# Ancient Mesopotamia

*A Reading A–Z Level Z1 Leveled Book*
*Word Count: 1,672*

## Connections

### Writing

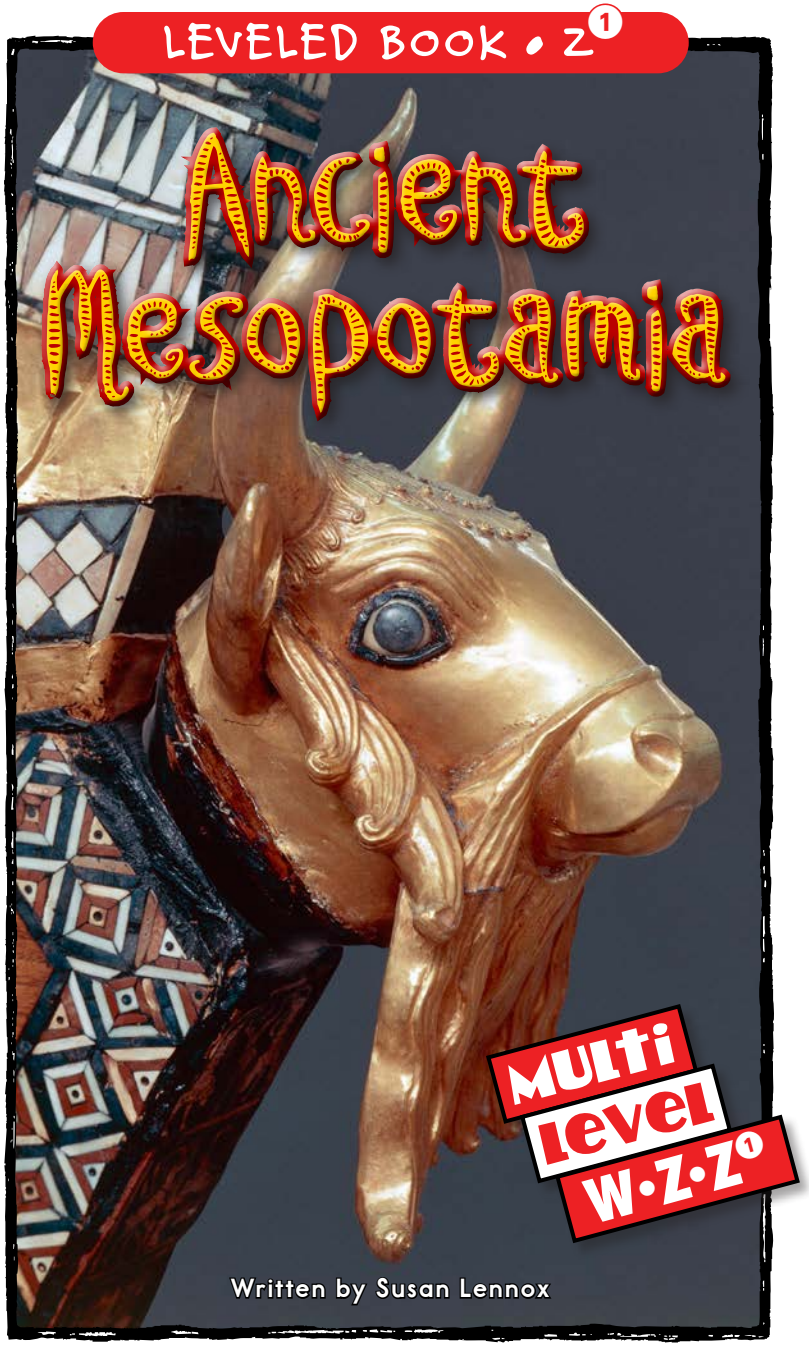
Write an essay describing the significance of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where the ancient Mesopotamians settled.

### Social Studies

Name another important contribution of the Sumerians. Write a script for a commercial to advertise this new technology. Present it to your class.

Reading A–Z

Visit www.readinga-z.com
for thousands of books and materials.




www.readinga-z.com

# Ancient Mesopotamia

Written by Susan Lennox

**www.readinga-z.com**

## Focus Question

What were the important features of ancient Mesopotamia?

## Words to Know

| | |
|---|---|
| alloy | nomadic |
| city-states | phonologic |
| civilized | pictographs |
| commerce | smelted |
| cuneiform | stele |
| demigod | ziggurat |

Front cover: An ornate bull's head decorates a harp owned by a Sumerian princess of Ur.

Title page: A sculpture of a lion-headed eagle was discovered at an ancient Sumerian archaeological site.

Page 3: A clay tablet was used to record rations and goods. The images were inscribed using a sharp instrument.

**Photo Credits:**
Front cover: © DEA PICTURE LIBRARY/De Agostini/Getty Images; title page: © DEA/A. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini Picture Library/Getty Images; page 3: © Ann Ronan Pictures/Print Collector/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; page 5: © CM Dixon/Print Collector/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; page 6: PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy Stock Photo; page 7 (main): © DEA PICTURE LIBRARY/De Agostini Picture Library/Getty Images; page 7 (inset): © KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP/Getty Images; page 8: © Prisma/UIG/Universal Images Group/Getty Images; page 9: dpa picture alliance archive/Alamy Stock Photo; page 10: © DEA/G. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini/Getty Images; page 11: © CM Dixon/Print Collector/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; page 12: © Gianni Dagli Orti/REX/Shutterstock; page 13: © Bettmann/Getty Images; page 15: © iStock/fotofrog; page 16 (top): © DEA/A. DE GREGORIO/De Agostini/Getty Images; page 16 (center): © iStock/SvetlanaK; page 16 (bottom): © iStock/TimAbramowitz; page 17 (top): © iStock/MACIEJ NOSKOWSKI; page 17 (center): © iStock/1001nights; page 17 (bottom): © iStock/benedek; page 18: © Leemage/Corbis Historical/Getty Images; page 19: Classic Image/Alamy Stock Photo

Ancient Mesopotamia
Level Z1 Leveled Book
© Learning A–Z
Written by Susan Lennox



www.readinga-z.com

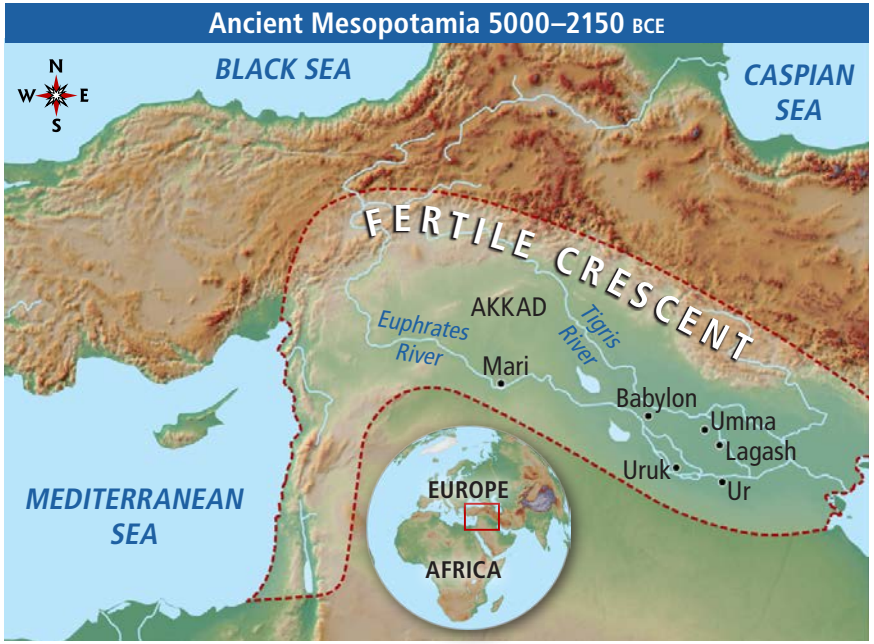
### Correlation

| LEVEL Z1 | |
|---|---|
| Fountas & Pinnell | W–X |
| Reading Recovery | N/A |
| DRA | 60 |

## Table of Contents








The name Mesopotamia means "the land between two rivers," referring to its location between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

## Introduction

Human beings have existed for nearly two hundred thousand years. They did not, however, form **civilized** societies until relatively recently. Historians define a civilized society as one that maintains rules and policies that help groups of people live and work together.

One of the earliest examples of a civilized society is that of ancient Mesopotamia. Occupying present-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Kuwait, Mesopotamia was the birthplace of civilization. This civilization brought about advancements that helped shape society as we know it today.

## The Ubaid

The heart of ancient Mesopotamian civilization was nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. The first people to inhabit Mesopotamia settled the southernmost region of the crescent in what is now Iraq and Kuwait. Modern archaeologists uncovered ancient stone tools, bricks, and pottery at the Tell al 'Ubaid (TEL EL oh-BAYD) site near the Euphrates River. The artifacts were the only sources of information about the lives of these ancient people. The items show that farming settlements existed as early as 5000 BCE. Researchers named the settlers the Ubaid after the site where the artifacts were found.

A small mosaic box thought to be a case for a musical instrument depicts life in early Mesopotamia.



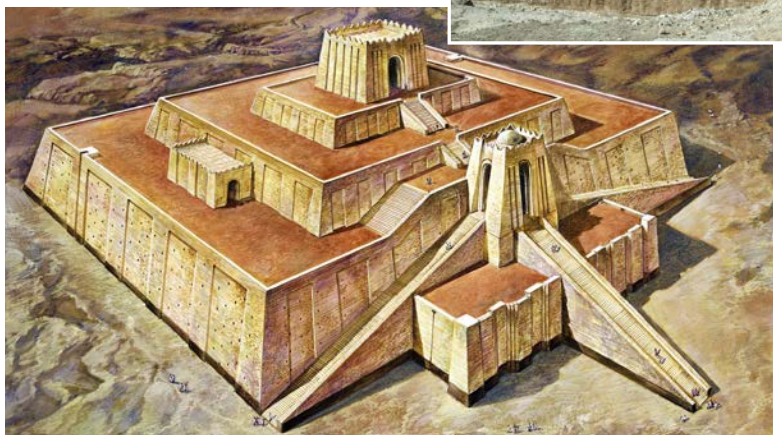
The Ubaid were the first people to tame and master the land known as Sumer. Before the Ubaid formed settlements, they and other Sumerian tribes were **nomadic** hunters and gatherers, roaming from place to place. Their travels were determined by weather and the availability of food and water. Eventually, the Ubaid developed ways to sustain themselves in one place. They drained marshes and grew crops in the fertile soil. They constructed irrigation canals to channel water to drier areas. In addition, they made pottery from river clay and wove baskets from reeds that grew in shallow water.

Copper lion heads were commonly used as protective guardian figures on Mesopotamian structures.

The river's bounty not only met their personal needs but also provided goods for trade with travelers. Major trade routes wound from Asia and Europe through the rich plains of Sumeria. Items that the Ubaid could not grow or make themselves were obtained from traders. Cedar from Lebanon and metals from other regions were highly sought by the Ubaid.

## Uruk, the First City

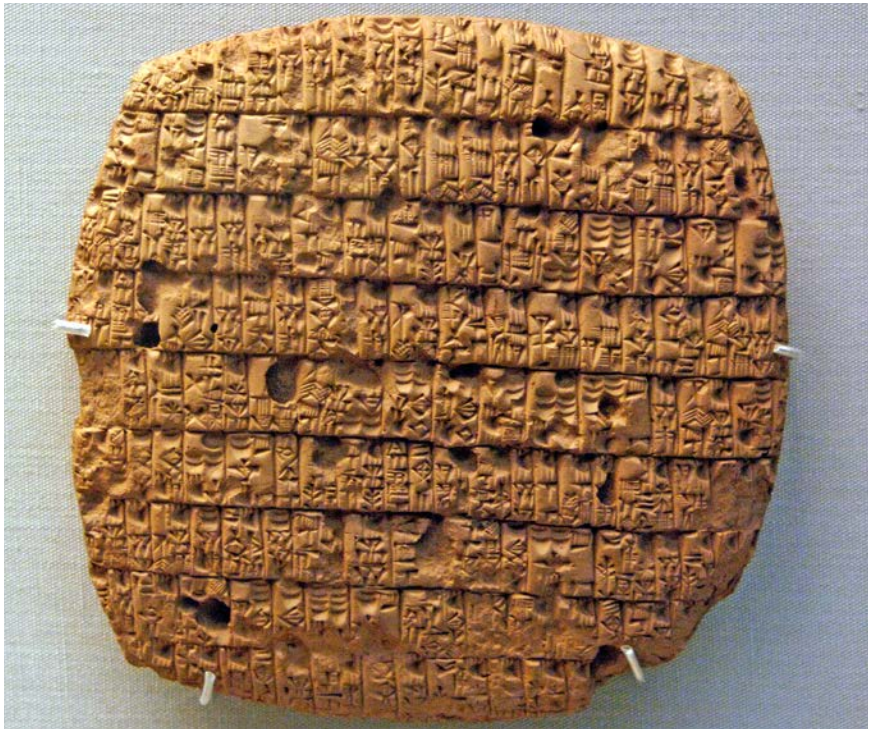
Over the years, more and more Sumerian settlements sprang up in the Fertile Crescent. A number of these settlements grew to become true cities and eventually **city-states**. The most influential was the city of Uruk (modern-day Warka, Iraq). From 4100 through 3000 BCE, Uruk was the area's center of authority and trade. At one point, Uruk had up to eighty thousand inhabitants. The city covered more than 2.6 square kilometers (1 sq. mi.) and boasted monumental buildings made of mud bricks. A multitiered **ziggurat**, or temple, served as a center of worship and sacrifice. It and other important structures were decorated with painted clay mosaics and relief carvings.



A drawing (main) shows a reconstructed ziggurat from ancient Mesopotamia. The stone base of Uruk's ziggurat still remains at its original site (inset).



Uruk was also where Mesopotamian **pictographs** first appeared. This early written language grew out of Uruk's role as a center of **commerce**. Simple images were marked on clay tablets to tally workers' rations and as a record of goods. Over the next thousand years, pictographs evolved into a system of writing known as **cuneiform**. For the first time in human history, symbols were used to stand for sounds rather than objects. The symbols could be used to write in any language.



An account of monthly grain rations was written in cuneiform script on a clay tablet around 2350 BCE.

This **phonologic** system had several advantages over a pictographic system. Since the same set of symbols could be shuffled to form different words, fewer symbols were needed. The system also made it easier to express abstract concepts that would be difficult to show as pictures.

Clay tablets inscribed with wedge-shaped cuneiform symbols provide information about Sumerian life during that period. Residents of Uruk and other city-states within Sumeria lived in structured societies. At the highest level was a priest-king. That person led various other ranking officials, such as a leader of the plow, leader of the law, and so on. Women of that era were granted many of the same privileges as men. Trade became an important means for establishing the roles of city rulers. Leaders sought more and more luxury items to show off their influence and power.

## Ancient Paycheck

Beveled-rim bowls were mass-produced in Uruk. They were used throughout the region as measuring and rationing tools to pay workers since wages at the time were calculated in bowls of grain. The clay tablet was used for keeping account of the rationed goods.



One of the most renowned and prominent rulers was King Gilgamesh (Bilgames in Sumerian). Gilgamesh is believed to have ruled Uruk around 2700 BCE during the Early Dynastic Period (2900–2350 BCE). He became an epic hero of song and legend. Poems were written about his 126-year reign. He was said to be a **demigod**, the son of King Lugalbanda and the Sumerian mother-goddess Ninsumun. Gilgamesh is credited with building the massive wall that protected Uruk. That wall still stands today.

## The Epic of Gilgamesh

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a collection of ancient Mesopotamian poems that tells the exciting adventures of an ancient king's battles, struggles, and achievements as he strives to attain immortality.

It is also believed to be the oldest surviving literary work in history. Stone tablets inscribed with individual poems date back to about 2100 BCE. A total of twelve tablets relate tales of Gilgamesh as he built the great wall of Uruk, battled and then befriended the wild man Enkidu, and fought the monstrous demon Humbaba.

The epic tale describes Gilgamesh wearing the skins of lions he slew.

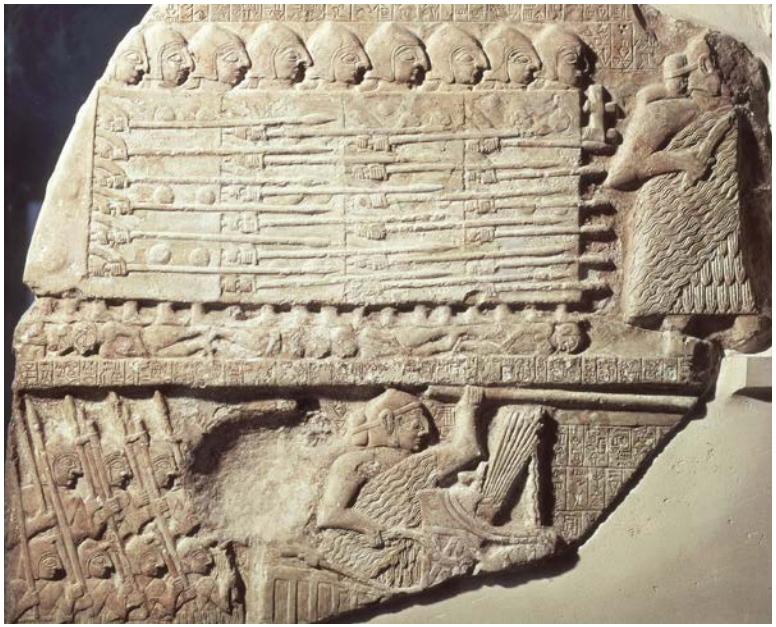
A carved image from about 600 BCE shows King Gilgamesh engaged in battle with the wild man Enkidu.

Modern archaeologists have long struggled to separate fact from fiction regarding Gilgamesh. It is unlikely, for instance, that he ruled for over a century. Recent findings by a German team of archaeologists, however, do support details found in the ancient poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In 2003, the team claimed to have uncovered the tomb of Gilgamesh beneath an ancient Euphrates riverbed. They found specific structures described in the epic verse. These finds prove that Gilgamesh did at one time actually live.



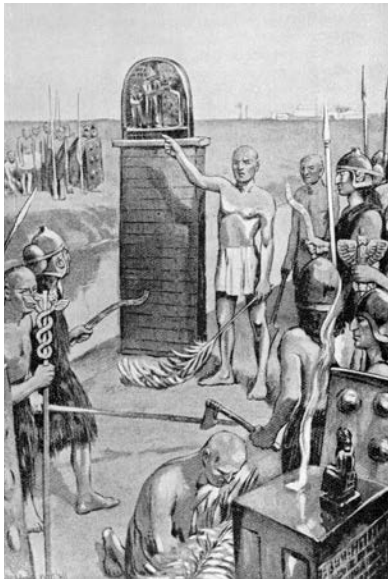
## Warring City-States

As the Sumerian city-states expanded and thrived, they began to compete with each other for control and influence over the region. War became more and more common. The earliest detailed record of Sumerian warfare shows a battle between the Mesopotamian city-states of Lagash and Umma in 2525 BCE. Figures and writing inscribed on an upright stone column called a **stele** (STEE-lee) show copper-helmeted infantrymen carrying swords, spears, and shields into battle. Military leaders rode in wheeled carts pulled by pairs of onagers, a native species of donkey.



This fragment from a stele is one of the oldest known historical documents. It shows scenes of war between Lagash and Umma.

Trade routes were vital for supplying the materials needed to craft the tools of warfare. Blacksmiths had discovered that two soft metals, copper and tin, could be **smelted** together to create a relatively hard substance. This **alloy**, known as bronze, was well suited for making swords and spear tips. Tin, however, was rare. It could only be obtained from traders from central Asia or Europe. Disrupting trade routes was a common strategy among feuding city-states. They knew that a lack of smelting materials would put the opposing army at a distinct disadvantage.



A Sumerian priest points to a stele marking the boundary between Umma and Lagash. The two city-states were in constant dispute over possession of land.

The Sumerians' constant fighting came to an end when King Sargon of Akkad (in southern Mesopotamia) took control of the region in about 2340 BCE. His conquest united the city-states into the Akkadian Empire. Sargon maintained order and control by placing key trusted allies in positions of power throughout the kingdom. Sargon's descendants continued this practice.




The Akkadian empire lasted until 2150 BCE. At its peak, it stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west and Arabia in the south to Iran in the east and the Anatolian Peninsula in the north.

The Akkadians did not speak Sumerian. However, they adapted the Sumerian cuneiform script to write in their own language. The Sumerian language was only used by scholars and literary scribes as part of official and religious ceremonies.

The very first literary works in Sumerian of which the author was known were poems written by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna. She was a high priestess in the city of Ur. Many of her poems praised the goddess Inanna, the most popular deity in Mesopotamia. Literacy was highly valued in Mesopotamia, as was shown by an extensive library in the city of Mari. The library held over twenty thousand cuneiform tablets.

## Prosperity and Advancement

Peace during the Akkadian empire brought progress to Mesopotamia. Under Akkadian rule, Mesopotamia created the first postal system. Clay tablets were inscribed with cuneiform messages, then wrapped in clay envelopes. An envelope was marked with the seal of the sender and the name and address of the recipient. The message could only be read by the recipient because the clay envelope had to be broken in order to get what was inside.

A centralized government was established, along with enforced laws and regulations. Trade networks expanded, and commerce boomed. Personal property featured relief figures. These ornate images served much more than a decorative purpose. The figures were made by cylinder seals—carved tubes that were pressed into clay and used to show ownership.

This 2,300-year-old letter is written in cuneiform script on a clay tablet.



An ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seal was the signature of all Sumerians.

The seals were used not only to indicate property rights but also to conduct day-to-day business in the empire. Documents and transactions were approved by pressing one's seal into the clay.

The Mesopotamians also developed the idea of numerical place value. Their counting system was a base sixty, or sexagesimal, system. The way we measure time and calculate angles uses this same system, which originated thousands of years ago.

### A System of Sixty

We use numerical base systems when we count certain objects. For example, when counting dozens of eggs, we use base twelve: twelve eggs equal one dozen.

When we count time, we use a system devised by the ancient Mesopotamians—base sixty. There are sixty seconds in one minute and sixty minutes in one hour. Why did the Mesopotamians use base sixty? Historians aren't quite sure, but one theory is that sixty can be split evenly so many ways, which made it easy to do math in a world without calculators.

The Sumerians' invention of the wheel was one of the most important technological advances in human history.

Around 3500 BCE, the Sumerians began using a round flat mechanical device to make clay bowls. The potter's wheel sat horizontally on an axis and, when spun, allowed the potter to make a bowl with even edges and surfaces.

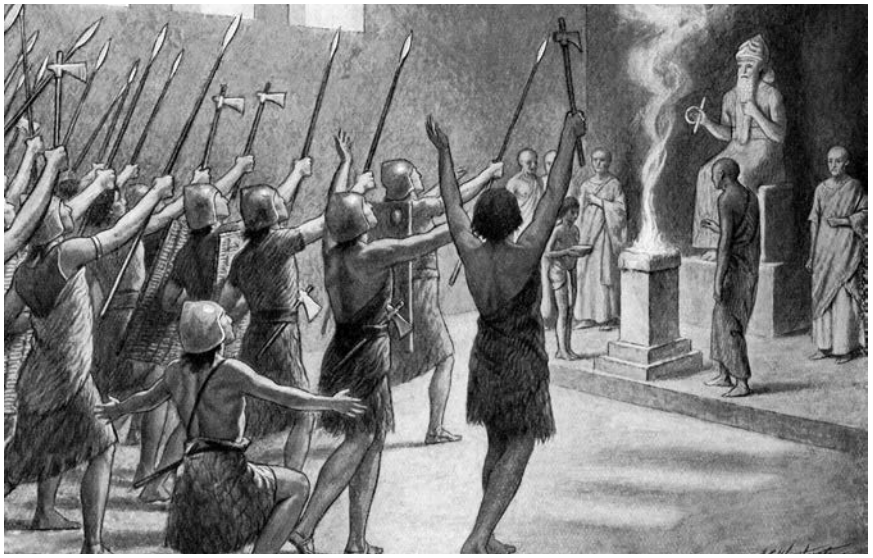
It took a while for the Sumerians to realize they could use it as a way to easily move objects and transport people. After much experimenting, the Sumerians tried attaching one wheel to each side of a single axle. The result was a device that made it easy to carry loads. The cart rolled across the ground with minimal effort. Other civilizations copied the Sumerians' invention, and wheels were soon used across the civilized world.



## Fall of an Empire

The Akkadian Empire ended about 2150 BCE after many internal uprisings and an invasion by the Gutians (GOO-tee-uhnz), who were nomads from the mountains to the north. Gutian war parties held regular raids on the outer reaches of the kingdom. As a result, trade slowed and fields lay untended. The Akkadian ruler at that time, Shar-Kali-Sharri, struggled to maintain control as the Gutians intruded farther into Mesopotamia. Eventually, the Gutian nomads took over Akkad, and the Akkadian Empire collapsed.

An ancient statue depicts Gudea, a Gutian prince who ruled Lagash between 2144 and 2124 BCE.



Sumerians pray to their gods for victory in battle against the Gutians.

The barbaric Gutians had little understanding of how a civilized society functioned. They were poor administrators. They allowed the canal network to fall into disrepair and brought on a terrible famine. Their 125-year rule of Sumer led to what came to be known as the Dark Age of Mesopotamia. It was not until the seventeenth century BCE under the reign of King Hammurabi that Mesopotamia would regain its stature as a thriving empire called Babylonia.

A winged bull with a human head is an Assyrian guardian figure from the gate of the palace near Nineveh, Iraq.



## Glossary

**alloy** *(n.)* a metal that is a combination of two or more metals (p. 13)

**city-states** *(n.)* cities or urban areas that act as independent countries (p. 7)

**civilized** *(adj.)* having an advanced level of social order and cultural development (p. 4)

**commerce** *(n.)* the buying and selling of goods; business or trade (p. 8)

**cuneiform** *(n.)* a system of writing made up of wedge-shaped characters, used in parts of the ancient Middle East (p. 8)

**demigod** *(n.)* a being from mythology who is part human and part god (p. 10)

**nomadic** *(adj.)* moving from place to place without a permanent home (p. 6)

**phonologic** *(adj.)* of or relating to the study of speech sounds within or among languages (p. 9)

**pictographs** *(n.)* symbols or pictures that represent words or ideas (p. 8)

**smelted** *(v.)* melted or fused using extreme heat (p. 13)

**stele** *(n.)* a large, upright slab or column of rock, usually inscribed with designs or words that commemorate something or someone; stela (p. 12)

**ziggurat** *(n.)* a rectangular structure in ancient Mesopotamia with steps up the sides and a temple at the top (p. 7)