

## Chapter 1

# Beginnings, Modern and Ancient

### 1. What is Iraq?

The modern state of Iraq is located in western Asia in the region now called the Near or Middle East, bordered on the north by Turkey, the east by Iran, the south by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and on the west by Jordan and Syria. It is approximately 1390 km from north to south and 1250 km from east to west, covering an area of about 441,839 sq km. Its present boundaries were first drawn in 1918–1919 by British administrators who sought to construct a state there from former provinces of the Ottoman Empire following their military occupation of them in 1917. Their administration was granted international authority by the victorious powers in the First World War, especially England, France, and the United States, in a series of peace conferences beginning in 1920. These eventually gave Britain “mandatory” power over Iraq, recognizing the occupation of the land by the British military and abrogating a secret agreement made with France and Russia in 1916, according to which northern Iraq would be given to France after victory in the war.

“Mandate” was a new term put forward by England and France, in deference to the American war aim of self-determination for all peoples, to replace older words like “colony” or “protectorate.” It implied that the British government would prepare Iraq for independence at a later date, as the British government believed that the peoples living the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire should not be allowed self-determination as to what sort of government they wanted.

Like most international boundaries, the borders of Iraq were matters of convention and history. The convention behind them was a series of arbitrary decisions by British administrators as to where they should go. Their history was in part former provinces of the Ottoman Empire and in part the British administrators' awareness of the ancient past of the region: the modern boundaries included ancient lands such as Sumer and Akkad, Babylonia and Assyria, and had as well certain natural features that defined them.

The southern part of Iraq is a fertile alluvial plain created by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flow across Iraq, the Tigris for 1418 km, the Euphrates for 1212 km, to empty ultimately in the Arab/Persian Gulf. As they approach the gulf, these two great waterways join 109 km north of the Gulf and branch out into myriad channels to form a vast marsh, most easily navigable by boat. Until recently, this marsh region was inhabited by a distinct people called the Marsh Arabs, or Ma'dan, whose culture was centered on a riverine way of life: fishing, trapping, bird catching. Their homes, utensils, and furnishings were made from the ubiquitous reeds of the marshes. Some of the earliest representational art from Iraq shows elaborate reed dwellings similar to those of the marsh Arabs, and ancient Mesopotamian poetry speaks of the inhabited world as if it were dry land heaped up by a creator god in a primeval marsh.

North of the marshes, the alluvial plain is well suited to agriculture. Rainfall in southern Iraq, as in most of the Middle East, is insufficient for agriculture, so artificial methods of watering crops are necessary. This means trapping and diverting the water from the rivers and redeploying it for cultivation. In southern Iraq, this was traditionally done by constructing channels and basins to carry and hold the water, and weirs or other barriers to catch, divert, or release the water where and when needed.

North of Baghdad, the plain gradually turns into a broad steppe, stretching to the foothills of the mountain ranges to the north and east, and continuing up the Euphrates in a narrow band into Syria in the west. The Euphrates rises in Anatolia and flows in a broad, curving, shallow channel south and east towards the Gulf, today drawing close to the Tigris near Baghdad. With its two main tributaries, the Balikh and Khabur in Syria, it forms a vast watershed plain, today known as the Jezirah, excellent

for agriculture and animal husbandry, with easy communication along the river banks or between rivers by well-established tracks. The Tigris rises in Anatolia and flows through a more deeply cut channel south. Its main tributaries, the Upper and Lower Zab and the Diyala, flow into it from the east, cutting through mountain ranges to form natural lines of communication between the plain and the Iranian uplands. Because these tributaries flow directly from the mountains, the Tigris in particular is prone to massive flooding in the spring when the snow melts from the peaks.

The rivers of Iraq have determined its history in three main ways. First, the Euphrates has been an important channel of communication with northern Syria, Anatolia, and the Mediterranean. Second, the Tigris and its tributaries have been important channels of communication north and northeast. Third, the rivers made possible human life on the plain, blessed with rich soil annually renewed by the rivers.

Beyond the plain of Iraq, to the west, south, and southwest, stretch inhospitable desert for hundreds of kilometers. To the east, north, and northeast the plain rises to foothills that quickly turn into mountain ranges, whose upthrust dramatically separates Iraq from what are now Iran and Turkey. Small wonder then that human beings living in ancient times on the plains of Iraq thought that this was the center of the world, ringed by desert, mountains, and oceans. For them, all that lay beyond was foreign and strange, the source of exotic materials, strange beasts, and the abode of brutish men.

So it was that when the British administrators drew their boundaries, they were following the approximate boundaries of long-dead ancient cultures rather than the current realities of the region, with its patchwork of speakers of Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish, its mixed Muslim, Jewish, Christian and pagan population, and its complex tribal divisions. To some, the ancient past of the region was a unifying factor in the face of many conflicting allegiances and ways of life. Indeed, the potential political and social usefulness of the remote, pre-Islamic, pre-Christian, and pre-Jewish past was soon to be seized upon by various states and peoples of the Middle East and the Balkans for their own political and cultural purposes. But this lay ahead. The land of Iraq, as it was created

after World War I, was a product of colonial expediency, a desire to protect British interests, and, to a lesser extent, a desire to plan for exploitation of its oil (at that time most British oil was imported from the United States).

The word “Iraq” was first regularly used for this area after the Arab-Muslim conquest of 637. Though it appears to be an Arabic word, no one knows what it means. Medieval Arab geographers proposed various origins and significances for it, which show only they were making their explanation up by comparing Iraq to other words with the same consonants in them. One of the most widely accepted explanations is that the word means arable land along a major river, vaguely corresponding to English “alluvium,” but this explanation may only have been reasoned backwards from the reality of Iraq itself. An ancient Greek term, “Mesopotamia,” has also been used to refer to Iraq, especially by European scholars. Originally this word name referred to what is now northern Syria, specifically, the expanse of land enclosed by the big bend there of the Euphrates River, but gradually it broadened and moved east to mean roughly the plain and uplands between the Tigris and Euphrates, from the Gulf to the Taurus mountains. Many writers today use “Mesopotamia” when referring to Iraq before the Muslim conquest and “Iraq” for the land thereafter. Although this is a convenient historical distinction, similar to “Gaul” versus “France,” a few writers prefer to say “ancient Iraq” instead of “ancient Mesopotamia.” This is because they would rather draw no line of separation between the pre-Islamic and Islamic past of the region.

## **2. The Birthplace of Civilization**

To visitors from parts of the earth with more temperate climates and more varied landscapes, the hot, featureless plain of southern Iraq may not seem like a place hospitable to the development of civilization. Nor are there splendid ruins to admire or reflect on, like pyramids or castles, such as could evoke a glorious past. In fact, the only features of the landscape that attest to the remote antiquity of human habitation there are hills or rises covered with debris, such as pottery and broken clay bricks, sometimes lying in the midst of faint outlines of ancient habitations, walls,

and watercourses. These mounds are all that remain of once bustling cities and towns, home to a vibrant and long-lived literate culture.

The Tigris and Euphrates, like other restless flowing water, are likely to shift their courses to new ones, sometimes by many miles. By such a change, the Euphrates flows today far to the east of its course in historical antiquity, so that what were once cities, towns, and villages are now ruins left in remote desert. The advantage of this is that many of the most important ancient cities in southern Iraq were left unmolested for thousands of years, until modern times. Archaeologists can explore them unhampered by modern settlement, so they have yielded most of what we know about Mesopotamian history and culture. In more recent times, these remote fields of ruins have become easy prey to large-scale looting and destruction, so that most of their vast and rich historical record is now lost forever. In the north, where the river channels are more stable, ancient settlements and cities often underlie modern ones, so may be more difficult to explore.

Still, one may ask, why was civilization born on this featureless plain ahead of all other places in the world? There are at once many answers and no answer to this simple question. Numerous answers have come from exploration in the soil of Iraq and of neighboring lands, for the Middle East has been explored intensively for more than a century with this and other historical questions in mind. Some of these theories may be drawn together into a story that seems reasonable and convincing in its outline, even if the details are frustratingly vague. On the other hand, there is no answer, for we describe events and changes without really knowing why they happened, and refer to people whom we know very little about. New discoveries and reinterpretation of old ones give us fascinating evidence to work into the story, but leave the reader with a sense of incompleteness that only the imagination can fill in.

### **3. Production of Food: An Important Transition for the Human Race**

Of the many ways to describe human beings of former times and how they lived, one long popular has been with reference to their technology.

One speaks of a “Stone Age,” implying that people mostly used stone tools, or a “Bronze Age,” when people mostly used bronze ones. Another way has been to focus on religious belief, such as “Christian,” “pagan,” “pre-Islamic.” In older books one spoke of oriental and occidental peoples or the “great white race” versus the “Semites.” More recently, a useful way of describing ancient human beings has been their mode of subsistence, that is, by what means they get the food and drink they need to survive. Some early cultures depended entirely on hunting game, for example, others on farming or stockbreeding. Still others depended on a combination of these strategies.

The importance of subsistence is that for nearly all of its history, the human race subsisted the same way, by hunting game and gathering naturally occurring plants. This mode of subsistence was very well suited for the human race and ensured its survival for more than 99% of its existence. Nor is hunting and gathering a demanding way of life; to judge from contemporary cultures, hunters need exercise their skill only two or three days out of seven to provide sufficiently for their community. They kill and collect only what they need to live and do not reduce their resources for sport or entertainment. Hunting populations, moreover, tend to remain fairly stable: hunters usually have small families, their children, especially girls, mature late; some hunting peoples even abandon infants to control population. Therefore, for most of its history, we imagine that the human population and its subsistence strategies achieved a balance, and that only major natural events, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, epidemics, famines, or major changes in climate, could cause a change large enough to be noticeable thousands of years later in the archaeological record. The best-known example of a major natural change is glaciation, the spread of polar ice across north America and Europe. The ancient inhabitants of Iraq knew nothing of this, but they did believe that very ancient peoples lived much longer lives than they did, perhaps a dim memory of a long-ago time in which change in human society was much less rapid. Unlike us, however, they believed that people as they knew them had always lived the same way, not as hunters, however, but in cities, because, as city dwellers, they thought that human life began in cities.

About ten thousand years ago, peoples in the Middle East gradually developed a different way of living based on farming and management of domesticated animals such as sheep and goats. Some historians refer to this momentous, irreversible change in human behavior as a revolution, thereby implying abrupt and dramatic change. But this change was abrupt only in comparison with the hundreds of millennia preceding when human beings had lived by hunting and gathering. One of the first places this change in behavior was observed and studied in detail was Iraq, in excavations of small settlements in the foothills or hilly flanks of the Zagros mountains. The change to a settled, productive way of life has also been studied in Iran, Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine, so this was a regional development throughout western Asia at roughly the same time, though it had local forms. What did it mean?

First, people settled in small villages in areas where certain wild grains, such as barley, and wild animals, such as sheep and goats, occurred naturally. These resources could be harvested in their natural state. They could also be managed: animals could be penned, herded, and bred. Preferred grains could be sown in specially prepared plots for greater productivity, away from less desirable plants. Domestication of plants and animals caused genetic and morphological changes in them through a process of selection: barley could be selected for preferred strains, such as those with softer husks and larger ears of grain; animals could be bred for quality of wool or hair, fattiness or yield of meat. Stable village life could be based on both sowing grains and managing animals, though in some dry seasons the animals might need to be taken away from the village to better pastures. Although this might describe the transition from hunting and gathering to pastoral and village life, it does not explain why this transition occurred when it did. In short, nobody knows why.

Change in the structure of human society accompanied change in subsistence. For much of the year, agricultural work is systematic and unrelenting: preparation of the soil, sowing, weeding, keeping off pests, harvesting, threshing, and storage. This pattern of life brings with it an ethos of working for what you gain, of saving, and of hopeful reliance on uncontrollable forces like weather and productivity of the soil and herds. There is less of the hunter's sense of participating in nature and

more of the farmer's of manipulating nature. There is greater emphasis on fertility of field and herd than for the hunter, who need rely only on natural replenishment of what he takes. Larger families became the norm for farmers because even small children can be useful in field work and herding. With larger families come earlier physical maturity and steady, even exponential, population growth. Villages may become larger or more villages may appear, as people are not willing to walk more than half a day or so to their fields from their homes.

New technology appears as well: first, simple tools for tilling the soil and reaping, then, most important, pottery. Clay vessels allow storage, transport, preparation, and mixing of both solids and liquids. Pottery allows also cooking and thus diversification of food intake. One can soak or roast grains that would otherwise be inedible. One can make, transport, and store dairy products, including cheeses and related milk products. One can ferment grain into a powerful beverage, beer or ale, that goes beyond slaking thirst to altering mood and behavior, thereby acquiring social and ritual functions. Pottery can be used as a means of aesthetic expression in its shape, manufacture, and decoration. Ceramic production can be the work of a few for the use of many, as anyone can make a simple pot but large or fine ones require special skills.

So it was, in this period of change ten thousand years ago, in the foothills above the plains of Iraq, that small villages of mud brick sprang up, their houses consisting of a few rooms and an open area, pens for animals and storage bins for foods, surrounded by an agricultural hinterland extending perhaps several hours' walk. So forceful was this new trajectory of human life that in a few places, such as Jericho in Jordan and Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia, good-sized towns appeared with comparatively large populations and even specialized structures for some particular purpose in communal life. But these were exceptional cases. Most villages were small, with a few dozen houses at most. The houses were of the same size and plan, suggesting an egalitarian society with communal as well as individual household storage facilities. Perhaps, too, resources, such as fields, were managed communally.

## 4. Settlement in the Plains

A second important transition was the move of farmers and stock breeders down from the foothills onto the plains of Iraq. No one knows why or when this occurred, as the earliest settlements in the plain may be buried deep in the alluvium. One can guess that settled life on the southern plain began about 5000 B.C.E., much earlier in the north. Why move to the plain? No one knows. One guess is population increase, but no evidence has been produced from the foothills that the population had become too large to be sustained locally. The important point is that once human beings had mastered the skills of sustaining themselves, they could live in areas where the wild ancestors of the domesticated plants and animals they had come to depend on did not naturally occur. Humans could bring the new forms of plants and animals with them to the plain, thus causing a permanent change in its ecology. They were responding to the challenge of their environment and changing it and controlling it for their advantage.

In Iraq, moreover, this environment presented unique challenges that were not easily mastered. The dearth of rainfall required irrigation. In principle, irrigation need only be a matter of digging a ditch to bring water to a field. In practice, larger ditches require community participation in their construction and decisions about who is to receive how much water when. Irrigation in southern Iraq is complicated by the rising of the water in the early spring, and its low point in the hot season, when water is most needed, so decisions need to be made about the use of water that may affect more than one family. In any case, the availability of water from the rivers, if properly managed, meant that villages appeared along natural watercourses with regular intervals of distance between them. Even if the watercourses are long gone, the riverine pattern of settlement can be traced on the ground and maps drawn showing where ancient settlement was. Furthermore, quantification of the relative sizes of the settlements can reconstruct an emerging hierarchy among them, though the earliest settlements in the plain may have mostly been the same size.

## 5. A Durable Peasant Culture

The settlement of farmers on the Mesopotamian plain was a success, the first stage in a story of human activity there that continues to the present day. We need not imagine, of course, that the plain lay empty before people began to till its soil — there was game, such as gazelle, in abundance, marsh creatures such as turtles and birds, and especially fish in the rivers and swamps. Thus an ancient Mesopotamian fisherman's ditty invites the fish into his traps:

*Let your acquaintances come,  
Let those precious to you come,  
Let your father and grandfather come,  
Let the son of your older brother come, the son of your younger  
brother come,  
Let your little ones and your big ones come,  
Let your wife and children come,  
Let your comrades and friends come,  
Let your brother-in-law and your father-in-law come,  
Let the group around your doorway come,  
Do not leave anyone around you out, not a single one!\**

But with agriculture and stock breeding, the land was changed forever. These two modes coexisted well and might be carried on by members of the same family. Flocks of sheep and goats could graze widely on the grassy plains in the spring, until the grass withered in the early summer. They could even graze off the first springtime shoots of the grain crops, thereby increasing the already high yields of the fields by causing a thicker second growth and fertilizing them as well. In summer the animals could be moved to higher pastures or fed on stored grain and its by-products from milling and brewing. In later periods for which written sources are available, the two main products of the Mesopotamian plains were wool and barley, supplemented by wheat and the fruit of the date palm, the abundant fish of the rivers, sheep and goats, and the hunting of game.

For centuries, then, stretching into millennia, a lowland peasant culture diffused throughout Iraq and far beyond into northern Arabia

and the steppe of northern Syria. In northern Iraq, agriculture could be sustained by wells and rainfall, meaning less intensive fieldwork than in the irrigated south and the potential for more extensive cultivation. Even if the south had smaller fields under cultivation, those fields had much higher productivity per hectare than the northern steppe, which, however, had the advantage of greater potential area for cultivation. The south probably had a higher population than the north, so extensive areas of the north may not have been cultivated at all, even at later periods. In the south, settlements were strung along natural watercourses as the basis for irrigation and transportation. In the north, settlements tended to be spread far across the landscape where wells could be dug. Material culture, south and north, befitted a peasant way of life: simple tools, practical pottery. What these peoples called themselves, what languages they spoke, what social institutions, spiritual life, and traditions they had, we know not. Since their shrines resembled houses and the plastic arts that have come down to use are mostly exaggerated representations of the female body, we surmise that their religious belief and practice focused on the forces most important to their way of life: fertility, procreation, the safety of the home hearth. Two aspects of it strike the modern observer: the longevity of this culture, perhaps a thousand years or more, indicating that a viable way of life had been successfully transplanted and transformed in the alluvial plain of Iraq and beyond, and its overall uniformity throughout Iraq, despite regional phases and variations. People might have continued to live this way of life indefinitely had not something extraordinary happened.

## 6. The First Cities

Nothing we see in the material remains of this nameless, long-lived culture gives a hint of the momentous changes that were to take place in southern Iraq. These led to the appearance of the first cities known anywhere in the world. An archaeologist of the future, studying the development of urban life on Manhattan island over a 300-year period, from 1650 to 1950, might well conclude that the massive and dramatic changes he sees in the archaeological record of the island began with

the immigration of new peoples, then took off with incredible rapidity: a woodland culture gave way to cultivated fields, then a town grew to a metropolis, covering the entire island with human habitation, all within a few generations. In fact, an older generation of historians was wont to explain change by immigration of new peoples, so believed that the impulse that led from villages and towns to a huge, fortified city in the Iraqi plain, swallowing up the villages around it, had to be the result of an influx of new people, whom they suggested came by sea or down from the mountains. Historians gave a name to this new people, the Sumerians, and spoke confidently of their “arrival” in Mesopotamia, transforming the plain of southern Iraq as the European settlers did Manhattan island, and in about the same span of time, beginning around 3600 B.C.E.

Truth to tell, this invasion was imagined; there is no real break in the material culture visible between the modest agricultural settlements on the plain and the gigantic city that was to grow up there and send out its colonies throughout Western Asia and perhaps beyond. New types of pottery appeared, for example, but these seem to be in response to new conditions and not as imports from abroad, nor do alien goods, techniques, and styles suddenly appear in any media. Rather, there seems to be a kind of quickening, an intensification of the earlier way of life, a realization of certain potentials it offered for change into a new, powerful and dynamic, and fundamentally different trajectory. The better analogy would therefore be if modern Manhattan had been created within three centuries by the indigenous peoples living there in 1600. How and why this happened in southern Iraq, ahead of anywhere else in the world, is one of the most fascinating riddles of antiquity. We can watch this process happen, however, and measure certain aspects of it, through the patient labor of archaeologists who have carefully examined the remains of the earliest great city, Uruk, a place that has had the same name for at least five thousand years. Furthermore, archaeologists are tracing remains of the culture of Uruk in Syria, Iran, and Anatolia, where it spread rapidly and intrusively: for a short period Mesopotamian Uruk was the greatest city on earth. How did this happen?

Two kinds of information from the ground help explain this phenomenon. First was excavation in Uruk itself, concentrated on a series

of major public buildings in the center of the city which must, in their day, have dominated the city and been visible from afar across the plain. While most of Mesopotamia was still a peasant culture in the fifth millennium B.C.E., monumental buildings were already under construction at Uruk. Around 3600 B.C.E. a large temple was constructed of stone laboriously transported from some 80 km away in the desert. More buildings were soon added or replaced the older ones. One of these was constructed on a gigantic irregularly shaped platform oriented to the points of the compass, over 12 m high, accessible by a ramp and staircase. It was evidently a sanctuary, perhaps to the sky god, consisting of a long chamber with an altar at one end and chambers to the side, its walls decorated with recesses. Close by was another great shrine where several large buildings, one for example 54.25 x 22.5 m on a side, were constructed as well. The walls and colonnade of one of these, the columns of which were 3 m in diameter, were decorated with cone mosaics (see Chapter 15). The countless man-hours of labor and resources that went into creating these structures had to be taken from other activities and compensated in some way: whose was the organizing and creative genius behind the planning and construction of these remarkable buildings?

Another approach to understanding the creation of the city Uruk has been to study the countryside that lay around it and to map settlements by size, historical period, and distribution. From this it appeared that throughout the plain a hierarchy of settlements was developing during the mid-fourth millennium B.C.E.: instead of villages of equal size across the landscape, some villages grew larger, and smaller settlements appeared to be dependent on them. One could even construct an index of villages, towns, and cities, calculating from their inhabited surface. This could be done because these settlements lay mostly away from modern habitations, often in open desert, so had not been disturbed for thousands of years. By this way of measuring, Uruk appeared just as extraordinary, a city surrounded by more than 10 km of fortifications, drawing into itself the neighboring towns and villages so as to leave a kind of empty corona of land around, a city many times larger than any other settlement observed in Iraq at the time. Thus evidence from within Uruk and from its rural hinterlands converge to suggest it was an unique agglomeration that

transcended the millennial limitations of its environment, but had grown out of that environment, carrying further than other settlements changes that were occurring elsewhere in a more tentative form, both in Iraq and in southwestern Iran.

More clues could be brought to bear on this mystery. A spectacular innovation of this Uruk civilization, as we may call it, was the world's first representational art. By this is meant art that purports to show people, buildings, and animals as they appeared, rather than symbolically or abstractly. An assortment of images from early Uruk show us niched buildings, as the archaeologists had discovered, and hierarchically arranged animals, such as sheep. Other images show a male dignitary being drawn about in a kind of sledge or braining prisoners with a mace. Two of the most dazzling discoveries, the Uruk vase and Uruk head, are discussed in Chapter 15. Both were found in the temple precinct later sacred to the goddess Inanna, of whom a Sumerian poet wrote, comparing her to a thunderstorm with its pelting rain:

*When you have spewed your venom on the land like a dragon,  
When you roar like thunder at the earth, nothing that grows can  
withstand you!\*\**

No longer was this a world of small farmers. It was now dominated by an urban elite, with access to foreign materials with which to fashion its imagery, with control of specialized craftsmen to make this imagery, and the will and means to mobilize tens of thousands of human beings in its service. How, then, was this stratified society achieved and how did this elite maintain itself over vastly greater numbers?

For such a question only broad theories can offer answers, not art and architecture. A particularly persuasive theory is based on the capacity of the southern plains to produce an agricultural surplus. Decisions about how to deploy this surplus could lie at the heart of the new social stratification. The mechanism we see in action is referred to as “redistribution,” a process whereby some people produce raw materials for food and others decide what is done with this production and oversee its distribution to people who do not produce food, either in raw form, as basic rations, or in prepared form, such as bread and beer. This would

presuppose, in the case of a city, extensive capacity for management of people, sophisticated storage and accounting, and important facilities for mass production of prepared food, plus some way of distributing it.

Many writers on early economy believe that such a system as here envisioned could not effectively be imposed by brute force on human beings, rather, there must have been some ideological basis, a set of beliefs, that persuaded people where they belonged in a stratified society and impelled them to act on those beliefs. Some scholars therefore see the great investment in the temples at Uruk, and their dominating position in the city, as indicative that religious belief provided this non-economic means of regulating production and distribution. One does not have to look far in ancient Mesopotamian literature to find the notion that human beings were created to serve the gods, like so many workers or drones, and that human rulers were the vicegerents of the gods on earth, the stewards of their households, the shepherds of their human flocks. To some materialist modern scholars, these metaphors were merely excogitated to shore up an existing social order; to others, they reflect, however, dimly, the reality of this vanished world, in which human society and that of the gods were paradoxically a continuum with a sharp dividing line between them: human beings were mortal and of limited power, the gods were immortal and had unlimited powers.

Social stratification and the ability to command vast resources of human beings, livestock, and food, the means to obtain foreign commodities and to command the skill to work them, the will, sophistication, and talent to express a vision of one's society in symbolic visual imagery are but aspects of the Uruk achievement about which we wish we knew more. Two more aspects of this culture deserve our attention: its effort to colonize Western Asia, and the invention of writing, the most powerful tool ever conceived and applied by the human race.

One of the major surprises of the archaeology of the Uruk culture was the discovery of distant settlements that were unmistakably colonies of the city of Uruk. One of these in Syria, for example, on a promontory above the Euphrates, was planned and built on virgin soil, with fortifications, residential quarters, administrative buildings and material culture obviously originating in Uruk and having no prior

relation to the existing culture of the region. This was not a long-lived undertaking, perhaps a century and a half, then it was abandoned and never thereafter occupied. Archaeologists soon traced a network of such settlements, some primary in the sense that they seem directly dependent on Uruk, others secondary in the sense that they may have been sent out from other colonies. Some have an admixture of local cultural remains, some, like the settlement in Syria, seem pristine. These colonies tended to follow natural riverine or overland routes and to be situated at key points along these routes, but in quite different environments. There seem to be many of these settlements, some of a large size.

What was the purpose of these colonies? One answer has been trade, the desire to secure resources not available in Mesopotamia. This seems a poor explanation for a settlement on the mid-Euphrates, however, which would have no resources Mesopotamia had not, nor, of course, is it necessary to have colonies to have trade. Other suggestions include an attempt to control as much territory as possible or a diaspora based on excess population in Uruk or some sort of social change or discontent. From the perspective of four millennia, the discovery of contemporaneous seventeenth-century English settlements in Holland and the north shore of Massachusetts might be equally perplexing and the explanations no less creative. The reality is, however, that the Uruk culture suddenly spread far and wide in the Middle East, and as suddenly collapsed and vanished.

The invention of writing was the most lasting and portentous achievement of the Uruk culture. Most people think that writing has been invented more than once, like other great inventions, in different places, but in any case the world's earliest writing is found at Uruk, at the beginning of one of the world's longest continuous traditions of its use. Speculations on the origins of writing abounded in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and modern times. They fall into two main categories, a belief that God gave people writing or that writing began with drawing pictures and developed from that to "true" writing. The second belief has been the most popular and is still found in many modern books. Uruk has provided the evidence that the pictographic theory is wrong.

We see now that the earliest writing was not pictures, but mostly abstract symbols and a few representational drawings. Furthermore, there were several principles at work in the earliest writing which were purely arbitrary, non-pictorial symbolic techniques: signs could be combined with other signs, inscribed within each other, reversed, inverted, tilted, or have certain parts of them emphasized with lines or other marks. These and other principles of writing are well known from the later descendant of this earliest writing system, referred to as cuneiform writing. The fundamental principles of the later forms of this writing are present already in the Uruk writing, so it must have been a system invented using a set of intellectual considerations, a deliberate and ingenious effort to represent language, not ideas or images, in symbolic form, across space and time. The system was complex and probably known only to a few. It gave its adepts a new kind of power and authority inaccessible to anyone else; as a Mesopotamian scribe expressed it, people could remind their rulers of what they had forgotten and frame their thoughts in a new medium.

Writing was not invented in a vacuum but appeared at roughly the same time as representational art, in the same place and social context. Thus this was a society in which the power of symbolism was appreciated and exploited to an exceptional degree. Furthermore, other symbolic systems of recording information already existed: clay tokens enclosed in marked balls of clay had been used to record quantities of goods in separate transactions, and seal impressions made in the surface of the clay indicated the authority or identity behind the transaction. This usage was ingenious but had important limitations, not least of which was that no independent concept of number had yet been arrived at, so separate forms and types of counters were required for each commodity. Depending on the commodity, the same symbol could stand for 10 or 18, for instance. Traces of this case-specific numeration survived in later cuneiform writing, but their historical importance was not recognized. Nor did this usage allow one to indicate more specifically even the basic nature of the transaction: income, out-go, balance. The use of tokens was not writing, but another technique

of symbolic representation that was used parallel to writing for a while and later abandoned, though it periodically reappeared in Iraq thereafter. The technique of using tokens certainly influenced the invention of writing, most importantly in the shape of some of the numerals, the possibility that some counters were scored or marked rather the way later signs were, and in the fact that later rectilinear cuneiform tablets were in reality flattened spheres in which the surface of the tablet was regarded as continuous horizontally and vertically. Yet these tokens were not the ancestor of writing in the sense that writing grew out of the use of tokens. Perhaps we can say that writing was invented in response to some of the same needs met by the use of tokens, but in full awareness of the limitations of that usage. We know nothing of the inventor.

Surveying the culture of Uruk as a whole, we find that it developed and contained in some form many of the fundamental elements of later Mesopotamian culture: social, political, spiritual, material, not to mention the tendency to expand beyond Mesopotamia whenever circumstances permitted. The more we know, the more we see this period as the real beginning of Mesopotamian history. Yet, so far as we can tell, later Mesopotamian tradition had no memory of it. There was no recollection of the primacy of Uruk, her expansion and colonies, her fertile and accomplished use of symbols, her teeming thousands of workers or of their service to their gods and goddesses. All that we see of this marvelous efflorescence and mysterious collapse and disappearance is the discovery and reconstruction of modern archaeological investigation. Had the site of ancient Uruk not been scientifically excavated and the finds preserved and studied, none of this story would be known.

The site of Uruk, excavated by German archaeologists over nearly a century, has been spared extensive looting since the Iraq war owing to the protection afforded it by local leaders of tribes whose men have been employed for generations excavating the site; see also Chapter 14.

## **Bibliographical Note to Chapter 1**

For the earliest history of the human race, Robert J. Braidwood's *Prehistoric Men* (Glenville, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975) is still both readable and authoritative, though dated in many respects. For the Middle East, Hans J. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East: 9000–2000 BC* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) is good for the prehistoric periods. For early farming, Stuart Struever, ed., *Prehistoric Agriculture* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1971), though dated, contains a good diversity of essays. A more recent survey of the issues will be found in Andrew Sherratt, "Climatic Cycles and Behavioral Revolutions: The Emergence of Modern Humans and the Beginnings of Farming," *Antiquity* 71 (1997), 271–287. For the civilization of Uruk, Mitchell S. Rothman, ed., *Uruk Mesopotamia & Its Neighbors, Cross-Cultural Interaction in the Era of State Formation* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2001), will give an idea of ongoing research. Illustrated surveys of the periods covered by this chapter include Susan Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and David and Joan Oates, *The Rise of Civilization* (New York: Elsevier Phaidon, 1976). An excellent textbook account is Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), Chapter 2.

## **Translated Excerpts**

\*From the edition of M. Civil, *Iraq* 23 (1961), 156–157 lines 14–23.

\*\*From the edition of William W. Hallo, *The Exaltation of Inanna, Yale Near Eastern Researches* 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 14 lines 9–10.