URUK

THE WORLD’S
FIRST BIG CITY

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
Nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the world’s first major city sprang up in a fertile region of land called Mesopotamia.
The first city

Between approximately 3600 and 2600 BCE, the people of Uruk created new concepts that have come to define cities ever since: social rank, specialized occupations, political control, writing, religion, literature, and public architecture. By “city” we mean simply tens of thousands of people living in a defined place with structures that play different social roles. To support a city, people living on the land around it had to be able to cultivate an excess of food. In addition, people in the city had to come up with clever ways of distributing the food in ways that would encourage constructive behavior.

Cities began to spring up about the same time in several places around the world. But most archaeologists agree that it is fair to claim Uruk (pronounced Ō-rook) as one of the world’s first cities. The site’s current name, Warka, is Arabic. Uruk arose about 5,500 years ago. It was not that long ago, when you consider Homo sapiens have existed for more than 200,000 years.

Location, location, location

Uruk arose in the place now called Iraq. Greek historians called this area Mesopotamia, or “the land between the rivers.” Those rivers were the Euphrates to the west and the Tigris to the east.

By roughly 4000 BCE, people living on higher ground in Mesopotamia had settled down to care for domestic sheep and goats and to grow wheat, barley, and peas. Yet their climate was changing; less rain was falling, and they needed to move to more stable sources of water.
As people migrated down into the two river valleys, they found that the soil produced abundant crops due to the repeated flooding of the rivers. They could grow enough to store surplus grain. That grain was enough to support other individuals who worked at something else besides farming. The surplus grain needed to be collected and handed out; probably priests first managed this task. In addition to grains and domestic animals, people had plenty of fish and fowl from the river and marshes. Beer had already been invented, and a goddess of beer, named Ninkasi, was worshipped.

Writing, beliefs, and everyday life

A great deal is known about Uruk because of archaeological digs of the site beginning in 1850. In addition, the earliest writing in the world comes from there, dated to about 3500 BCE. People in Uruk wrote on clay tablets with reeds. The writing is called “cuneiform,” named after the wedge-shaped reeds that writers pressed into wet clay. Since clay tablets are more durable than the silk, bark, bamboo, or papyrus used by other people for writing, many of Uruk’s tablets have survived and are now held in museums.

The tablets tell us that the people of Uruk built a temple to a sky god called An and another one to his daughter, Inanna, goddess of love and war. Inanna served as the patron goddess of Uruk; its inhabitants believed that they attracted her there by building a special house for her, staffed with priests and servants. The priests managed the people’s contributions and gradually built up their power, using temples as centers for the redistribution of surplus food.

As people learned to farm, they stopped wearing clothing made from wild-animal skins. Instead, they fashioned garments out of what they could make from their domesticated animals and plants. In Mesopotamia, this meant that most people wore woolen garments made from their sheep, even in hot weather. Only high-ranking people could wear linen, a textile made from the fibers of flax plants, because it took much longer to make than weaving or knitting wool.
Uruk at its height

By 5,000 years ago, Uruk held 40,000 to 50,000 people. A few hundred years later, it reached its peak population of 50,000 to 80,000. By that time, there were 11 other cities between the rivers, and they frequently went to war with each other over land, water, and other resources. Priests gradually had to share their power with warrior leaders. Eventually, this led to a system that turned into a single king ruling each city.

Early clay tablets in Uruk contain a “standard professions list.” The list included professions from the king down through ambassadors, priests, and supervisors and on through stonemasons, gardeners, weavers, smiths, cooks, jewelers, and potters. A small group of priests were at the top of the social rank. Most people belonged to a much larger group of commoners who either owned property or did not. At the bottom was a small group of slaves, those who were captured in war, criminals, or people who owed others a great deal of money.

Historians say that the first state came about almost at the exact same time as the first city appeared. The state was made up of high-ranking people who could make others do work and hand over valuable goods. Why did the majority of people allow a few people so much power? This is difficult to answer, but on the one hand it seems that the rulers took power as more resources became available. On the other hand, it seems that citizens gave power in exchange for organization. Such organization allowed the development of big, important projects like irrigation, and for security and protection. What may have begun as a willing exchange of power may have become less so as the high-ranking people gathered more resources.

Writing began in Uruk as a way to keep track of how many sheep, goats, and grain passed through the central warehouses. It began with pictures made in wet clay representing the various goods. After about 400 years, people had figured out how to use symbols and abstract numbers instead of drawing a picture for each item. They used a small wedge to represent one, a small circle to represent 10, a large wedge for 600, and a large circle for 3,600. Their system of numbers was based partly on 10 and partly on 60 for measuring grain. This latter base-60 system led to viewing a circle as 360 degrees.

After about a thousand years, people in Uruk had developed their system of writing. It was advanced enough to allow them to write hymns, funeral songs, and superhero stories. One hymn was “The Lady of the Evening,” written about the evening star, which represented Inanna. Sumer is mentioned. It refers to the area from modern-day Baghdad down to the Persian Gulf. Here are some lines:

At the end of the day, the Radiant Star, the Great Light that fills the sky,
The Lady of the Evening appears in the heavens.
The people in all the lands lift their eyes to her...
There is great joy in Sumer.
The young man makes love with his beloved.
My Lady looks in sweet wonder from heaven.
The people of Sumer parade before the holy Inanna.
Inanna, the Lady of the Evening, is radiant
I sing your praises, holy Inanna.
The Lady of the Evening is radiant on the horizon.

Poets in Uruk also gave us our first superhero story — in fact, our first recorded story of any kind — The Epic of Gilgamesh. The tale imagines Gilgamesh, a king who may have actually ruled Uruk at about 2750 BCE, as two-thirds divine and one-third human. He has a friend, Enkidu, who becomes a city person and stops living as a wild hunter. They go on many adventures together, one of which results in Enkidu being sentenced to death. This beautiful story has several modern versions. Here are a few lines describing the city of Uruk:
When at last they arrived, Gilgamesh said to the boatman, “This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares.

The legacy of Uruk and Mesopotamia

Despite all the amazing new inventions by its people, Uruk eventually declined. After Mesopotamia experienced several hundred years of constant warfare, Sargon of Akkad (ruled 2334–2279 BCE) conquered most of it. A serious drought occurred in about 2250 BCE. By 1700 BCE, all of southern Mesopotamia had declined into a backwater of other empires. The underlying reasons seem to be environmental. The irrigation that Mesopotamians used to increase their crop yields increased the salt content of the soil. As the sun evaporated the water standing in the fields, it left behind the mineral salts that had been dissolved in the water. As the salt levels in the soil increased, the yields of grain decreased gradually. By 1700 BCE, crops were depleted by as much as 65 percent.

Mesopotamia had a new time of glory as Babylonia, under Hammurabi (ruled 1792 — 1770 BCE). Other empires warred with Babylonia until it had a final moment under King Nebuchadnezzar. In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and Jerusalem. He sent at least 10,000 Jewish people into exile in Babylon, 250 miles from Uruk.

This is thought to be close to their original home. According to the Old Testament, Abraham came from the city of Ur, in southern Mesopotamia. Apparently Abraham left Ur in about the twentieth century BCE, in the

Hammurabi receives the laws from the Mesopotamian deity Shamash
midst of drought, warfare, and collapse. He traveled southwest with his band of followers and eventually settled in what is now Israel.

Traditions from southern Mesopotamia also were adopted by Greek scholars. Especially in mathematics, ideas from Mesopotamia persist. Our day is still divided into 24 hours, each hour into 60 minutes, and each minute into 60 seconds. A circle still consists of 360 degrees. Cuneiform writing was used regionally until the beginning of the Common Era, when it disappeared.

By 300 CE, people had mostly abandoned Uruk. By the time of the Arab conquests in 634, it was completely empty.

People in Uruk put together all the pieces of what we call civilization 5,000 years ago. They combined kings, writing, temples and palaces, specialized occupations, and literature into a culture remarkably similar to what we still know, despite the many changes that have occurred since.

Sources


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