

CHAPTER 2

RIVERS AND DITCHES, TEMPLES AND FARMS

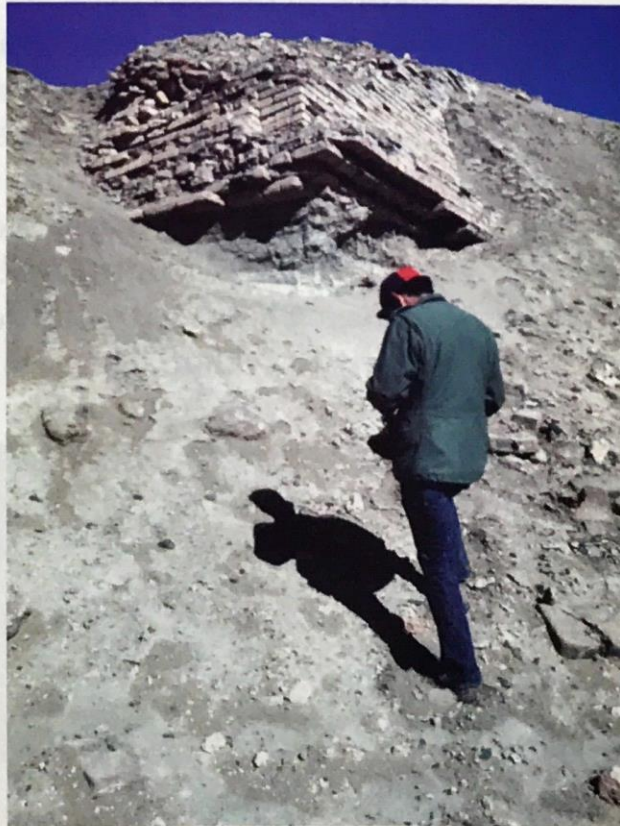
IRRIGATION AND THE GROWTH OF TOWNS

Ever since the British reporter Jonathan Glancy was young, he wanted to visit the ancient Mesopotamian town of Eridu, built almost seven thousand years ago. The exhibits in the British Museum in London had fascinated him. In an article in a British newspaper, the *Guardian*, Glancy recalled wandering through the museum's "echoing gray halls, . . . captivated by the treasures of Mesopotamia, . . . winged bulls with the heads of fierce bearded men, . . . cuneiform scripts baked . . . into brick tablets, and a jigsaw of civilizations."

In 2002, Glancy's wish came true. He went to Mesopotamia, now called Iraq. When he reached Eridu, in southern Iraq, he was amazed by how dry and isolated everything seemed in the blistering hot desert. He found that, "what hits first is not history but a wall of heat and an even hotter wind. Our feet crunch across seashells—thousands of years old." Seashells in the desert? The ancient Mesopotamians

“THE
LAMENTATION OVER
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OF SUMER AND
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A MESOPOTAMIAN
TOWN

Town of Eridu, Iraq, around
5000–4000 BCE



It's hard to imagine that the bleak, desert landscape at Eridu used to be a green marsh.

64 "The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Akkad," Iraq, around 2000 BCE

described Eridu as a place where river water mixed with the salty water of the sea. According to one ancient writer from around 2000 BCE, Eridu was a place "overflowing with great waters."

Eridu was once a thriving town in what the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia, which means "land between the rivers." In fact, very few people actually lived *between* Mesopotamia's two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The climate was (and is) so hot and dry, people had to live right on the riverbanks in order to have enough water.

Archaeologists tell us that Eridu was on the bank of the Euphrates in ancient times. So why is it in the desert today, miles from water? The rivers themselves know the answer. Thousands of years ago, as the Tigris and Euphrates flowed south, they carried soil and dropped it downstream. Gradually, the build-up of fine soil and sand created a broad, flat valley between the rivers. The southern stretch of this valley has no rocks in it—nothing hard enough to make a solid bed for the rivers to flow through. So after the rivers flooded, which they did every year, they didn't always go back to the same path.

Ancient people built canals and levees—raised banks—to keep the rivers flowing near their settlements. For thousands of years, their efforts succeeded. But eventually, the rivers rebelled. Like a horse that throws off its saddle and reins, the Euphrates changed its course and left Eridu stranded in the middle of the Iraqi desert.

Even when the river flowed by Eridu, it must have been a pretty uncomfortable place to live—incredibly hot in the

summer and dry all year round. In fact, archaeologists have discovered that ancient peoples first settled in northern Mesopotamia, where it was cooler. Living among its hills, shady trees, and lush grasses, they survived by hunting wild animals for food. They gathered fruits, seeds, and roots and harvested the wheat and barley that grew wild there. Later, the villagers began to farm and to keep animals in herds. Gradually some farmers moved south into the river valley, taking their now-domesticated crops and animals with them.

No one knows for sure why some of these ancient peoples moved to southern Mesopotamia. Perhaps they wanted to live near the coast of the Persian Gulf, which, like the Euphrates, was closer to Eridu in those days. Perhaps they wanted to fish in the gulf and hunt wild birds on its shores. Archaeologists know, though, that by around 5000 BCE, settlers had reached the place that was later called Eridu.

The first settlers lived in reed and mud huts built on a dry sand dune, surrounded by marshes. The people grew crops in the damp soil near the marshland and fished in its waters. But then the marshes began to dry out, so the people of Eridu dug canals. At first, they dug simple ditches to bring water from the river to their fields. Over time, their irrigation system became more complex, with larger and larger canals.

The people who lived in Eridu between 5000 and 4000 BCE used the reeds that grew along the riverbanks to make baskets and mats. They also used reeds for roofing. Bones found in the tells show that dinner included fish from the river and animals, such as birds and gazelles, that lived on its banks.

Goats, sheep, and cattle all ran wild, until people learned they could fence a pair of animals and start a herd. These domesticated animals provided a regular supply of milk, meat, and wool.



The building carved in the middle of this alabaster trough was probably made from reeds. This ancient building technique is still used today in southern Iraq.

Water, reeds, and palm trees once marked the landscape in southern Mesopotamia. In ancient times, the area around Eridu would have looked like this, but now it is a desert.



The only trees that grew well in the south were palm trees. Even though their fruit, the date, was good to eat, the trees weren't very useful for building, because the wood is spongy and isn't strong enough. And because stones were scarce, the people built their homes from what the earth provided: mud and clay. In fact, the ancient people of Eridu used mud and clay for almost everything: tools, pots, and dishes. They made balls from clay and used them as ammunition in their slingshots. They even made clay sickles for cutting grain.

Archaeologists have found some things at Eridu that didn't come from southern Mesopotamia: shells and colored stones that were used for beads; hoes made of flint, a very hard stone; and knives made of obsidian. The flint was from northern Mesopotamia, and the obsidian, a glass-like rock formed in volcanoes, came from hundreds of miles away in what is now called Turkey. These objects must have come through trade. And most likely, each of them passed through many hands—ancient middlemen—before they reached Eridu.

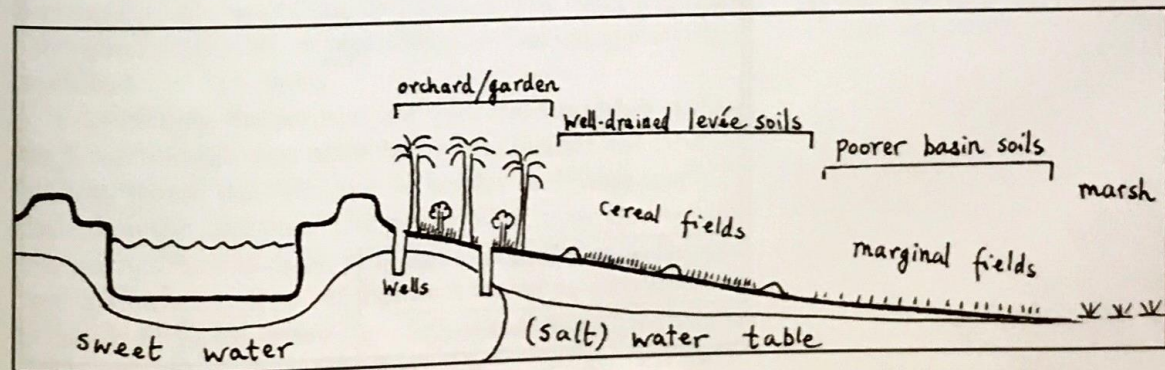
Southern Mesopotamia was the center of the action: one of the first places in the world where villages grew into towns. Archaeologists aren't sure why this happened, but they have some ideas about it. Perhaps, as families had more children and the population grew, the irrigation ditches had to stretch further and be dug deeper to provide water for more land and more people. Then, as the canal system expanded, the fields became richer and the supply of food grew. Once it was irrigated, the soil of southern Mesopotamia produced even richer crops than the rain-fed fields of the north. Perhaps the good farming conditions encouraged people to settle near thriving southern towns, such as Eridu.

Traders—bringing such luxuries as flint, obsidian, and shell—flocked to the towns to find buyers for their goods. This, too, helped the towns to grow. People wanted to live in interesting places where they could find and buy exciting new things. What fun to have something *not* made out of clay!

Many early towns were built around shrines or small temples to the gods. One of Eridu's first mud-brick buildings was a shrine built around 5000 BCE and dedicated to Ea, the god of fresh water. In fact, the people of Eridu built 18 shrines and temples on that same spot over a two-thousand-year period from 5000 to 3000 BCE. Because people believed that their gods watched over them, perhaps it made them feel safer to live close to the place where their gods were kept. Any or all of these factors might have encouraged villages to grow into towns of maybe two thou-

Farmers who can't depend on rainfall to water their crops use irrigation instead. When you see sprinklers watering a field, or when you water your own lawn, you're seeing the descendants of an ancient technique the Mesopotamians invented.

Each year, the rivers laid down fine soil, called silt, that gradually raised the height of the riverbed. The river was actually higher than the land around it, as this archaeologist's drawing shows. But the water didn't spill over (except during the flood season) because the riverbanks also became higher each year. Farmers irrigated their crops by cutting a slice in the bank and letting water flow through a canal into their fields. When they had enough water for their crops, they would close up the gap.



REINING IN THE RIVERS

Big canals fed smaller and even smaller canals, with the water always flowing downhill from the river. But the canals needed constant attention. Without care, they could become clogged with silt, and the water would no longer flow to the fields. The whole community worked together to dig out the extra silt so that the rivers would continue to flow beside their communities and water their fields.

sand people, and later into cities of many thousands.

No one knows who ruled over the people of Eridu at the beginning of its history. That's one of many mysteries. Archaeologists have found no palaces in the lowest (earliest) levels of the tell. This means that the people didn't have kings for thousands of years. But it's likely that someone, or maybe a special group, was in charge. Perhaps the priests who tended the statue of the local god led the population in other ways, too. Perhaps they organized the men of the town so that together they could clear out the canals, build the temples to the gods, and keep the town safe. Because people hadn't invented writing yet, we have to depend upon the tells to whisper Mesopotamia's earliest secrets.

The people who lived in Mesopotamia's ancient villages and towns were like us in many ways. Their bodies and minds were the same as ours. They could think and reason, just as we do today. They just didn't have all our equipment and know-how or some of our ideas. But new ideas were blossoming all the time.

