

### Lecture 4:

### Sumerian Society, Science and Religion



HIST 213 Spring 2012

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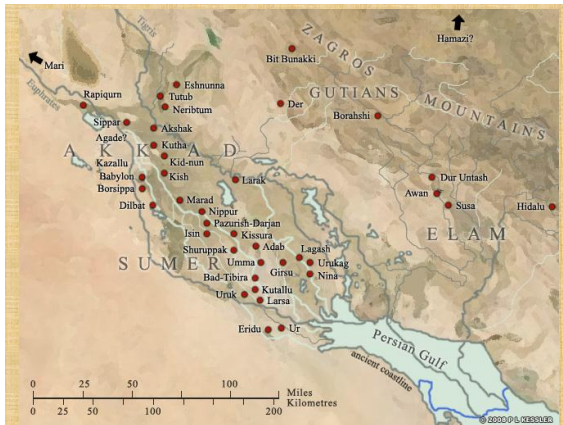
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### Who were the Sumerians?

- *autochthonous* peoples from S. Mesopotamia
  - *auto* = self; *chthonous* = spring up from the Earth
  - neither Semitic nor Indo-European
- bound together culturally
  - religious and burial practices
  - *ki-en-gir* = Sumer = (land of the Sumerian tongue)
- A people who developed civilization in various city-states
  - Eridu, Ur, Uruk, Girsu, Lagash, Umma, etc.
    - flat alluvial plain
    - frequently at war with one another

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### Mesopotamian City-State

Basic political unit in S. Mesopotamia

- urban center
- villages within a 15 km radius

35 such city-states arose

- at first, enough distance between them
- began to come into direct conflict

Each ruled by a particular god/dess

- Nanna for Ur
- Inanna for Uruk
- Enlil for Nippur

- divided politically, not culturally

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### Sumerian: Early Dynastic Period 2900-2350 BCE

- 2900-2700 Early Dynastic I
- 2700-2500 Early Dynastic II
  - Heroic Age of Epic Literature
- 2500-2400 Early Dynastic IIIA
  - Warrior Kings of Lagash
- 2400-2350 Early Dynastic IIIB

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### History of ED documents

- mostly administrative texts
- organization of society in "households"
  - households—extended political units
- palace = é-gal: "great household"
  - households could own property and people (slaves)
  - rewarded for their work with rations
  - amounts provided depended on gender and status of the worker
  - Shuruppak show a single barley register for 20,000 people for 6 months
    - centralized economy

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### Rise of Sumerian Kingship

- *en*: "lord" (roof beam)
  - secular and religious
- *lugal*: "great man"
  - "king"
  - sovereign over several city-
  - administered justice
  - ruler's wife (*nin*) "lady" took an active role in governance
  - "King of Kish" becomes universal term
- *ensi*: "governor"
- *é-gal*: "great household"




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### Sumerian King Lists

- Records a number of Kings in Sumer
- Kish first city to domination over all of Sumer
  - King Enmebaragesi (2700 BCE)
  - "carried away as spoils the weapons of Elam"
- Gilgamesh of Uruk
- King of Ur (2600)

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### Royal Tombs (Death Pits) at Ur 2600 BCE

Excavated by C. Leonard Woolsey (1924-34)

- found 1850 burials
- 17 were "royal tombs"

[http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/tombs/explere/exp\\_set.html](http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/tombs/explere/exp_set.html)




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**Title:** *The Goat in Thicket (Ram and Tree)*, one of the pair from the Great Death Pit in the Royal Cemetery of Ur. Muqaiyir, Iraq.  
**Date:** ca. 2600 BCE.

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Standard of Ur:  
Inlaid Lapis Lazuli from Tomb PG 779  
2600-2400 BCE

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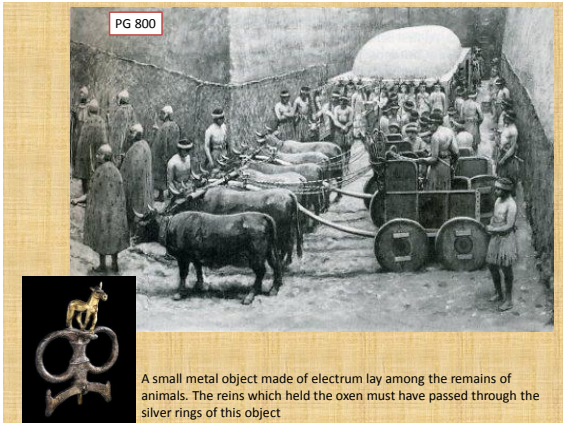
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PG 800

A small metal object made of electrum lay among the remains of animals. The reins which held the oxen must have passed through the silver rings of this object

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Wall plaque- Ur-Nanše and family.  
Limestone w/ cuneiform inscription  
Girsu (modern Tello), Southern Iraq  
Early Dynastic IIIA 2550-2400 BCE

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### Domination of Lagash (2450-2360)

- Struggle between Kish, Uruk and Ur for control over Sumer
  - raids by nomadic Elamite tribes
- King Eannatum amassed a large army
  - attacked city of Umma
- Commemorative Inscriptions of Lagash
  - *Stele of the Vultures*

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Stele of Eannatum. ca. 2460 BCE

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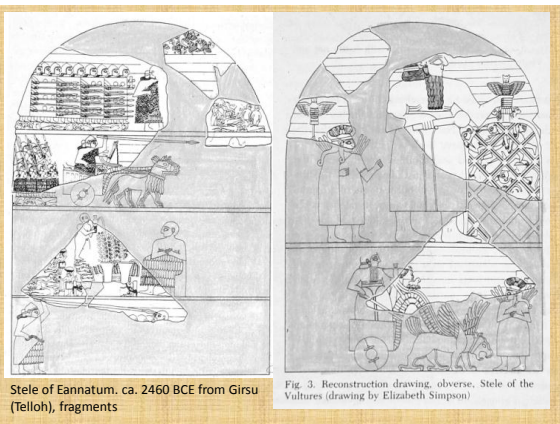
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Stele of Eannatum. ca. 2460 BCE from Girsu (Telloh), fragments

Fig. 3. Reconstruction drawing, obverse, Stele of the Vultures (drawing by Elizabeth Simpson)

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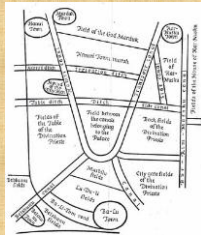
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## Sumerian agriculture

- Main canals were nearly 75 feet wide, had hundreds of connecting channels, and ran for several miles



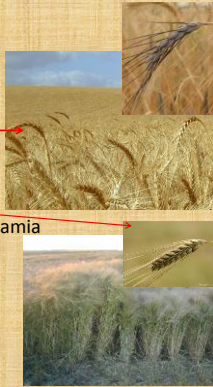
Foot Sowing Plow



## The Sumerian Diet

Cereals were primary calories

- wheat (emmer, einkorn, far)
- millet
- barley
  - first economic unit in Mesopotamia
- used in a variety of ways
  - flour
  - porridge
  - beer




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### Sumerian Diet

- milk
  - butter (main source of fats)
- very little meat
  - fish (shellfish)
  - birds
  - turtles
- honey
- syrup
- fruits and vegetables
  - onions and garlic




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### Sumerian Cosmology

- Mesopotamia was a flat disk with a rim of mountains
- all floating on a sea of water
    - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE\\_4XJK93bQ&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE_4XJK93bQ&feature=related)
  - all things in the world was animate
    - trees, rocks, springs alive and directed by supernatural beings
  - astral bodies moved across the sky
    - (great vault)

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## Sumerian Pantheon



**Title:** Statues, Abu Temple. Tell Asmar, Iraq  
**Date:** ca. 2700–2500 BCE

- **An:** God of heaven
- **Enlil:** God of the air; patron deity of Nippur.
- **Ninlil:** An air goddess and wife of Enlil
- **Enki:** God of freshwater, male fertility, and knowledge; patron deity of Eridu.
- **Inanna:** Goddess of sexual love, female fertility and warfare; matron deity of Uruk.
- **Ki:** Goddess of the earth.
- **Nanna,** God of the moon; one of the patron deities of Ur
- **Ningal:** Wife of Nanna.
- **Ninurta:** God of war, agriculture; patron deities of Lagash
- **Utu:** God of the sun at the E'barbara temple of Sippar

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**Title:** *Priest-King Feeding Sacred Sheep*, from vicinity of Uruk (Warka), Iraq  
**Date:** ca. 3300 BCE  
**Museum:** Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

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## Temple Worship

- Religion revolved around the city temple
- Female deities had male priests
- Male deities had female priestesses
- spiritual leader of the city
- exercised great political authority
- temples extremely rich
- 1/3 economy
- sacred prostitution



Temple Oval at Khafaje

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Apsu: the fresh waters (male principle)  
Tiamat: the salt waters (female principle)

Ea, the god of intelligence and wisdom,  
puts Apsu in a trance and then kills him.



The statue of the god Marduk  
with his dragon, from a  
Babylonian cylinder seal.  
Marduk killed Tiamat.

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### Cults statues and rites

- small statue of the god/dess
- housed clothed fed and sheltered
- priests went about the temple nude
- lest clothing offend the deities
- sexual practices in the temple
  - sacred prostitutes
  - hymns, music with flutes, drums and lyres
  - offering of food, milk, beer, vegetables
  - sacrifice of a bull



Statuettes of Temple of Abu,  
Tell Asmar  
c. 2700-2600 BCE, gypsum

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