

INTRODUCTION

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Can't everyone—even small children—name the country where she or he lives? Today, the answer would surely be yes, but that hasn't always been true. In ancient times, borders shifted, so that even many grown-ups had only fuzzy ideas about which land they lived in.

Ancient Mesopotamia, which was located in the region of modern Iraq, had no ancient name. The people who lived there never spoke of the whole land as we now know it. The ancient Greeks later came up with the name Mesopotamia for the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (meso + potamia = “between” + “the rivers,” in ancient Greek.)

People who lived in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago thought of themselves as belonging to a particular city or region, where a particular language was spoken. Later, around the 15th century BCE, they began to identify themselves with the huge cities that dominated the land. At this point, historians call the flat river valley of southern Mesopotamia “Babylonia,” and the hills of northern Mesopotamia “Assyria.”

Historians have tried to figure out exactly where the borders of the ancient lands were, but it's often hard to do. So they sometimes look at wider areas where the people shared a common culture. The ancient Near East is just such a region. The lands of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Anatolia (modern Turkey), Persia (modern Iran), the Levant (modern Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian territories), and Syria shared many things in ancient times—perhaps most important was their writing system. We could call them the “cuneiform lands,” the places where educated people used a wedge-shaped writing system to inscribe their words and ideas on clay tablets.

The cuneiform writing system developed in Mesopo-

tamia, but over time it spread to neighboring lands. Along with the writing system came trade, a shared interest in law and literature, and a similar way of thinking about the gods. The cuneiform sign for the storm god's name, for example, was the same in many lands, including Mesopotamia and Syria. People from Mesopotamia would read that sign as “Adad.” But in Canaan, where the storm god had a different name, people would read it as “Baal.”

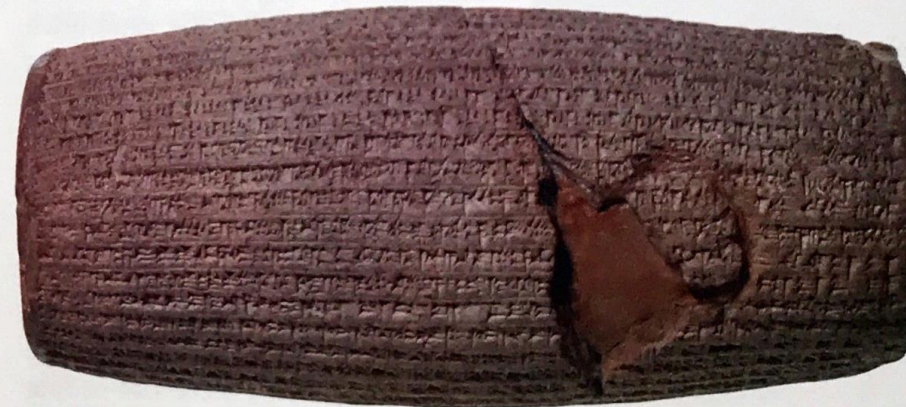
The history of the cuneiform lands starts with the first cities, around 3500 BCE, and lasts for more than 3,000 years. Historians and archaeologists piece together the history of the cuneiform lands by studying the stories of commoners and kings, warriors and lawmakers, inventors and adventurers, scribes and priestesses, and by carefully examining the objects and buildings they left behind.

WHY IS 1700 IN THE 18TH CENTURY?

The 18th century BCE—during the height of the ancient Near Eastern civilization—took place in the 1700s BCE. It may seem that this century ought to be the 17th, because the year numbers all begin with 17—1706, 1707, 1708, and so on. But it isn't, because the 100s were actually the *second* century.

MAPLES FOR REMEMBERING

The first letters of the Near Eastern regions spell MAPLES: Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Persia, the Levant, Egypt, and Syria. Even though Egypt was part of this ancient world, scholars study it separately because it had a different writing system and different religious beliefs from the rest of the Near East.

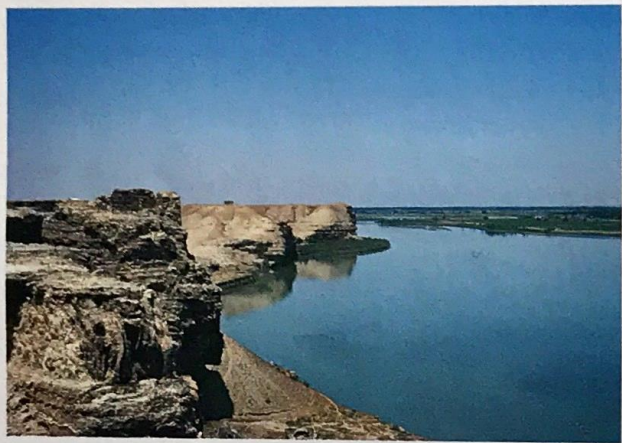


Although most cuneiform tablets were rectangular, many were barrel-shaped, like this one. Students wrote on circular tablets, and royal scribes sometimes used prism-shaped tablets for their royal inscriptions.

66 A SYRIAN TELL
AND ROYAL TOMBS

ANCIENT TRASH AND BURIED TREASURE

ARCHAEOLOGISTS AT WORK



Syria's steep cliffs drop right to the edge of the Euphrates River, creating a narrow valley. But in the distance, green fields flourish, made rich by water from the river.

It's early morning. The sun hasn't risen, but the sky has begun to turn pink in the east. The Euphrates River looks like a silver streak against the black landscape. Roosters crow in the small village of Tell Ashara in the Middle Eastern country of Syria. Voices call to one another in Arabic as farmers walk along the dusty roads to their fields. In one of the mud-brick houses, men and women sit around a wooden table, sharing a breakfast of pita bread, yogurt, hard-boiled eggs,

and oranges, washed down with cups of instant coffee. They're planning their day's work, deciding where to dig. They speak in English, Italian, Arabic, and French.

Who are these people, and what are they up to? They are archaeologists, and their work combines the talents of historians, junk collectors, scientists, and detectives. They are paid to be nosy, exploring the buried secrets of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago by digging up ancient cities and towns. Why are they up so early? To keep from melting! By afternoon, the mercury could hit a sizzling 115 degrees Fahrenheit or more in the shade. So the archaeologists at Tell Ashara do most of their work early in the day.

The archaeologists walk from their house to the *tell*—a huge hill rising from the plain. Tells (sometimes spelled *tels*) mark the places where human beings have lived, worked, and worshiped. They are made up of windblown dirt, discarded pottery, leftover bits from ancient meals, and parts of broken walls. Sometimes a town or village rests on top of

the ancient remains. But often, the site has been abandoned. The word *tell* is the same in modern Arabic and Hebrew, and in the ancient languages of the Near East because these languages are all related to one another. And it works in English, too, because a tell does exactly that: it *tells* about the past. It's an archaeologist's workshop.

The archaeologists at Tell Ashara—like the archaeologists at dozens of places in the Near East—carry picks, notebooks, digging tools, laptop computers, and bag lunches to the work site. Flat fields line the path to the tell on both sides. Manmade ditches between the fields carry water to the thirsty crops that grow there, mostly wheat and barley. Poplar trees mark the boundaries between fields. Orchards of palms and apricot trees patch the landscape with green and gold.

Workmen from the nearby village join the archaeologists at the tell. These men wear headscarves for protection from the burning sun. They have walked to work or ridden on bicycles, motorcycles, or even donkeys. Many of these workers have been excavating local sites for years, and they know how to “read” what they see in the ground.

Together, the archaeologists and workmen at Tell Ashara gradually uncover the remains of an ancient city where people lived for thousands of years. In ancient times, it was called Terqa, and it was one of the biggest cities in ancient Syria. As with all archaeological sites, the most recent remains are in the top levels. In the mud at the top, the archaeologists found ballpoint pens and blue jeans from only a few years ago. The oldest remains lie at the bottom, and are more than five thousand years old.

Thousands of tells dot the landscape in the Near East, so how do archaeologists decide where to dig? They usually lean toward larger tells. And they tend to avoid tells that are partly covered by modern buildings. But there are usually many tells to choose from, so the archaeologists collect



A deep trench cuts through the tell at Jericho, revealing recent materials at the top and very ancient remains below. People lived in Jericho even before the invention of pottery, thousands of years ago.

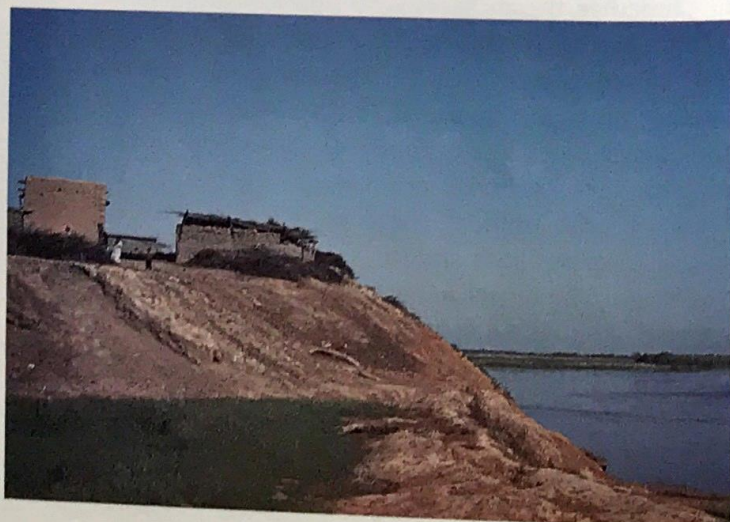
HOW BIG IS BIG?

More than 12 million people live in Tokyo today and 8 million inhabit New York City. A big city in the ancient world seems tiny by comparison. A thriving Mesopotamian city might have only ten thousand inhabitants, but that was huge, compared to a village.

pottery sherds—broken pieces—from the surface of each tell. They try to imagine what the pot looked like when it was new. Was it tall and thin, or was it short and thick? Was its surface rough or shiny? Did the potter paint his pot or leave it plain? Because pottery styles were different at different times, the answers to these questions help archaeologists figure out when the pot would have been used and, from that information, when the tell was occupied. When their choice is final, the team begins to work.

To most people, a dig looks like a big hole in the ground. Everything is the same pale brown color—all made of mud and clay. But a trained eye can pick out pieces of a wall, part of a floor, or even a few baked tiles. The workmen carry dirt out of the pit in buckets. The archaeologists help with the digging, using trowels, picks, and brushes. And everyone watches for scorpions because of their poisonous stings.

The archaeologists all have special jobs to do. Some direct the local workmen. Others write down exactly where each “find” was discovered. The “findspot” helps to pinpoint how each object was used and when it was buried or thrown away. For example, a room with many pots that contain the remains of food was probably a pantry. And a pantry on the lowest level of the tell will be much older than one higher up. One archaeologist takes hundreds of



A modern village rests atop an ancient tell, formed by the remains of a town that was buried long ago. For thousands of years, people used the water from the nearby Euphrates River to water their crops.

photos and describes each discovery in a notebook. Another specializes in plant remains. Yet another is a pottery expert. One of the archaeologists records all the written documents that are uncovered, if there are any, and later translates them. A specialist in animal bones identifies different animals from the remains of their bones. A **conservator** helps to protect everything that is found. All these people have the same goal: to learn as much as they can about the ancient village or city and its people by studying what they discover in the ground.

What archaeologists usually find isn't very glamorous. We call it “buried treasure” because of the story it tells. In fact, it's mostly trash that nobody wanted anymore: broken pottery and bricks, bone scraps left after a meal, or a cracked grinding stone that women once used to make flour for baking. Almost everything that has survived is made of bone, stone, or clay. Archaeologists almost never find straw mats, carpets, clothes, or baskets. These materials will have fallen apart long ago. Harder materials such as copper and bronze aren't found very often either because people tended to re-use them instead of throwing them away. Often valuable things were buried in the tombs of kings, queens, and other wealthy people, but grave robbers have stolen most of these treasures—though not all of them.

Glenn Schwartz, a university professor and archaeologist, got lucky. He and his students were working at a dig site called Umm el-Marra, in Syria. They were astonished to discover a tomb that the thieves had missed. Inside, they found both human and animal remains. Among the dry, white bones were gold and silver treasures. Very few archaeologists have the thrill of discovering a tomb like that one. But they can learn a lot from ordinary tells—from what people left or threw away.

What if someone was trying to understand *your* family by going through your trash? What artifacts would they find? A used-up watercolor set, a magazine with a page torn out, or a tomato-stained pizza box? (Any bits of pepperoni

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Conservators try to protect ancient objects, sometimes treating them with special materials to keep them from falling apart. Sunlight and moisture in the air can damage or destroy these treasures.



66 Gold headband from Umm el-Marra, Syria, 2300 BCE

**ARCHAEOLOGIST
AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
GLENN SCHWARTZ**

Glenn Schwartz takes notes on a tomb, while student Alice Petty cleans a bone using a dental tool. Dr. Schwartz wears a headscarf for protection against the broiling sun. He is a professor of Near Eastern studies in the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. He is the leader of a team of archaeologists and graduate students working on a tell



at Umm el-Marra, believed to be the site of Tuba, one of first cities of ancient Syria. Graduate students, like Petty, have already been to college. They go back to a university to work on their favorite subject—archaeology or history, for example. After years of study, they may become professional archaeologists, conservators, historians, or professors themselves.

How did you discover the tomb at Umm el-Marra?

My graduate students and I had been investigating this tell since 1994. In the fall of 2000, we were digging at the highest point of the tell, which would have been the center of the ancient city. Because temples were built on high mud-brick platforms in the center of the city, we dug at the tell's highest point, hoping to discover a buried palace or temple. We were very disappointed to find that there wasn't one. Instead, we found a really big heap of stones. We didn't know what to make of this mound. Sometimes, in

archaeology, you find things that just don't make any sense. I told Alice Petty, one of my graduate students, to make sure that all of the stones were sketched and photographed and then to get rid of them. So she did that and immediately hit on what seemed to be a small, rectangular room with stone walls.

Were you excited to discover a buried room?

Not really. That wasn't too exciting, especially when you're hoping for a palace. But then we realized that the room was full of unbroken pottery. Now *that* was unusual. Most things are in bits and pieces by the time we

find them, thousands of years after they've been used and thrown out.

Up to that point, Alice hadn't been particularly lucky with her finds. She never seemed to find anything really wonderful. In fact, a couple of nights before, at dinner when we had chicken, she was sharing a wishbone with another graduate student. She wished that she'd find something—*anything*—exciting, for once. And she won the “pull.”

Sounds like her wish was coming true.

It sure was. Next she spotted some pieces of gray metal sticking up from the ground. Now, if they'd been green, we'd have known they were copper, because copper turns green as it ages. But gray meant that they were silver, which is very valuable. They looked like spearheads. But then came the big discovery. Bones! We called over the bone expert on our team, and she told us that the bones were not animals, but humans. That's how we knew it was a tomb.

Could you tell anything about these bones, other than that they had belonged to a person?

We didn't just find a few bones. We found a whole skeleton. Four skeletons, in fact. There were two young women, buried side-by-side, each with a baby beside her. Alice had found an untouched tomb. She was completely flabbergasted. It was a shock—a wonderful shock.

Who were these people—or, rather, who had they been?

We don't know for sure. But the women were buried with lots of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli—a valuable blue stone that

would have come from faraway Afghanistan. One of the babies had on a bronze collar, and one of the women had a small iron object on her necklace. Iron was unusual and valuable in those days. All this told us that the women were very wealthy, probably members of a royal family.

What else did you find in the tomb?

We noticed the top of another skull, and when we excavated further, we found a whole other layer. On this second level down were the skeletons of two men. With them was a bronze dagger and a bronze spearhead. The men had fewer valuables buried with them, as compared to the women. But one man wore a silver headband. We kept digging, of course, and found a third layer and another skeleton, another grown person buried with a small silver cup and some silver pins—kind of like ancient safety pins.

Why would so many people be buried together like that?

We can't be sure at this point, but we've got some ideas. Here's one possibility: two women and their babies died, sometime around 2300 BCE, perhaps in an epidemic... some terrible disease. We know from Mesopotamian texts that people living at this time believed in life after death. They thought you had to take gifts to give to the spirits who guarded the underworld. Otherwise, they'd give you a hard time. And because the women were royals, lower-ranking men were killed and buried with them—perhaps to serve them in the afterlife. That would explain the silver cups and valuable objects in the tomb.



Archaeologists found the skulls of two donkeys on top of a box containing the donkeys' bodies at Umm el-Marra, Syria.

What was the weirdest thing that you found in the tomb?

The weirdest thing might be donkeys. We found the skeletons of two small donkeys

in a brick box next to the tomb. These creatures had been buried standing up. And their heads had been cut off. The skulls were stuck on top of the box. Then two years later, in 2002, we found more donkeys and more skulls near the tomb.

Why wasn't this tomb robbed?

I don't know. We found another tomb not far away, and it had been stripped of all its valuables. Maybe this one was honored and protected for a long time, but then maybe the roof caved in, and it was forgotten somehow. It's a puzzle. There are very few tombs found in the ancient Near East with gold and silver still in them. I guess we just got lucky!

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in the corner?) Would they find a dog food can or a bag of kitty litter? Disposable diapers? Contact lens solution? Nosy snoops would learn a lot. They'd have a pretty good idea about how many people live in your home, their ages, and what each person likes. Archaeologists learn the same sorts of things from ancient trash, even though there was much less to throw away in those days.

Standing on the floor of an ancient house, surrounded by things left behind, an archaeologist may feel like a time traveler. The oven in the middle of a courtyard conjures up the image of the woman who once baked bread there. Small figures, clay wagons, and other toys bring to life the children who played, not far from their mother's watchful eye. The remains of the nearby well invite us to imagine the man of the house drawing water for his family. Wouldn't those ancient people be amazed to learn that we think about them now, thousands of years after their deaths?