not only by the fighting but also by the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, by a widespread plague, and by the swift succession of Sasanian rulers, which caused chaos. Finally in 632 order was restored by the last king, Yazdegerd III, but in the following year the expansion of the Muslim Arabs began, and the end of the Sasanian empire followed a few years afterward.

Unlike the Parthians, the Sasanians established their own princes as rulers of the small kingdoms they conquered, except on the frontiers, where they accepted vassals or allies because their hold over the frontier regions was insecure. By placing Sasanian princes over the various parts of the empire, the Sasanians maintained more control than the Parthians had. The provincial divisions were more systematized, and there was a hierarchy of four units—the satrapy (*shahr* in Middle Persian), under which came the province (*ōstan*), then a district (*tassug*), and finally the village (*deh*). In Mesopotamia these divisions were changed throughout Sasanian history, frequently because of Roman invasions.

Many native tax collectors were replaced by Persians, who were more trusted by the rulers. In addition to the many tolls and tariffs, corvée, and the like, the two basic taxes were the land and poll taxes. The latter were not paid by the nobility, soldiers, civil servants, and the priests of the Zoroastrian religion. The land tax was a percentage of the harvest, but it was determined before the collection of the crops, which naturally caused many problems. Khosrow I undertook a new survey of the land and imposed the tax in a prearranged sum based on the amount of cultivable land, the quantity of date palms and olive trees, and the number of people working on the land. Taxes were to be paid three times a year. Abuses were still rampant, but this was better than the old system; at least, if a drought or some other calamity occurred, taxes could be reduced or remitted. Although information is contradictory, it appears that religious communities other than the Zoroastrian one had extra taxes imposed on them from time to time. This was especially true of the growing Christian community, particularly in the time of Shāpūr II, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Religious communities became fixed under the Sasanians, and Mesopotamia with its large Jewish and Christian populations experienced changes because of the shift in primary allegiance from the ruler to the head of the religious group. The exilarch of the Jews had legal

and tax-collecting authority over the Jews of the Sasanian empire. Mani, the founder of the Manichaean religion, was born in lower Mesopotamia, and his religion spread quickly both to the east and west, even before his death. In its homeland, Mesopotamia, it came under severe persecution by the priests of the Zoroastrian religion, who viewed Manichaeism as a dangerous heresy. Christianity, however, was viewed not as a heresy but as a separate religion, tolerated until it became the official religion of the enemy Roman Empire; Christians were then regarded as potential traitors to the Sasanian state. The first large growth of Christianity in Mesopotamia came with the deportation and resettlement of Christians, especially from Antioch with its patriarch, during Shāpūr I's wars with the Romans. In a synod convened in 325, the metropolitan see of Ctesiphon was made supreme over other sees in the Sasanian empire, and the first patriarch or catholicos was Papa. In 344 the first persecutions of Christians began; they lasted with varying degrees of severity until 422, when a treaty with the government ended the persecutions.

The earliest contemporary mention of Christians in Mesopotamia is in the inscriptions of Kartēr, the chief Zoroastrian priest after the reign of Shāpūr I. He mentions both Christians and Nazareans, possibly two kinds of Christians, Greek-speaking and Syriac-speaking, or two sects. It is not known which groups are meant, but it is known that followers of the gnostic Christian leaders Bardesanes (Bar Daiṣān) and Marcion were active in Mesopotamia. By the 5th century the Church of the East dominated Mesopotamia, formally constituting itself in 410 at Ctesiphon. It simultaneously adopted the Nicene Creed, which had been formulated in the Roman Empire under the oversight of Emperor Constantine I, but by 424 it was asserting its autonomy from the Roman imperial church. A few years later the imperial church affirmed a dogmatic teaching that Mary was *Theotokos* (Greek: "birth-giver of God"). While the Church of the East was not directly involved in that debate, its theological tradition maintained a strict separation of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ, and, therefore, in its view, Mary could have given birth only to his human nature. The theological division between the two entities would prove decisively divisive. After about 485 the Sasanian government was satisfied that the church in its domains was not loyal to Constantinople. The Church of the East thereafter received at least some support and recognition from the Sasanian kings, whose divine right to rule was likewise pronounced by its bishops. Further persecutions were not state-inspired but rather prosecuted by the Zoroastrian clergy. At the end of the Sasanian period, however, the Church of the East was fighting the miaphysites, now called Jacobites,

more than the Zoroastrians. The Jacobites had established a network of monasteries, especially in northern Mesopotamia, introducing institutional competition with the Church of the East.

Ethnicity became less important than religious affiliation under the Sasanians, who thus changed the social structure of Mesopotamia. The Arabs continued to grow in numbers, both as nomads and as settled folk, and Arabic became widely spoken. King Nuʿmān III of the Arab client kingdom of the Lakhmids of Al-Ḥīrah in southern Mesopotamia became a Christian in 580, but in 602 he was deposed by Khosrow II, who made the kingdom a province of the empire. This act removed a barrier against inroads by Arab tribesmen from the desert, and, after the union of Arabs in the peninsula under the banner of Islam, the fate of the Sasanian empire was sealed. The Muslims, on the whole, were welcomed in Mesopotamia as deliverers from the foreign yoke of the Persians, but the conversion of the mass of the population to Islam did not proceed rapidly, mainly because of the well-organized Christian and Jewish communities. The arrival of Islam, of course, changed the history of Mesopotamia more than any other event in its history.

Richard N. Frye

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