

# FARMERS AND DOCTORS, BARBERS AND BUILDERS

## MESOPOTAMIAN WORKERS, SLAVE AND FREE

Sunbaked clay lasts almost forever. And this is why we still have many original Mesopotamian texts—not just copies. The clay tablets that Mesopotamian scribes wrote on tell us about the lives of people who lived, worked, and died thousands of years ago. The surprising thing is that the Mesopotamian texts sometimes tell us more about the lives of *ordinary* people—such as gardeners, weavers, and merchants—than about the lives of the kings, queens, and priests who ruled over them.

Ningallam was one such ordinary person. She was a slave, but we know her name because scribes wrote it, month after month, in the records of the palace where they all worked. There are several ways that Ningallam might have become a slave. For example, she might have been a prisoner of war, or she might have been born to slave parents and purchased by the queen's palace.

Ningallam raised pigs for the queen's palace in the Sumerian city of Lagash around 2400 BCE. The ancient records tell us that Ningallam received 18 liters of barley each month—which equals  $4\frac{3}{4}$  gallons. Her two children must have helped their mother in her work, because they too received monthly rations of grain. Poor children could not go to school. Instead, they learned their parents' crafts and began working at an early age.

Together, Ningallam's family received 42 liters of grain a month—barely enough to survive on. Many modern families buy milk in plastic jugs. The largest size holds a gallon. Imagine  $10\frac{1}{2}$  of these filled with grain. That's how much Ningallam and her children received each month. But later the pattern changed and, for a while, Ningallam's name

### CLAY. CLAY. GLOOO-RIOUS CLAY!

The ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians wrote on papyrus—a type of paper made from reeds—whereas the Mesopotamians wrote on clay tablets. Papyrus may seem to be more modern, but papyrus can be torn or burned, and, in time, falls apart. Although some papyrus texts have survived, especially in the dry Egyptian desert, most disintegrated. The Greek and Roman histories, myths, and other works that have come down to us are copies of copies.



Women spun, dyed, and wove fabric for their families—and sometimes for priests and the royal family too.

appeared without her usual rations. Her children's names were still listed as receiving their usual 12 liters each. Why was Ningallam left out? A later text gives the answer; it lists the “children of Ningallam” as “orphans.” Ningallam had died. But her name was still on the lists. Why? Perhaps it was to identify who her children were, because this was before the invention of last names.

Not much is known about how slaves were treated in ancient Mesopotamia. But we do know that Ningallam's children kept on raising pigs for the palace because her children's names appear in palace records for many years.

Thousands of people worked for the temples and palaces. Some, like Ningallam and her children, raised animals. Others wove cloth, made tools and weapons, created fine jewelry, or brewed beer. Still others made furniture, carved stone statues and inscriptions, or tanned leather. Some worked in teams in or near the palace and temple buildings, but others worked outside the town limits. Ningallam's pigs probably weren't kept anywhere near the palace—too smelly. Metalworkers also worked in the

66 Records from a queen's estate, Iraq, 2400 BCE

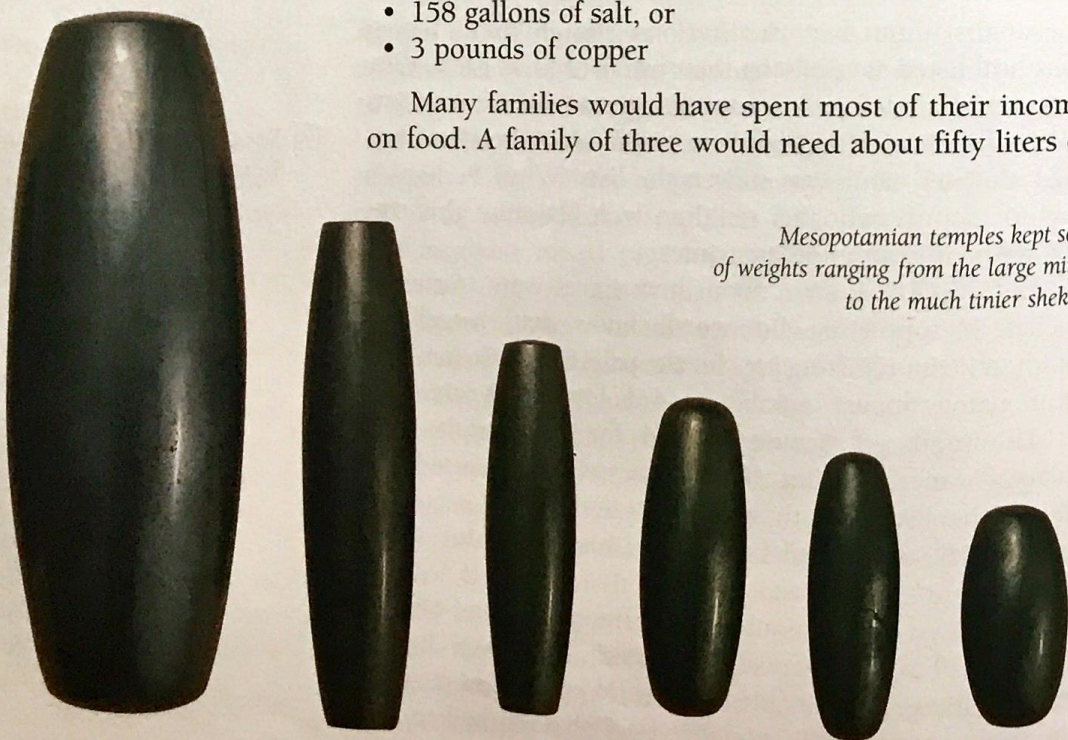
countryside because the very hot fires that they used made a lot of smoke. But the palace and temples paid them all with grain, oil, and wool, and the scribes wrote their names on clay tablets.

Some workers were better paid than Ningallam was, and most weren't slaves. Some workers received more grain, oil, and wool than they actually needed for survival. These lucky ones had enough left over to buy other things that they wanted. Some were even paid in silver. Workers usually expected to receive one shekel or less of silver a month. Even though a shekel only weighed about eight grams (about the weight of two squares from a chocolate bar), it went pretty far. One collection of laws from around 1900 BCE lists what a shekel of silver could buy:

- 79 gallons of barley, or
- $\frac{3}{4}$  gallon of best oil, or
- $\frac{2}{5}$  gallon of pig's fat, or
- 6 pounds of wool, or
- 158 gallons of salt, or
- 3 pounds of copper

Many families would have spent most of their income on food. A family of three would need about fifty liters of

*Mesopotamian temples kept sets of weights ranging from the large mina to the much tinier shekel.*



66 Laws of Eshnunna, Iraq, 1900 BCE

barley a month. Ningallam's family received much less. They would also have needed salt for seasoning, wool for clothing, and oil for cooking and lighting. (People in the ancient Near East used oil lamps to light their homes at night.) They probably grew vegetables in a small garden and added to their diet with fish from the river. A worker who received more barley than he or she needed each month could trade some of it for other goods.

Top palace and temple officials were paid in land that they could farm. With the help of hired workers, they could become rich from the sale of their farm products. By the time of Hammurabi's empire, more people owned their own farms and had started businesses than in Ningallam's time.

If you could walk through a Mesopotamian city in Hammurabi's time, the sights and smells would tell you a lot about the types of work that went on and the lives of the workers there.

On one street you might find bakers, sweating in the summer heat as their ovens baked loaves of bread. Farther along a potter might have his kilns going, firing a batch of clay bowls and jars that he would sell later. The neighborhood handyman might be melting down metal scraps, planning to reshape them later into things his neighbors might buy. Imagine the mingled aromas of bread, smoke, and hot metal.

Further along, you might find a tavern, at the corner of two streets. Taverns, which were often owned by women, weren't always very respectable because criminals often hung out there. Hammurabi mentioned this problem in his law 109: "If there should be a woman innkeeper in whose house criminals gather, and she fails to . . . lead them off to the palace authorities, that woman innkeeper shall be killed."

Professionals—important people such as physicians, veterinarians, builders, and barbers—also lived and worked in the city. The king's barber was often one of the king's closest advisors. (Anyone who regularly held a sharp knife that near the king's head had better be trustworthy!) But even the barber had to follow certain rules—or get into trouble. He wasn't allowed to cut a slave's hair in such a way

#### PAYING THE BILL

The Mesopotamians invented a clever way of paying for things before coins were invented. A wealthy man would wear a coil of silver around his wrist. When he wanted to buy something, he would just snip off a bit of silver, which would be weighed on a scale. Although each merchant probably kept a set of weights, the only ones that everyone accepted as accurate were the ones in the temple. If a merchant tried to cheat his customers by using false weights, his set could be checked against the temple set. The first coins in the world were invented in Lydia (in modern Turkey) in the sixth century BCE. This invention made shopping much easier!

66 Laws of Hammurabi, around 1755 BCE

“Laws of Hammurabi, around 1755 BCE

that the hairstyle no longer identified him or her as a slave. One of Hammurabi's laws said that “If a barber shaves off the slave-hairlock . . . without the slave owner's permission, they shall cut off that barber's hand.”

Some of the biggest houses you would see, on this walk through the city, would belong to the merchants who brought luxury materials from other lands. Few of the merchants traveled personally. They usually hired trading agents who did the hard, and often dangerous, work of traveling to foreign places.



Now that towns were becoming more prosperous and traders were bringing luxury goods to Mesopotamia, where did ordinary Mesopotamians do their shopping? If they were farmers, their farms produced much of what they needed to eat and most families seem to have woven their own cloth from the wool of their sheep. (Even people who made a living in another way, such as innkeepers and priests, often owned farmland as well.) But they still must have needed to buy pots, tools, and furniture. They may have had surplus grain or vegetables to sell, as well. There were public squares in the cities, and people also seem to have gathered at open spaces near the city gates. They may have set up their markets in these places, like ancient shopping centers—the Southgate Mall, perhaps?

*A Mesopotamian shopkeeper holds the scales that he uses to weigh metals. If customers didn't trust him, the merchant's scales could be checked against the "master set" in the temple.*