Sumer

by Sophia

Sumer was the first major civilization to develop in Mesopotamia. Religion in Sumer holds significant symbolic and religious significance. In this lesson, you will learn about:

☆ BIG IDEA

Sumer was the first major civilization to develop in ancient Mesopotamia.

1. Time Period and Location of Sumer

This lesson covers the years from around 4500 BC to around 2000 BC. For reference, take a look at the timeline below. The time period covered in this lesson is highlighted in purple, and to give you an idea of just how far back in time this era was, the founding of the Roman Republic, the precursor to the Roman Empire, is indicated by the arrow.
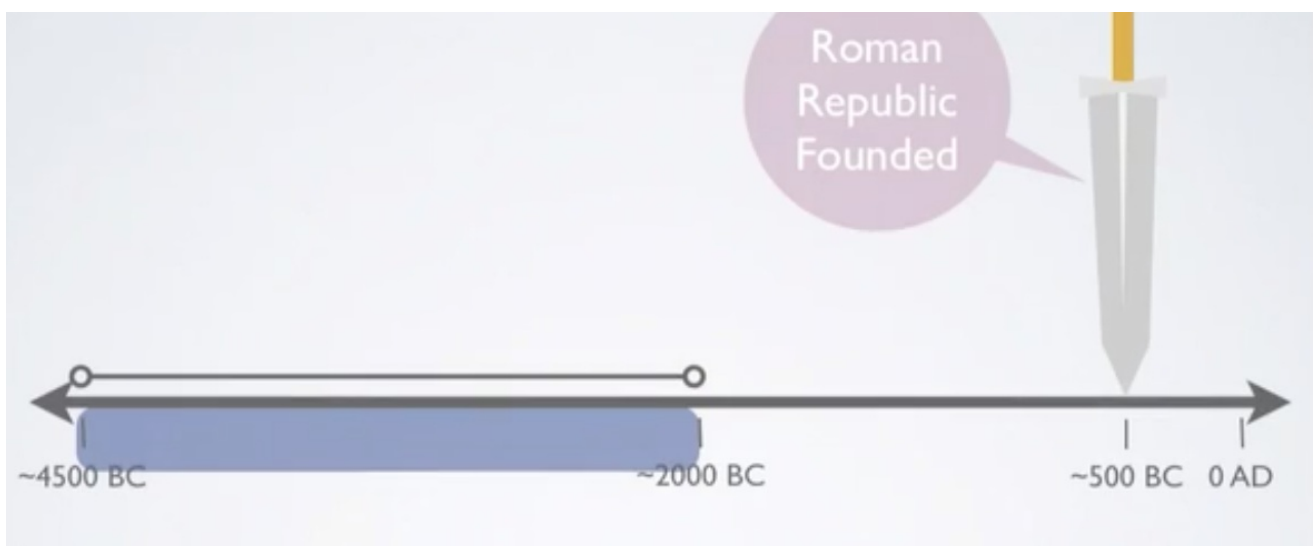
⊘ DID YOU KNOW

BC is before Christ and AD is Anno Domini, which is Latin for "in the year of our Lord." Remember, there's no year 0, so the year 1 AD immediately follows 1 BC.

Sumer was a civilization that developed within Mesopotamia and consisted of a number of city-states that established themselves over time.

The map below shows Mesopotamia and the surrounding geography. Notice Mesopotamia's location relative

to the the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the city-states indicated with red dots.

2. Sumer and Religion

Sumer was the first major civilization to develop in Mesopotamia. People came to form city-states, which functioned more or less independently of one another, at least with respect to the local government. The religion of Sumer was of particular historical importance because of the influence it had on the Sumerian people and the role it played in their daily lives.

In terms of stratification, the priestly class of individuals, who were the religious leaders and differentiated from the secular rulers of a particular city-state, were at the top. They controlled the religious functions of the community, and had a monopoly on the available face time with the deities. Ceremonies and rights were likely carried out in the shrines atop ziggurats, which were large religious temples that had an important place within the layout of each city-state.

⊘ DID YOU KNOW

Religious ceremonies and access to religious shrines in Sumer seemed to have been exclusive to certain individuals rather than open to the public.

3. Early Civilization and the City-State

The concept of a city-state is important to understand as you explore this time period. A city-state is completely independent of any outside government. In other words, it's an autonomous state that consists of the city and perhaps some surrounding territory. Early civilizations often began as city-states.

↗ EXAMPLE Athens and Sparta in Greece are city-states that might be familiar to you.

The city-state of Ur is particularly important in this lesson. Ur is located in the southern part of Mesopotamia and indicated by the red dot on the map below.


4. The City-State of Ur

Much like the use of patron saints in older cities throughout Europe, each city-state in Mesopotamia had a patron deity who protected the city. Religious emphasis was on honoring the city's patron deity. In Ur, Nanna, the moon goddess in the Sumerian religion, was the patron deity of Ur.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look a this image below of a work of art called The Standard of Ur. As the name implies, it is widely believed to have served as a standard, something that's carried around for display. But its true use is still a mystery. It's a six-sided mosaic that dates from between 2600 and 2400 BC.
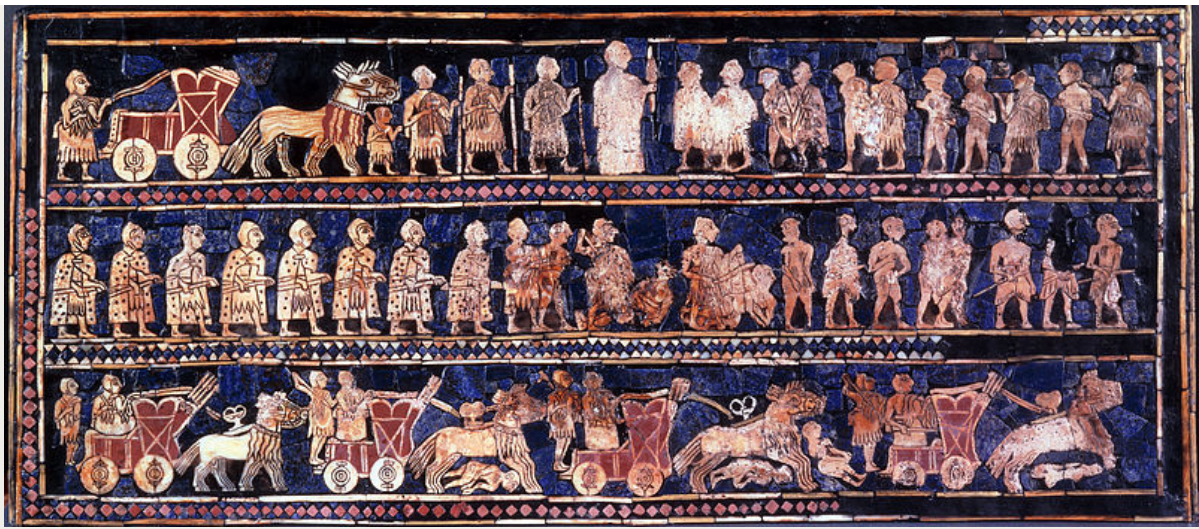
The Standard of Ur

2600-2400 BC

Mosaic (shell, limestone, lapis laxuli)

This piece has two main panels. One of these is of war, and it depicts a Sumerian army conquering its enemies and presenting the captured and naked foes before their leader. The other panel, not shown, depicts peace through what is thought to be a typical Sumerian banquet scene.

5. The Ziggurat

A **ziggurat** is a symbolic and religious structure, much like a temple. It was looked at as a holy mountain, reinforcing the idea that the gods dwelt above humans. The public were not allowed to gather here; rather, it was limited to only a privileged few, the priestly class, who conducted their business within the shrine at the top. The Nanna ziggurat was the major religious structure within the city of Ur.

IN CONTEXT

Below is a reconstruction of the original Nanna ziggurat. The original remains are actually slightly visible by the people at the top.
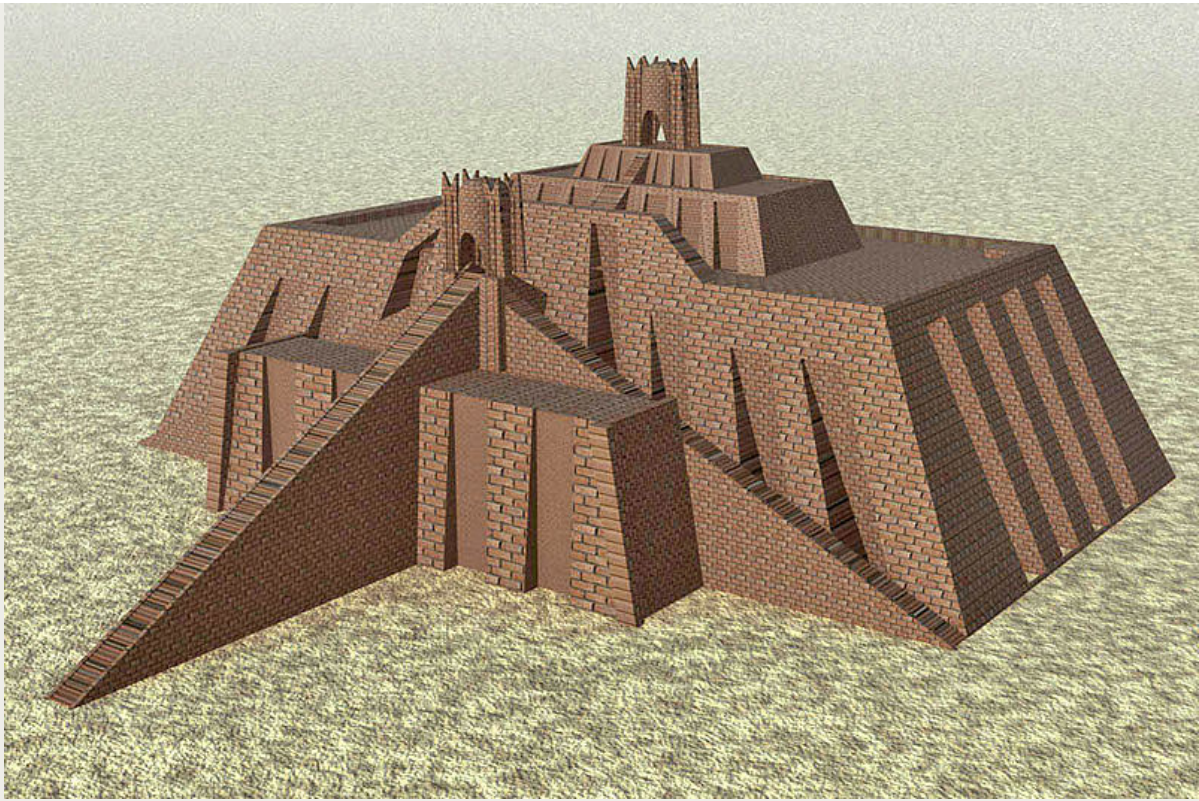
Ziggurat

21st century BC

Ur (present day Dhi Qar Province, Iraq)

Here is a more detailed CAD rendering of what the ziggurat may have looked like in its day. Notice in the image below that the stepped or tiered structure has long access ramps. These are common ziggurat design elements.

CAD reconstruction of Ur-Nammu's ziggurat

 DID YOU KNOW

The tiered structure was likely a limitation of the building materials and construction techniques of the time. Materials available included predominantly mud brick, which is sun-baked. While mud brick has a relatively decent level of compression strength, it is not an ideal material for building tall, airy structures. Structures made with mud bricks tend to be rather stocky.

 TERM TO KNOW

Ziggurat

A Mesopotamian temple shaped as a pyramid tower and having a number of stories, that is winding and round

6. Votive Figures

At the top of the ziggurat shrine is a small opening for access. Religious function would have been performed inside the temple, which would also serve to house votive sculptures.

Male worshipper votive sculpture

2750-2600 BC

Alabaster, shell, and black limestone

These **votive figures** played an important role for the priestly class in Sumer, serving as a representation of a person, a devout worshipper. It's purpose was to continue the act of worship while the priest was away. The Sumerian belief system placed a tremendous amount of responsibility in the hands of the priestly class, and their prayers were believed to appease the gods. Happy gods meant a safe and prosperous city, so these votive figures were of utmost importance to national security.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Votive Figures
Sculptures placed in a shrine in fulfillment of a vow

7. The Eye

The eye is an important symbol in Middle Eastern cultures. In Mesopotamian art, it meant to approach a deity with an attentive and respectful gaze.
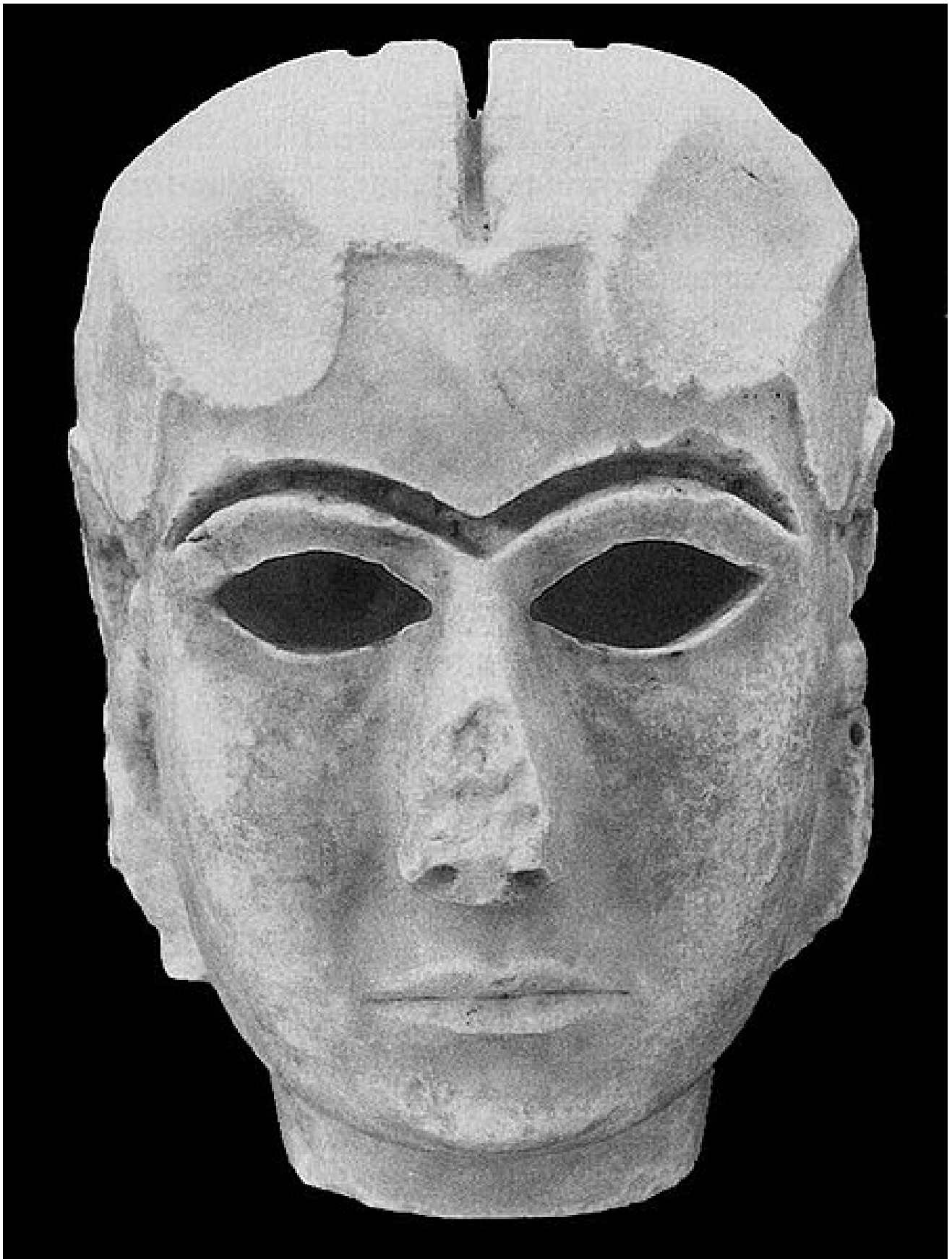
Eye Idols

2nd half of the 4th century BC

Limestone

This is a mask from Warka, sometimes referred to as the "Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia" or the "Lady of Uruk."

Mask of Lady of Uruk

~3200-3100 BC

Marble

This is a very important artistic relic. It was likely a representation of the goddess Inanna, another important Sumerian deity and the goddess of love, fertility, and war. This is also one of the earliest representations of a human face and the unibrow.

📋 SUMMARY

One of the first major civilizations came to be in Mesopotamia. This civilization was Sumer, and religion was of utmost importance to this civilization and its people. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of Sumer** as well as **Sumer and its religion**. The religious leaders, separate from the secular rulers of a particular city-state, were at the top of the social hierarchy, and they controlled the religious functions of the community.

You also learned about **early civilization and the city-state**, more specifically, **the city-state of Ur.** Within this civilization and the city-states, you learned that **the ziggurat** was a symbolic and religious structure, much like a temple. It was looked at as a holy mountain, reinforcing the idea that the gods dwelt above humans. **Votive figures and the eye** were also extremely symbolic during this time period. The votive figure served as a representation of a person, a devout worshipper, and the eye was a symbol that reminded individuals to approach a deity with an attentive and respectful gaze.

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📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Votive Figures
Sculptures placed in a shrine in fulfillment of a vow.

Ziggurat
A Mesopotamian temple shaped as a pyramid tower and having a number of stories that is winding and round.