VISITORS TO CAPITAL CITIES LIKE WASHINGTON, PARIS, AND ROME TODAY stroll along broad avenues among huge buildings, dominating gateways, and imposing sculpture. They are experiencing "controlled space," a kind of civic design that rulers and governments—consciously or not—have used since the time of the Assyrian city-state to impress or even intimidate. Ninth-century BCE emissaries to Nimrud, for example, would have encountered breathtaking examples of this ceremonial urbanism, in which the city itself is a stage for the ritual dramas of rulership that reinforce and confirm absolute power. Even from a distance, as they approached the city, these strangers would have seen the vast fortifications and temple where the king acted as intermediary between citizen and god. Following a processional way, they would have passed sculpture extolling the power of the Assyrian armies and then come face-to-face with lamassus, extraordinary guardian-protectors of palaces and throne rooms. These creatures may combine the bearded head of a man, the powerful body of a lion or bull, the wings of an eagle, and the horned headdress of a god (fig. 2-1). Often lamassus have five legs, so that when seen from the front they appear immobile, but when viewed from the side they seem to be in motion, vigorously striding. The sheer size of the lamassus—often twice a person's height—symbolizes the strength of the ruler they defend. Their forceful forms and prominent placement contribute to an architecture of domination. The exquisite detailing of their beards, feathers, and jewels testifies to boundless wealth, which is power. These fantastic composite beasts inspire civic pride and fear. They are works of art with an unmistakable political mission in just one of many cultures that rose and fell in the ancient Near East.

TIMELINE 2-1. The Ancient Near East. Beginning about 9000 BCE, early Neolithic civilization arose in the Fertile Crescent. After about 7000 BCE, many different peoples successively conquered and dominated Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).

THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Well before farming communities arose in Europe, agriculture emerged in the ancient Near East in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. The “crescent” stretched along the Mediterranean coast through modern Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, arched into central Turkey, and descended along the fertile plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (ancient Mesopotamia, the “land between the rivers”), sweeping through Iraq and a slice of western Iran to the Persian Gulf (Map 2-1).

The earliest settled farming communities arose about 9000 BCE, first in the hills above rivers and later in river valleys. In the Near East, agricultural villages gradually evolved into cities, where large populations were separated from outlying rural areas. Mesopotamia’s relatively harsh climate, prone to both drought and flood, may have contributed to this change there, as early agriculturists cooperated to construct large-scale systems for controlling their water supply. Trade among distant communities also increased. Farming spread from the Fertile Crescent and reached the Atlantic coast of Europe by about 5000 BCE.

Between 4000 and 3000 BCE, a major cultural shift took place in the Near East. Archaeologists have long believed that this change happened first in southern Mesopotamia, then spread northward. Excavations beginning in 1999, however, strongly suggest that the evolution of agricultural villages and cities occurred simultaneously and independently in the northern and southern regions of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). Prosperous cities and their surrounding territory developed into city-states, each with its own government; eventually, larger kingdoms absorbed these city-states. Urban life and population density gave rise to the development of specialized skills other than those for agricultural work, and social hierarchies evolved. Workshops for milling flour and making bricks, pottery, textiles, and metalware sprang up, and the construction of temples and palaces kept builders and artists busy.
Specialists emerged who controlled rituals and the sacred sites and who eventually became a class of priests. The people of the ancient Near East were polytheistic, worshiping numerous gods and goddesses, and they attributed to them power over human activities and the forces of nature. Each city had a special protective deity, and people believed the fate of the city depended on the power of that deity. (The names of comparable deities varied over time and place—for example, Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of fertility, love, and war, was equivalent to the Babylonians’ Ishtar, the Egyptians’ Isis, the Greeks’ Aphrodite, and the Romans’ Venus.) Large temple complexes—clusters of religious, administrative, and service buildings—developed in each city as centers of worship and also as thriving businesses. Religious and political power were closely interrelated.

Mesopotamia’s wealth and agricultural resources, as well as its few natural defenses, made it vulnerable to repeated invasions from hostile neighbors and to internal conflicts. Over the centuries, the balance of power shifted between north and south and between local powers and outside invaders (Timeline 2-1). First the Sumerians formed a state in the south. Then for a brief period they were eclipsed by the Akkadians, their neighbors to the north. When invaders from farther north in turn conquered the Akkadians, the Sumerians regained power locally. The Babylonians were next to dominate the south. Later, the center of power shifted to the Assyrians in the north, then back again to Babylonia, called Neo-Babylonia. Throughout this time, important cultural centers arose outside of Mesopotamia as well, such as Elam on the plain between the Tigris River and the Zagros Mountains to the east, the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia, and Persia, east of Elam. Beginning in the sixth century BCE, the Achaemenid Persians, a nomadic people from the mountains of modern-day Iran, forged an empire that included not only Mesopotamia but the entire Near East.

**EARLY NEOLITHIC CITIES**

One of the earliest Near Eastern cities, Jericho, located in today’s West Bank territory in Palestine, was home to about 2,000 people by around 7000 BCE. Its houses, made of mud bricks (shaped from clay and dried in the sun), covered 6 acres, an enormous size for that time. Ain Ghazal (“Spring of Gazelles”), just outside present-day Amman, Jordan, was even larger. That settlement, dating from about 7200 to 5000 BCE, occupied 30 acres on terraces stabilized by stone retaining walls. Its houses may have resembled the adobe pueblos that native peoples in the American Southwest began to build more than 7,000 years later (fig. 2-2). The concentration of people and resources in cities such as Jericho and Ain Ghazal was an early step toward the formation of the larger city-states that arose in Mesopotamia and later were common throughout the ancient Near East.

Among the objects recovered from Ain Ghazal are more than thirty painted plaster figures. Fragments suggest that some figures were nearly lifesize (fig. 2-3). Sculptors molded the figures by applying wet plaster to
Many ancient Near Eastern cities still lie undiscovered. In most cases an archaeological site in a region is signaled by a large mound—known locally as a tells, tepe, or huyuk—that represents the accumulated debris of generations of human habitation. When properly excavated, such mounds yield evidence about the people who inhabited the site. But critical information is lost when treasure hunters, who have no interest in the context in which they find things, loot sites for artifacts to sell on the international art market. Even scientific excavation destroys context, and subsequent investigators are forced to rely on the excavators’ detailed records. This is especially true at Chatal Huyuk, which was reburied after it was excavated in the 1960s.

SUMER

The cities and then city-states that developed along the rivers of southern Mesopotamia between about 3500 and 2340 BCE are known collectively as Sumer. The inhabitants, who had migrated from the north but whose origins are otherwise obscure, are credited with many firsts. Sumerians invented the wagon wheel and plow, cast objects in copper and bronze, and created a system of writing—perhaps their greatest contribution to later civilizations, though recent discoveries indicate that writing developed simultaneously in Egypt (Chapter 3). Sumerians pressed cuneiform (“wedge-shaped”) symbols into clay tablets with a stylus (writing stick) to keep business records (see “Cuneiform Writing,” opposite). Thousands of Sumerian tablets document the gradual evolution of writing and arithmetic, another tool of commerce, as well as an organized system of justice and the world’s first epic literature (see “Gilgamesh,” opposite).

The Sumerians’ most impressive buildings were ziggurats, stepped pyramid structures with a temple or shrine on top. The first such structures may have resulted from repeated rebuilding at a sacred site, with rubble from one structure serving as the foundation for the next; elevating the buildings also protected the shrines from flooding. Whatever the origin of their design, ziggurats topped by the flat plain proclaimed the wealth, prestige, and stability of a city’s rulers and glorified its protective gods. Ziggurats functioned symbolically, too, as lofty bridges between the earth and the heavens—a meeting place for humans and their gods. They were given names such as “House of the Mountain” and “Bond between Heaven and Earth,” and their temples were known as “waiting rooms” because priests and priestesses waited there for deities to reveal themselves. Ziggurats had impressive exteriors, decorated with elaborate clay mosaics—images made by small colored pieces affixed to a hard surface—and reliefs. The gods would have been pleased with all this handiwork, it was said, because they disliked laziness in their people.

Uruk (modern Warka, Iraq), the first independent city-state, had two large temple complexes in the 1,000-acre city. One temple complex was dedicated to Inanna, the goddess of love and war, and the other probably to the sky god Anu. The Anu Ziggurat, built up in stages over the centuries, ultimately rose to a height of about 40 feet. Around 3100 BCE, a whitewashed brick temple was erected on top that modern archaeologists refer to as the White Temple (fig. 2-5). This now-ruined structure was a simple rectangle oriented to the points...
CUNEIFORM WRITING
Sumerians developed a very early system of writing around 3100 BCE, apparently as an accounting system for goods traded at Uruk. The symbols were pictographs, simple pictures incised on moist clay slabs with a pointed tool. Between 2900 and 2400 BCE, the symbols evolved from pictures into phonograms—representations of syllable sounds—thus becoming a true writing system. During the same centuries, scribes adopted a stylus, or writing tool, with one triangular end and one pointed end. The stylus could be pressed rapidly into a wet clay tablet to create the increasingly abstract symbols, or characters, of cuneiform writing.

This illustration shows examples of the shift from pictograph to cuneiform writing. The drawing of a bowl, which means "bread" and "food" and dates from about 3100 BCE, was reduced by about 2400 BCE to a four-stroke sign, and by about 700 BCE to a highly abstract vertical arrangement. By combining the pictographs and, later, cuneiform signs, writers created composite signs; for example, a composite of the signs for "head" and "food" came to mean "to eat."

GILGAMESH
Among the many thousands of cuneiform tablets excavated thus far in Sumer, fewer than 6,000, containing about 30,000 lines of text, record religious myths, heroic tales, legendary histories, hymns, songs of mourning, and so-called wisdom texts, consisting of essays, debates, proverbs, and fables. These make up the world's oldest written literature, and they tell us much about Sumerian beliefs. Most are written as poetry, and some may have been performed with music.

The best-known literary work of ancient Mesopotamia is the Epic of Gilgamesh. Its origins are Sumerian, but only fragments of the Sumerian version survive. The fullest version, written in Akkadian, was found in the library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (ruled 669-c. 627 BCE) in Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik, Iraq). It recounts the adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary Sumerian king of Uruk, and his companion Enkidu. When Enkidu dies, a despondent Gilgamesh sets out to find the secret of eternal life from Utnapishtim and his wife, the only survivors of a great flood sent by the gods to destroy the world, and the only people to whom the gods had granted immortality.

In Tablet XI, the "Flood Tablet," Utnapishtim tells this story—with its many striking similarities to the Hebrew Bible's tale of Noah and the Ark. He describes building a huge boat and loading it with "all the seeds of living things," wild and domesticated beasts, and people who knew all the crafts. When the flood strikes:

For six days and seven nights
The wind blew; flood and tempest overwhelmed the land;
When the seventh day arrived the tempest, flood and onslaught
Which had struggled like a woman in labour,
Blew themselves out.
The sea became calm, the imhullu
Wind grew quiet, the flood held back.
I looked at the weather; silence reigned,
For all mankind had returned to clay.
I opened a porthole and light fell on my cheeks.
I bent down, then sat. I wept.
Henrietta McCall, Mesopotamian Myths, British Museum Publications in cooperation with University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, p. 48.

Gilgamesh ultimately abandons his quest for eternal life and returns to Uruk, having accepted his mortality and having recognized that the majestic city is his lasting accomplishment.
of the compass. An off-center doorway on one of the long sides led into a large chamber containing a raised platform and altar; smaller spaces opened off this main chamber. Courtyards and interior walls in both the Inanna and the Anu compounds were decorated with cone mosaics, a decoration apparently invented at Uruk (fig. 2-6). Artisans pressed thousands of baked clay cones like thumbtacks into the wet plaster walls so that the flat, colored “heads” created shimmering, multicolored designs. They decorated the exterior surfaces of ziggurats with paint and patterns of plain or colored bricks.

South of Uruk lay the city of Ur (modern Muqaiyir, Iraq), the birthplace of the patriarch Abraham, who founded the Hebrew people. About a thousand years after the completion of the White Temple, the people of Ur built a ziggurat dedicated to the moon god Nanna, also called Sin (fig. 2-7). Although located on the site of an earlier temple, this imposing mud-brick structure was elevated by design, not as the result of successive rebuildings. Its base is a rectangle 190 by 130 feet, with three sets of stairs converging at an imposing entrance gate atop the first of what were three platforms. Each platform’s walls angle outward from top to base, probably to prevent rainwater from forming puddles and eroding the mud-brick pavement below. The first two levels of the ziggurat and their retaining walls have been reconstructed in recent times; little remains of the upper level and temple.

Sculpture of this period was associated with religion, and large statues were commonly placed in temples as objects of devotion. A striking lifesize marble face from Uruk may represent a goddess and once have been part of such an image (fig. 2-8). The face would have been attached to a wooden head on a full-size wooden body. Now stripped of its original facial paint, wig, and inlaid (set-in) brows and eyes—probably with shell used for the whites and lapis lazuli for the pupils—it is a stark, white mask. Nevertheless, its compelling stare and sensitively rendered features attest to the skill of Sumerian sculptors.

A tall, carved, alabaster vase found near the temple complex of Inanna at Uruk (fig. 2-9) shows how Near Eastern sculptors of the time—and for the next 2,500 years—told their stories with great economy and clarity by organizing picture space into registers, or bands, and condensing the narrative, much as modern comic-strip artists do. Its lower registers show the natural world, beginning with water and plants that medical historians have identified as the pomegranate and the now-extinct silphium, plants used by early people both to control fertility and as fertility symbols. Above them, on a solid groundline, rams and ewes alternate, facing right. In the middle register nude men, facing left, carry baskets of foodstuffs. In the top register, Inanna is accepting an offering from a naked priest.

Size was associated with importance in ancient art, a convention known as hieratic scale, and the goddess dominates the scene. The stylized figures, which do not conform to natural appearances, are shown simultaneously in side or, profile view (heads and legs) and in three-quarter view (torsos), which makes both shoulders visible and increases each figure’s breadth. Inanna
stands in front of her shrine, indicated by two reed door poles hung with banners. Through the doorway her wealth is displayed, and behind the priest come others who bear offerings. The scene is usually interpreted as the ritual marriage between the goddess and a human during the fall New Year’s festival, meant to ensure the fertility of crops, animals, and people, and thus the continued survival of Uruk.

Limestone statues dated to about 2900-2600 BCE from the Diyala River Valley, Iraq, excavated in 1932-33, reveal another aspect of Mesopotamian religious art (fig. 2-10, page 34). These votive figures—images dedicated to the gods—represent an early example of an ancient Near Eastern religious practice: the placement in a shrine of simple, small statues of individual worshipers before a larger, more elaborate image of a god. Anyone who could afford to might commission a self-portrait and dedicate it to a shrine. A simple inscription might identify the figure as “One who offers prayers.” Longer inscriptions might recount in detail all the things the donor had accomplished in the god’s honor. Cuneiform texts reveal the importance of approaching a god with an attentive gaze, hence the wide-open eyes seen here. Each sculpture served as a stand-in, at perpetual attention, making eye contact, and chanting its donor’s praises through eternity.

The sculptors of the votive figures followed the conventions of Sumerian art—that is, the traditional ways of representing forms with simplified faces and bodies and dress that emphasized the cylindrical shapes. The figures stand solemnly, hands clasped in respect. As with the face of the woman from Uruk, arched brows inlaid with dark shell, stone, or bitumen once emphasized their huge, staring eyes. The male figures, bare-chested and dressed in sheepskin skirts, are stocky and muscular, with heavy legs, large feet, big shoulders, and cylindrical bodies. The female figures at the left of the tallest male are as massive and square as the men. One wears a long sheepskin skirt and the other a short skirt that reveals her sturdy legs and feet.

The earliest pottery in the Near East dates to about 7000 BCE. Decorated vessels excavated in large numbers from gravesites indicate the development of pottery styles in various regions. One popular type of Sumerian painted ceramic was Scarlet Ware, produced from around 3000 to 2350 BCE (fig. 2-11, page 34). Designs on these vessels, predominantly in red with touches of black, were painted with colored mixtures of clay and water. Circles, herringbones, zigzags, diamonds, and other geometric patterns, as well as animal images, were common motifs. The vase pictured here is about a foot tall and includes human figures, which is unusual.
Votive statues, from the Square Temple, Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar, Iraq). c. 2900-2600 BCE. Limestone, alabaster, and gypsum, height of largest figure approx. 30" (76.3 cm). The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago.

Scarlet Ware vase, from Tutub (modern Tell Khafajeh, Iraq). c. 3000-2350 BCE. Ceramic, height 11 3/4" (30 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

The archaeologist's best friend is the potsherd, or piece of broken pottery. Ceramic vessels are easily broken, but the fragments are almost indestructible. Their earliest appearance at a site marks the time when people in the region began producing ceramics. Pottery styles, like automobile designs and clothing fashions today, change over time. Archaeologists are able to determine the chronological order of such changes. By matching the potsherds excavated at a site with the types in this sequence, they can determine the relative date of the site (see "How Early Art Is Dated," page 13).
From about 3000 BCE on, Sumerian artisans worked in various metals, including bronze and precious metals, often combining them with other materials. Many of their metal creations were decorated with—or were in the shape of—animals or composite animal-human-bird creatures. A superb example of their skill is a lyre—a kind of harp—from the royal tomb that scholars most recently identify with King Meskalamdug of Ur (c. 2550-2400 BCE), which combines wood, gold, lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan, and shell (fig. 2-12). From one end of the lyre projects the three-dimensional head of a bearded bull, intensely lifelike despite the decoratively patterned blue beard.

On the panel below the head, four horizontal registers present scenes executed in shell inlaid in bitumen (fig. 2-13). In the bottom register a scorpion-man holds a cylindrical object in his left hand. He is attended by a gazelle standing on its hind legs and holding out two tall cups, perhaps filled from the large container from
The distinctive design on the stone cylinder seal on the left belonged to its owner, like a coat of arms in the European Middle Ages or a modern cattle-rancher's brand. When rolled across soft clay applied to the closure to be sealed—a jar lid, the knot securing a bundle, or the door to a room—the cylinder left a raised image, or band of repeated raised images, of the design. Sealing discouraged unauthorized people from secretly gaining access to goods or information.

which a ladle protrudes. The scene above this one depicts a trio of animal musicians. A seated donkey plucks the strings of a bull lyre—showing how such instruments were played—while a standing bear braces the instrument’s frame and a seated animal, perhaps a fox, plays a small percussion instrument, perhaps a rattle. The next register shows animal attendants, also walking erect, bringing food and drink for a feast. On the left a hyena assuming the role of a butcher with a knife in its belt carries a table piled high with pork and mutton. A lion follows with a large jar and pouring vessel. In the top panel, facing forward, is an athletic man with long hair and a full beard, except for a wide belt, who is clasping two rearing human-headed bulls. Some of the imagery on the harp may have been inspired by the Epic of Gilgamesh (see “Gilgamesh,” page 31) with its descriptions of heroic feats and fabulous creatures like the scorpion man Gilgamesh met as he searched for his dead and departed friend Enkidu. With the invention of writing we are no longer dealing with the speculations of prehistory and can begin to study the iconography (the narrative and allegorical meaning) of art images with some confidence.

Because the lyre and others like it were found in graves and were used in funeral rites, their imagery probably depicts the fantastic realm of the dead, offerings to the goddess of the underworld, or a funeral banquet. The animals shown are the traditional guardians of the gateway through which the newly dead had to pass. Cuneiform tablets preserve songs of mourning from Sumer, which may have been chanted by priests to lyre music at funerals. One begins: “Oh, lady, the harp of mourning is placed on the ground”—and indeed this harp was so placed in a king’s grave.

About the time written records appeared, Sumerians developed stamps and seals for identifying documents and establishing property ownership. At first, Sumerians used simple clay stamps with designs incised (cut) into one surface to sign documents and to mark the clay sealing container lids and doorways to storage rooms. Pressed against a damp clay surface, the stamp left a mirror image of its distinctive design that could not be easily altered once dry. Eventually, temple record keepers redesigned the stamp seal in the form of a cylinder. Sumerian cylinder seals, usually less than 2 inches high, were made of a hard stone, such as marble, so that the tiny elaborate scenes carved into them would not wear away. The scene in figure 2-14 includes rearing lions fighting with a human-headed bull and a stag on the left, and a hunter on the right—perhaps a spoils-of-the-hunt depiction or an example of the Near Eastern practice of showing leaders protecting their people from both human and animal enemies as well as exerting control over the natural world.

AKKAD During Sumerian domination, a people known as the Akkadians settled to the north of Uruk and adopted Sumerian culture. Unlike the Sumerians, the Akkadians spoke a Semitic language (a language in the same family as Arabic and Hebrew). Under the powerful military and political figure Sargon I (ruled c. 2332–2279 BCE), they conquered the Sumerian cities and most of Mesopotamia. For more than half a century, Sargon ruled this empire from his capital at Akkad, the actual site of which is yet to be discovered. As “King of the Four Quarters of the World,” Sargon assumed broad earthly powers and also elevated himself to the status of a god, a precedent followed by later Akkadian rulers.

Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon I, was a major public figure who combined the roles of princess, priestess, politician, poet, and prophet and wielded exceptional power. During her lifetime, she was considered the embodiment of the goddess Ningal, wife of the moon god Nanna, and after her death she herself may have been elevated to the status of goddess. She was apparently the only person to hold the office of high priestess for the ziggurats of both Nanna and Anu, Sumer’s two most prestigious gods. She began the tradition of princesses serving as high priestesses, and she
complemented her father's political consolidation of his empire by uniting religious authority within it. Her hymns in praise of Sargon and Inanna are among the earliest literary works whose author's name is known. She is memorialized on several cylinder seals, as well as on an inscribed alabaster disk that bears her picture (fig. 2-15). The figures carved in high relief in a band across the middle of this disk are participating in a ritual at the base of a ziggurat, seen at the far left. A nude priest pours ceremonial liquid from a pitcher onto an offering stand. The tall figure behind him, wearing a flounced robe and priestess's headdress, is presumed to be Enheduanna. She and the two figures to her right, probably priests with shaven heads, each raise one hand in a gesture of reverent greeting. The disk shape of this work is unique and may have to do with its dedication to the moon god.

The concept of imperial authority was literally carved in stone in the Stele of Naramsin (fig. 2-16). This 6'/2"-foot-high stele, or upright stone slab, commemorates a military victory of Naramsin, Sargon's grandson. It is an early example of a work of art created to celebrate the achievements of an individual ruler. The sculptors used the stele's pointed shape, accommodating the carved mountain, as a dynamic part of the composition (the arrangement of elements in the work), but in a sharp break with visual tradition, they replaced the horizontal registers with wavy groundlines. The images stand on their own, with no explanatory inscription, but the godlike king is immediately recognizable. Watched over by three solar deities, symbolized by the rayed suns in the sky, Naramsin ascends a mountain wearing the horned crown associated with deities. He stands at the dramatic center of the scene, closest to the mountain-top, silhouetted against the sky. His greater size is in hieratic relationship to his soldiers, who follow at regular intervals, passing conquered enemy forces sprawled in death or begging for mercy. Both the king and his warriors hold their weapons upright. Although this stele depicts Akkadians in triumph, they managed to dominate the region for only about another half century.

LAGASH About 2180 BCE, the Akkadian Empire fell under attack by the Gutti, a mountain people from the northeast. The Gutti controlled most of the Mesopotamian plain for a brief time, then the Sumerians regained control of their own region and Akkad. But one large Sumerian city-state remained independent during the period of Guti control: Lagash, the capital...
of which was Girsu (modern Telloh, Iraq), on the Tigris River in the southeast, under the ruler Gudea. Gudea built and restored many temples, in which he placed votive statues representing himself as governor and as the embodiment of just rule. The statues are made of diorite, a very hard stone that was difficult to work, prompting sculptors to use compact, simplified forms for the portraits. Twenty of these figures survive, making Gudea's face a familiar one in ancient Near Eastern art.

Images of Gudea present him as a strong, peaceful, pious ruler worthy of divine favor. Whether he is shown sitting or standing, he wears a garment similar to that of the female votive figures from Eshnunna, which provides ample space for long cuneiform inscriptions (fig. 2-17). Here the text relates that Gudea, who holds a vessel from which life-giving water flows in two streams filled with leaping fish, dedicated himself, the statue, and its temple to the goddess Geshtinanna, the divine poet and interpreter of dreams. This imposing statue is monumental—that is, it gives an impression of grandeur—although it is only 2\( \frac{1}{2} \) feet tall. The sculptor's treatment of the human body, as in other Mesopotamian figures, emphasizes its power centers: the eyes, head, and smoothly muscled chest and arms. Gudea's face, below the sheepskin hat, is youthful and serene, and the eyes—oversized and wide open, the better to return the gaze of the deity—express intense concentration.


BABYLON AND MARI

For more than 300 years, periods of political turmoil alternated with periods of stable government in Mesopotamia. The Amorites, a Semitic-speaking people from the Arabian Desert, to the west, eventually reunited Sumer under Hammurabi (ruled 1792–1750 BCE), whose capital city was Babylon and whose subjects were called Babylonians. Among Hammurabi's achievements was a written legal code that listed the laws of his realm and the penalties for breaking them (fig. 2-18, "The Object Speaks").

As kingship and empire became increasingly important, palace architecture overshadowed temple architecture. The great palace of another Amorite king, Hammurabi's contemporary Zimrilim (ruled 1779–1757 BCE), reflects this trend. Zimrilim's capital city, Mari, was strategically located on the Euphrates River about 250 miles northwest of Babylon. It prospered from commercial traffic on the river and was notable for its well-built houses, sophisticated sanitation system, and bronze-working industry. The palace boasted an enormous courtyard paved in alabaster, several temples and shrines, hundreds of other rooms and courtyards, and a notable art collection. Zimrilim and Hammurabi had once been allies, but in 1757 BCE Hammurabi marched against Mari and destroyed Zimrilim's palace. From the palace, a few murals—large paintings or decorations affixed directly to the wall—have survived, providing rare examples of a fragile ancient Near Eastern art form.

The subjects of the murals range from geometric patterns decorating the royal family's quarters to military and religious scenes in the administrative areas. One, in the
THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

Hammurabi made his capital, Babylon, the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient Near East. One of his greatest accomplishments was the first systematic codification of his people’s rights, duties, and punishments for wrongdoing, which was engraved on the Stele of Hammurabi (fig. 2-18). This black basalt stele—in effect, a megalith—speaks to us both as a work of art that depicts a legendary event and as a historical document that records a conversation about justice between god and man.

At the top of the stele, we see Hammurabi on a mountaintop, indicated by three flat tiers on which Shamash, the sun god and god of justice, rests his feet. Hammurabi listens respectfully, standing in an attitude of prayer. Shamash sits on a backless throne, dressed in a long flounced robe and crowned by a conical horned cap. Flames rise from his shoulders, and he holds additional symbols of his power—the measuring rod and the rope circle—as he gives the law to the king, the intermediary between the god and the people. From there, the laws themselves flow forth in horizontal bands of exquisitely engraved cuneiform signs. The idea of god-given laws engraved on stone tables is a long-standing tradition in the ancient Near East: in another example, Moses, the Lawgiver of Israel, received the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets from God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:19).

A prologue on the front of the stele lists the temples Hammurabi has restored, and an epilogue on the back glorifies Hammurabi as a peacemaker, but most of the stele was clearly intended to ensure uniform treatment of people throughout his kingdom. In the introductory section of the stele’s long cuneiform inscription, Hammurabi declared that with this code of law he intended “to cause justice to prevail in the land and to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak nor the weak the strong.” Most of the 300 or so entries that follow deal with commercial and property matters. Only sixty-eight relate to domestic problems, and a mere twenty deal with physical assault.

Punishments are based on the wealth, class, and gender of the parties—the rights of the wealthy are favored over the poor, citizens over slaves, men over women. The death penalty is frequently decreed for crimes such as stealing from a temple or palace, helping a slave to escape, or insubordination in the army. Trial by water and fire could also be imposed, as when an adulterous woman and her lover were to be thrown into the water (those who did not drown were deemed innocent) or a woman who committed incest with her son was to be burned (an incestuous man was only banished). Although some of the punishments seem excessive to us today, we recognize that Hammurabi was breaking new ground in his attempt to create a society regulated by published laws rather than the whims of judges or rulers.

2-18. Stele of Hammurabi, from Susa (modern Shush, Iran), c. 1792-1750 BCE. Basalt, height of stele approx. 7’ (2.13 m), height of relief 28” (71.1 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.
2-19. *Investiture of Zimrilim (Zimiri-Lim, King of Mari, before the Goddess Ishtar)*, facsimile of a wall painting on mud plaster from the Zimrilim Palace at Mari (modern Tell Hariri, Iraq), Court 106. Before c. 1750 BCE. Height 5'5" (1.7 m). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

palace’s main courtyard, shows Zimrilim receiving his authority from Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of war, fertility, and love (fig. 2-19). The central panels, devoted to the investiture ceremony, are organized in the formal, symmetrical style familiar in earlier Sumerian art. In the framed upper register, the goddess, holding weapons and resting her foot on a lion—all emblems of power—extends the rod and the ring, symbols of rule, to the king. Below, two goddesses, holding tall plants in red vases, are surrounded by streams of water that flow from the vases—a theme familiar from the Gudea statue (see fig. 2-17). Flanking these two panels are towering aloë-like plants with fan-shaped, stylized foliage; three tiers of animals, mythical and otherwise—bulls, winged lions, and crowned, human-headed winged creatures; date palms being climbed by two fruit pickers; and finally two gigantic goddesses, hands raised in approval. Eye-catching checked and striped patterning throughout the mural makes its surface sparkle. The colors have darkened considerably over time, but they probably included blue, orange, red, brown, and white.

ASSYRIA

After centuries of struggle among Sumer, Akkad, Lagash, and Mari in southern Mesopotamia, a people called the Assyrians rose to dominance in northern Mesopotamia. They were very powerful by about 1400 BCE, and after about 1000 BCE they began to conquer neighboring regions. By the end of the ninth century BCE, they controlled most of Mesopotamia, and by the early seventh century BCE they had extended their influence as far west as Egypt. Soon afterward they succumbed to internal weakness and external enemies, and by 600 BCE their empire had collapsed.

Assyrian rulers built huge palaces atop high platforms inside the different fortified cities that served as the Assyrian capital. They decorated these palaces with scenes of victorious battles, presentations of tribute to the king, combat between men and beasts, and religious imagery.

During his reign (883-859 BCE), Assurnasirpal II established his capital at Nimrud, on the east bank of the Tigris River, and undertook an ambitious building program. His architects fortified the city with mud-brick walls 5 miles long and 42 feet high, and his engineers constructed a canal that irrigated fields and provided water for the expanded population of the city. According to an inscription commemorating the event, Assurnasirpal gave a banquet for 69,574 people to celebrate the dedication of the new capital in 879 BCE. Most of the buildings in Nimrud were made from mud bricks, but limestone and alabaster—more impressive and durable—were used for architectural decorations. *Lamassu* guardian figures flanked the major portals (see fig. 2-1), and panels covered the walls with scenes carved in low relief of the king participating in religious rituals, war campaigns, and hunting expeditions.

In a vivid lion-hunting scene (fig. 2-20), Assurnasirpal II stands in a chariot pulled by galloping horses and draws his bow against an attacking lion that already has four arrows protruding from its body. Another beast, pierced by arrows, lies on the ground. This was probably a ceremonial hunt, in which the king, protected by men with swords and shields, rode back and forth killing animals as they were released one by one into an enclosed area. The immediacy of this image marks a shift in Mesopotamian art away from a sense of timelessness and toward visual narrative. As in many earlier works, *Assurnasirpal II Killing Lions* shows a man confronting wild beasts. Unlike earlier works, however, the man is not part of nature, standing among animals as their equal, but has assumed dominion over nature. There is no question in this scene who will prevail.

Sargon II (ruled 721-706 BCE) built a new Assyrian capital (fig. 2-21) at Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad, Iraq). At the northwest side, a walled *citadel*, or fortress, containing 200 rooms and thirty courtyards, straddled the city wall. The *palace complex* (the group of buildings where the ruler governed and resided), behind the
citadel on a raised, fortified platform about 52 feet high, demonstrates the use of art as propaganda to support political power. Guarded by two towers, it was accessible only by a wide ramp leading up from an open square, around which the residences of important government and religious officials were clustered. Beyond the ramp was the main courtyard, with service buildings on the right and temples on the left. The heart of the palace, protected by a reinforced wall with only two small, off-center doors, lay past the main courtyard. Within the inner compound was a second courtyard, lined with narrative relief panels showing tribute bearers, that functioned as an audience hall. Visitors would have entered the king’s throne room from this courtyard through a stone gate flanked by colossal guardian figures even larger than Assurnasirpal’s (see fig. 2-1).
The ziggurat at Dur Sharrukin towered in an open space between the temple complex and the palace, declaring the might of Assyria's kings and symbolizing their claim to empire. It probably had seven levels, each about 18 feet high and painted a different color. The four levels still remaining were once white, black, blue, and red. Instead of separate flights of stairs between the levels, a single, squared-off spiral ramp rose continuously along the exterior from the base.

Assurbanipal (ruled 669–c. 627 BCE), king of the Assyrians three generations after Sargon II, established his capital at Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik, Iraq). His palace was decorated with alabaster panels carved with pictorial narratives in low relief. Most show the king and his subjects in battle and hunting, but there are occasional scenes of palace life. One panel shows the king and queen in a pleasure garden (fig. 2-22). The king reclines on a couch, and the queen sits in a chair at his feet. Some servants arrive with trays of food, while others wave whisks to protect the royal couple from insects. This apparently tranquil domestic scene is actually a victory celebration. The king's weapons (sword, bow, and quiver of arrows) are on the table behind him, and the severed head of his vanquished enemy hangs upside down from a tree at the far left. It was common during this period to display the heads and corpses of enemies as a form of psychological warfare, and Assurbanipal's generals would have sent him the head as a trophy.

Although much Assyrian art is relief carving, other arts were developing. One of the most spectacular archaeological finds in the Near East was the discovery, beginning in 1988, of more than a thousand pieces of gold jewelry weighing more than 125 pounds; they were found in three Assyrian royal tombs at Nimrud. The work dates from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE (fig. 2-23). The refinement and superb artistry of the crowns, necklaces, bracelets, armbands, ankle bracelets, and other ornaments recovered from these tombs accord with the richly carved surfaces of Assyrian stone sculpture.
NEO-BABYLONIA

At the end of the seventh century BCE, the Medes, a people from Media, now western Iran, and the Scythians (see page 167) from modern Russia and Ukraine invaded the northern and eastern parts of Assyria. Meanwhile, under a new royal dynasty, the Babylonians reasserted themselves. This Neo-Babylonian kingdom began attacking Assyrian cities in 615 BCE and made a treaty with the Medes. In 612 BCE, the allied army captured Nineveh. When the dust settled, Assyria was no more. The Medes controlled a swath of land below the Black and Caspian seas, and the Neo-Babylonians controlled a region that stretched from modern Turkey to northern Arabia and from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea.

The most famous Neo-Babylonian ruler was Nebuchadnezzar II (ruled 605–562 BCE), notorious today for his suppression of the Jews, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible Book of Daniel. A great patron of architecture, he built temples dedicated to the Babylonian gods throughout his realm and transformed Babylon—the cultural, political, and economic hub of his empire—into one of the most splendid cities of its day. Babylon straddled the Euphrates River, its two sections joined by a bridge. The older, eastern sector was traversed by the Processional Way, the route taken by religious processions honoring the city's patron god, Marduk (fig. 2-24). This street, paved with large stone slabs set in a bed of bitumen, was up to 66 feet wide at some points. It ran from the Euphrates bridge past the temple district and palaces to end at the Ishtar Gate, the ceremonial entrance to the city. The walls on either side of the route were faced with dark blue bricks that were glazed—a film of glass placed over the bricks and fired, a process used since about 1600 BCE. Against that blue background, specially molded turquoise, blue, and gold-colored bricks formed images of striding lions, symbols of the goddess Ishtar. The walls and towers along the Processional Way were topped with notches, or crenellations.

The double-arched Ishtar Gate, a symbol of Babylonian power, was guarded by four crenellated towers. It is decorated with tiers of mushhushshu, horned dragons with the head and body of a snake, the forelegs of a lion, and the hind legs of a bird of prey, which were sacred to Marduk and with the bulls with blue horns and tails associated with other deities such as the weather god Adad. Now reconstructed inside one of the Berlin State Museums, the Ishtar Gate is installed next to a panel from the throne room in Nebuchadnezzar II's nearby palace (fig. 2-25, page 44). In this fragment, lions walk...
2-25. Ishtar Gate and throne room wall (modified for installation), from Babylon (modern Iraq) c. 575 BCE. Glazed brick, height of gate originally 40' (12.2 m) with towers rising 100' (30.5 m). Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz.
beneath stylized palm trees. Among Babylon's other marvels—none of which survived—were the city's walls, its fabled terraced and irrigated Hanging Gardens (see "The Seven Wonders of the World," page 64), and the Marduk Ziggurat. All that remains of this ziggurat, which ancient documents describe as painted white, black, crimson, blue, orange, silver, and gold, is the outline of its base and traces of the lower stairs.

Outside of Mesopotamia, other cultures—those in Elam, Anatolia, and Persia among them—developed and flourished. Each had an impact on Mesopotamia before one of them, Persia, eventually overwhelmed it.

ELAM

The strip of fertile plain known as Elam, between the Tigris River and the Zagros Mountains to the east (in present-day Iran), was a flourishing farming region by 7000 BCE. About this time, the city of Susa, later the capital of an Elamite kingdom, was established on the Shaur River. Elam had close cultural ties to Mesopotamia, but the two regions were often in conflict. In the twelfth century BCE, Elamite invaders looted art treasures from Mesopotamia and carried them back to Susa (see "Protection or Theft?" below).

About 4000 BCE, Susa was a center of pottery production. Twentieth-century excavations there uncovered nearly 8,000 finely formed and painted vessels (beakers, bowls, and jars), as well as coarse domestic wares. The fine wares have thin, fragile shells that suggest they were not meant for everyday use. Decorations painted in brown glaze on pale yellow clay are sometimes purely geometric but are more often a graceful combination of geometric designs and stylized natural forms, mainly from the animal world, expertly balanced between repetition and variation.

A pair of ibexes (only one of which is visible here) reduced to pure geometric form (fig. 2-26) decorates a beaker (a cup without handles) that is representative of

PROTECTION OR THEFT?

Some of the most bitter resentments spawned by war—whether in Mesopotamia in the twelfth century BCE or in our own time—have involved the "liberation" by the victors of objects of great value to the people from whom they were taken. Museums around the world hold works either snatched by invading armies or acquired as a result of conquest. Two historically priceless objects unearthed in Elamite Susa, for example—the Akkadian Stele of Naramsin (see fig. 2-16) and the Babylonian Stele of Hammurabi (see fig. 2-18)—were not Elamite at all but were Mesopotamian. Both had been brought there as military trophies by an Elamite king, who added an inscription to the Stele of Naramsin explaining that he had merely "protected" it.

The same rationale has been used in modern times to justify the removal of countless works from their cultural contexts. The Rosetta Stone, the key to the modern decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics, was discovered in Egypt by French troops in 1799, fell into British hands when they forced the French from Egypt, and ultimately ended up in the British Museum in London (see page 72). In the early nineteenth century, the British Lord Elgin removed renowned classical Greek reliefs from the Parthenon in Athens with the blessing of the Ottoman authorities who governed Greece at the time (see figs. 5-42, 5-43, 5-46). Although his actions may indeed have protected the reliefs from neglect and the ravages of the Greek war of independence, they have remained installed, like the Rosetta Stone, in the British Museum, despite continuing protests from Greece. The Ishtar Gate from Babylon (see fig. 2-25) is now in a museum in Germany. Many German collections include works that were similarly "protected" at the end of World War II and are surfacing now. In the United States, Native Americans are increasingly vocal in their demands that artifacts and human remains collected by anthropologists and archaeologists be returned to them. "To the victor," it is said, "belong the spoils." It continues to be a matter of passionate debate whether this notion is appropriate in the case of revered cultural artifacts.
THE FIBER ARTS

Fragments of fired clay impressed with cloth have been dated to 25,000 BCE, showing that fiber arts, including various weaving and knotting techniques, vie with ceramics as the earliest evidence of human creative and technical skills. Since prehistoric times, weaving appears to have been women's work—probably because women, with primary responsibility for child care, could spin and weave in the home no matter how frequently they were interrupted by the needs of their families. Men as shepherds and farmers produced the raw materials for spinning and as merchants distributed the fabrics not needed by the family. Early Assyrian cuneiform tablets preserve the correspondence between merchants traveling by caravan and their wives, who were running the production end of the business back home and complaining about late payments and changed orders. It is no coincidence that the Woman Spinning (see fig. 2-27) is a woman.

The production of textiles is complex. First, thread must be produced: fibers gathered from plants (such as flax for linen cloth or hemp for rope) or from animals (wool from sheep, goats, and camels or hair from humans and horses) are cleaned, combed, and sorted. Only then can they be twisted and drawn out under tension—that is, spun—into the long, strong, flexible fibers needed for textiles or cords. Spinning tools include a long, sticklike spindle to gather the spun fibers, a whorl (weight) to help rotate the spindle, and a distaff (a word still used to describe women and their work) to hold the raw materials. Because textiles are fragile and rapidly decompose, the indestructible stone or fired-clay spindle whorls are usually the only surviving evidence of thread making.

Weaving begins on a loom. Warp threads are laid out at right angles to weft threads, which are passed over and under the warp. In the earliest, vertical looms, warp threads hang from a beam, their tension created either by wrapping them around a lower beam (a tapestry loom) or by tying them to heavy stones (a warp-weighted loom, such as the woman from Susa would have used). Although weaving was usually a home industry, in palaces and temples slave women staffed large shops, specializing as spinners, warpers, weavers, and finishers. The fiber arts also include various nonweaving techniques—cording for ropes and strings; netting for traps, fish nets, and hair nets; knotting for macramé and carpets; sprang (a looping technique like cat's cradle); and single-hook work or crocheting (knitting with two needles came relatively late).

Early fiber artists depended on the natural color of their materials and on natural dyes from the earth (ochers) and from plants (madder for red, woad, an herb, and indigo for blue, and safflower and saffron crocus for yellow). The ancients combined color and techniques to create a great variety of fiber arts. Egyptians seem to have preferred white linen for their garments, elaborately folded and pleated. Minoans created multicolored patterned fabrics with fancy edgings. Greeks perfected pictorial tapestries. The people of the ancient Near East used woven and dyed patterns and also developed knotted pile (the so-called Persian carpet) and felt (a cloth of fibers bound by heat and pressure, not spinning, weaving, or knitting).

fine Susa ware. On each side, the great sweep of the animals' horns encloses a small circular motif, or rondel, containing what might be a leaf pattern or a line of birds in flight. A narrow band above the ibexes shows short-haired, long-nosed dogs at rest. In the wide top band, stately wading birds stand motionless.

Susa's ingenious artisans produced a gray bitumen-based compound that could be molded while soft and carved when hard. From this compound they made a variety of practical and decorative objects. An especially fine example shows an important-looking woman adorned with many ornaments (fig. 2-27). Her hair is elegantly styled, and her garment has a patterned border. She sits barefoot and cross-legged on a lion-footed stool covered with sheep-skin, spinning thread with a large whorl (weight) to help rotate the spindle, and a distaff (a word still used to describe women and their work) to hold the raw materials. Because textiles are fragile and rapidly decompose, the indestructible stone or fired-clay spindle whorls are usually the only surviving evidence of thread making.

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2-27. **Woman Spinning**, from Susa (modern Shush, Iran). c. 8th-7th century BCE. Bitumen compound, $3\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$" (9.2 x 13 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

2-28. **Lion Gate**, Hattushash (near modern Boghazkeui, Turkey). c. 1400 BCE. Limestone.
seem to emerge from the gigantic boulders that form the gate, unlike the later Assyrian guardians (see fig. 2-1) who, while clearly part of the building, seem to stride or stand as independent creatures. The Hittite Lion Gate harmonizes with the colossal scale of the wall. Despite extreme weathering, the lions have endured over the millennia and still possess a sense of both vigor and permanence.

PERSIA In the sixth century BCE, the Persians, a formerly nomadic, Indo-European-speaking people related to the Medes, began to seize power. From the region of Parsa, or Persis (modern Fars, Iran) southeast of Susa, they eventually overwhelmed Mesopotamia and the rest of the ancient Near East and established a vast empire. The rulers of this new empire traced their ancestry to a semilegendary Persian king named Achaemenes, and consequently they are known as the Achaemenids. Their dramatic expansion began in 559 BCE with the ascension of a remarkable leader, Cyrus II (called the Great, ruled 559-530 BCE). By the time of his death the Persian Empire included Babylonia, Media (which stretched across present-day northern Iran through Anatolia), and some of the Aegean islands far to the west. Conquests continued, and when Darius I (ruled 521-486 BCE), the son of a government official, took the throne, he could proclaim: "I am Darius, great King. King of Kings, King of countries, King of this earth.

An able administrator, Darius organized the Persian lands into twenty tribute-paying areas under Persian governors, and he often left local rulers in place. This practice, along with a tolerance for diverse native customs and religions, won the Persians the loyalty of many of their subjects. Darius also developed a system of fair taxation, issued a standardized currency (see fig. 2-32), and improved communication throughout the empire. Darius, like many powerful rulers, created palaces and citadels as visible symbols of his authority. He made Susa his first capital and commissioned a 32-acre administrative compound to be built there. In about 518 BCE, he began construction of Parsa, a new capital in the Persian homeland in the Zagros highlands. Today this city, known as Persepolis, the name the Greeks gave it, is one of the best-preserved and most impressive ancient sites in the Near East (fig. 2-29). Darius imported materials, workers, and artists from all over his empire for his building projects. He even ordered work to be executed in Egypt and transported to his capital. The result was a new style of art that combined many different cultural traditions, including Persian, Mede, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek. This artistic integration reflects Darius's far-reaching political strategy.

In Assyrian fashion, the imperial complex at Persepolis was set on a raised platform and laid out on a rectangular grid, or system of crossed lines. The platform was 40 feet high and measured 1,500 by 900 feet. It was accessible only from a single ramp made of wide, shallow steps that allowed horsemen to ride up rather than dismount and climb on foot. Darius lived to see the erection of only a treasury, the Apadana (audience hall), and a very small palace for himself on the platform. The
The central stair displays reliefs of animal combat and tiered ranks of royal guards, the "10,000 Immortals," and delegations of tribute bearers. The figures cover the walls with repeated patterns. Unlike the bellicose Assyrian reliefs, however, Persian sculpture emphasizes the extent of the empire and the economic prosperity under Persian rule. The elegant drawing, calculated compositions, and sleek modeling of figures reflect the Persians' knowledge of Greek art and perhaps the use of Greek artists.

Apadana, set above the rest of the complex on a second terrace (fig. 2-30), had open porches on three sides and a square hall large enough to hold several thousand people. Darius's son Xerxes I (ruled 485-465 BCE) added a sprawling palace complex for himself, enlarged the treasury building, and began a vast new public reception space, the Hall of 100 Columns.

Sculpture at Persepolis displayed the unity and economic prosperity of the empire. On the walls of Darius's Apadana, ranks of warriors seem ready to defend the palace, while on the staircase, lions attack bulls at each side of the Persian generals. These animal combats (a theme found throughout the Near East) emphasize the ferocity of the leaders and their men. Other reliefs throughout Persepolis depict displays of allegiance or economic prosperity. In one example, Darius holds an audience while his son and heir, Xerxes, listens from behind the throne (fig. 2-31, page 50). Such panels would have looked quite different when they were freshly painted in rich tones of deep blue, scarlet, green, purple, and turquoise, with metal objects such as Darius's crown and necklace covered in gold leaf, sheets of hammered gold.

The Persians' decorative arts—including ornamented weapons, domestic wares, horse trappings, and jewelry—demonstrate high levels of technical and artistic sophistication. The Persians also created a refined coinage, with miniature low-relief portraits of rulers, so that coins, in addition to their function as economic standards, served as propaganda, carrying the ruler's portrait throughout the empire. The Persians had learned to mint standard coinage from the Lydians of
Long before the invention of coins, people used gold, silver, bronze, and copper as mediums of exchange, but each piece had to be weighed to establish its exact value. The Lydians of western Anatolia began to produce metal coins in standard weights in the seventh century BCE, adapting the seal—a Sumerian invention—to designate their value. Until about 525 BCE, coins bore an image on one side only. The beautiful early coin here, minted during the reign of the Lydian king Croesus (ruled 560-546 BCE), is stamped with the heads and forelegs of a bull and lion in low relief. The reverse has only a squarish depression left by the punch used to force the metal into the mold.

To make two-faced coins, the ancients used a punch and anvil, each of which held a die, or mold, incised with the design to be impressed in the coin. A metal blank weighing the exact amount of the denomination was placed over the anvil die, containing the design for the “head” (obverse) of the coin. The punch, with the die of the “tail” (reverse) design, was placed on top of the metal blank and struck with a mallet. Beginning in the reign of Darius I, kings’ portraits appeared on coins, proclaiming the ruler’s control of the coin of the realm—a custom that has continued throughout the world in coins such as the American Lincoln pennies and Roosevelt dimes. Because we often know approximately when ancient monarchs ruled, coins discovered in an archaeological excavation help to date the objects around them.

is among the most valuable coins in the world today. Commonly called an “archer,” it shows the well-armed emperor wearing his crown and carrying a lance in his right hand; he lunges forward as if he had just let fly an arrow from his bow.

At its height, the Persian Empire extended from Africa to India. From the Persians’ spectacular capital,
Darius in 490 BCE and Xerxes in 480 BCE sent their armies west to conquer Greece, but mainland Greeks successfully resisted the armies of the Achaemenids, preventing them from advancing into Europe (Chapter 5). And it was a Greek who ultimately put an end to their empire. In 334 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia crossed into Anatolia and swept through Mesopotamia, defeating Darius III and nearly laying waste the magnificent Persepolis in 331 BCE (see fig. 2-30). Although the Persian Empire was at an end, the Persian style in art continued to influence Greek artists and eventually Islamic art.

2-32. Daric, a coin first minted under Darius I of Persia. 4th century BCE. Gold, diameter approximately \( \frac{1}{2} \)" (1.45 cm). Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.