

PRENTICE HALL LITERATURE



WORLD MASTERPIECES

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LITERATURE

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PLATINUM

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

THE BRITISH TRADITION

WORLD MASTERPIECES

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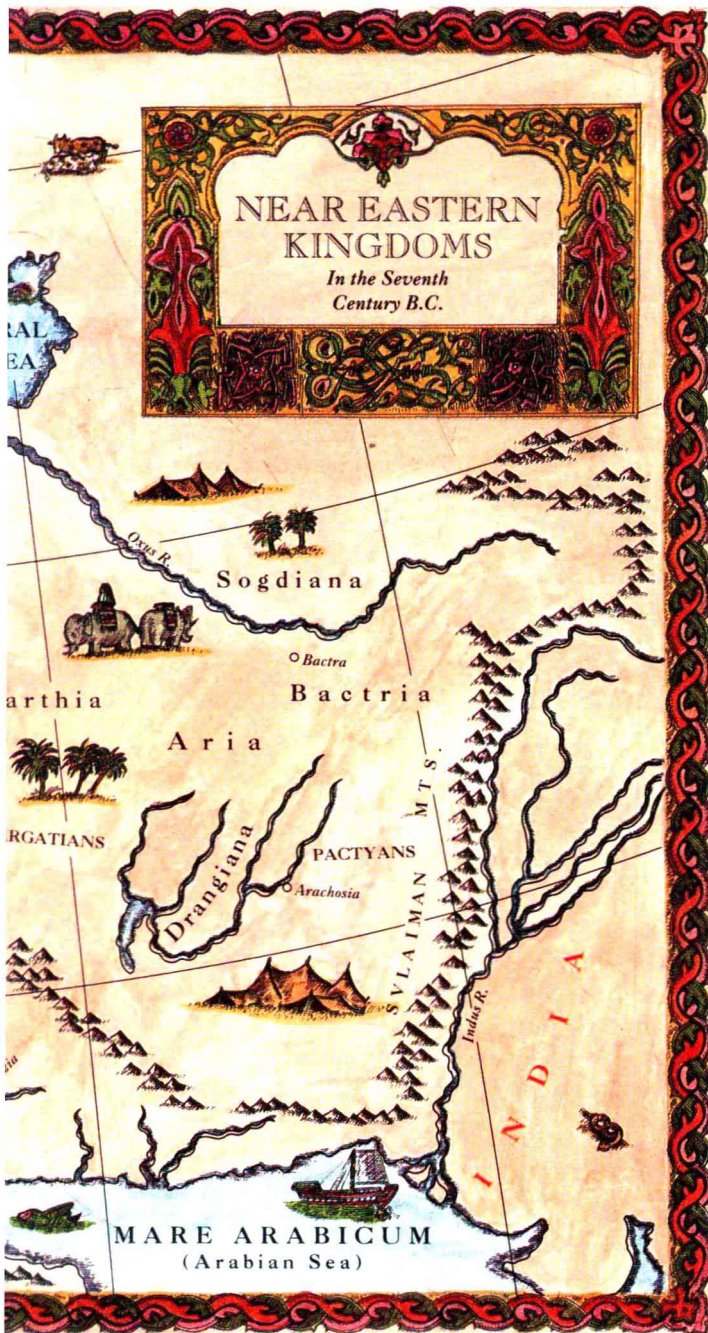
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Beginnings in the East

3000 B.C.–A.D. 1400

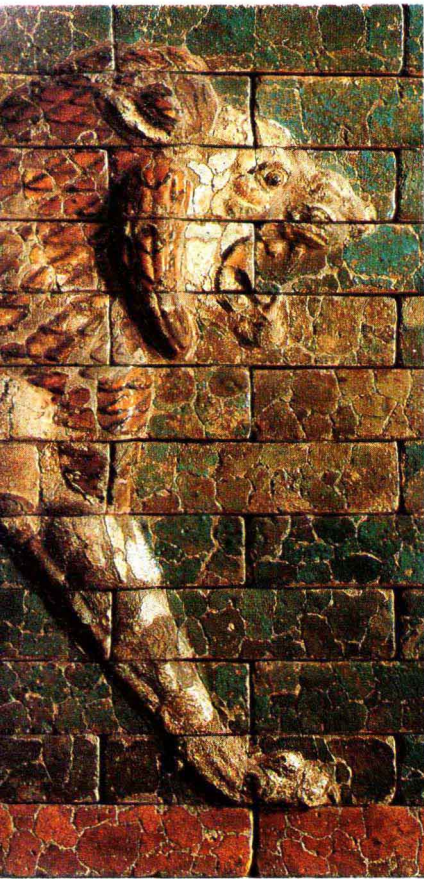




WALKING LION IN RELIEF (detail)

Babylonian mosaic on walls of processional road

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



SUMERIAN, EGYPTIAN, AND HEBREW LITERATURE

3000 B.C.—c. 100 B.C.

When the journey was accomplished they arrived at Uruk, the strong-walled city. Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Urshanabi, climb up onto the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk.”

—from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

MESOPOTAMIA

The Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization

The quotation on the preceding page comes from an epic about an ancient Sumerian king. That it boasts about a city is no accident. When we speak of civilization, we usually mean cities, or at least the high degree of social organization that cities suggest: temples, palaces, arts and crafts, technology, and systems of writing.

About 4,000 years ago, several major civilizations developed in the river valleys of southwest Asia. The region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in modern Iraq, was one of these sites: Mesopotamia, the Greek name for this region, means “the land between the two rivers.”

The southeastern part of this region, Sumer, was flat, dry, and arid; moreover, it lacked timber and minerals. Yet overflows from the two rivers made the land fertile and the resulting mud could be baked into brick. To capitalize on these floods, however, farmers had to build irrigation ditches. The need to coordinate the digging and repair of these ditches may have prompted the growth of Sumerian civilization.

The Sumerians

Scholars disagree about the identity of the people or peoples who spoke and wrote Sumerian. In the succession of civilizations that arose in this region, however, theirs was the first, and it influenced the Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations that followed.



As the founders of Mesopotamian civilization, the Sumerians have many “firsts” to their credit. They probably invented the region’s earliest system of writing, which developed from simple pictures to the cuneiform, or wedge-shaped, signs familiar to archeologists.

Furthermore, the professional writers called scribes learned this system in Mesopotamia’s first schools, called *edubbas*. These scribes were the guardians of Sumeria’s rich literary tradition. While much literature circulated in oral form, scribes also recorded and transmitted many of the culture’s epics, hymns, historical accounts, myths, and proverbs.

Besides cuneiform writing, the Sumerians developed a system of numeration based on sixty. The Sumerian system led to our 60-second minute, 60-minute hour, and 360-degree circle.

Perhaps the most famous Sumerian “first” was the creation of cities. Many of these urban centers, which were like mini-nations, were actually within sight of one another. At first the main institution in each city was a temple. This temple contained the image of the city’s chief god—the Sumerians worshiped many gods—and housed the temple staff: priests who ruled the city, scribes who recorded the crops the temple received from its lands, and artisans. The largest building in the temple complex, and in the city itself, was the ziggurat, a six- or seven-story tower that Sumerians believed the gods could use as a ladder in descending from heaven.

As city-states grew and came into conflict, military leaders replaced priests as rulers. These military leaders eventually became kings, and the king’s palace, with its own staff, rivaled the temple in importance.

The Babylonians

One of the greatest Mesopotamian kings was Sargon (c. 2340 B.C.). His new capital city of Agade, located near the site of Babylon, was north of Sumer—the northward shift of power in Mesopotamia would become a continuing trend. Agade contributed its name to the region where Sargon lived (Akkad) and the language he spoke (Akkadian). A Semitic language, related to modern He-



GROUP OF SUMERIAN FIGURES FROM IRAQ: TELL ASMAR
c. 2700–2500 B.C.
The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

brew and Arabic, Akkadian in its various forms became the tongue of the new northern centers of power, Babylon and Assur.

Those who spoke Semitic languages, the Semites, were nomadic peoples who migrated to Mesopotamia from the Arabian peninsula. One such group, the Amorites, founded the village of Babylon on the Euphrates River (c. 2000 B.C.). Not until the reign of Hammurabi (c. 1750 B.C.), however, did Babylon come into its own as the capital of a great empire. Hammurabi’s kingdom encompassed Sumer, Akkad, and the northern cities of Assur and Nineveh. His famous legal code, engraved on a stone slab, contains 282 laws covering all aspects of daily life. It was based on a principle described as “an eye for an eye”: A person who blinded another was punished by being blinded.

Babylonians had a reverent attitude toward Sumerian culture. Babylonian scribes, for instance, learned the Sumerian language and preserved its literature. However, they were far more than slavish imitators. Reshaping a group of Sumerian tales about a legendary king, these scribes fashioned a brilliant Akkadian work that we know today as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (see page 15).

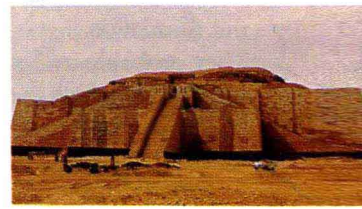
Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hebrew

(3000 B.C.–100 B.C.)



Mesopotamian carving of Gudea, a Sumerian city-god, c. 2130 B.C.

Ziggurat at Ur



–3000

–2500

–2000

HISTORY

- Sumerian city-state develops
- Old Kingdom in Egypt begins
- Promulgation of laws by Sumerian states is common
- Sargon, an Akkadian soldier, establishes the first empire in recorded history
- First Intermediate period in Egypt begins
- Dynasty of Pharaohs in Egypt begins
- Middle Kingdom in Egypt begins
- Second Intermediate period in Egypt begins
- Hammurabi, King of Babylon, establishes empire in Mesopotamia

HUMAN PROGRESS

- Sumerians develop written language in cuneiform
- Egyptians develop hieroglyphics
- Systematic astrological observations in Egypt, India, and China begin
- Egypt introduces calendar of 365 days
- Wrestling becomes the first sport
- The horse is domesticated
- First libraries in Egypt are opened
- The earliest Egyptian mummies are made
- Percussion instruments are added to Egyptian orchestral music
- The Hebrew patriarch Abraham migrates from Ur
- Irrigation-system in Egypt begins

LITERATURE

- Gilgamesh, legendary King of Uruk, rules
- Scribal schools in Sumeria are established
- Written composition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* begins
- Hammurabi's code is established