

THE FOUNDATION OF URUK

In Uruk [King Gilgamesh] built walls, a great rampart, and the temple of blessed Eanna for the god of the firmament Anu, and for Ishtar, the goddess of love. Look at it still today: the outer wall where the cornice runs, it shines with the brilliance of copper; and the inner wall, it has no equal. Touch the threshold, it is ancient. Approach Eanna the dwelling of Ishtar, our lady of love and war, the like of which no latter-day king, no man alive can equal. Climb upon the wall of Uruk; walk along it, I say; regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages laid the foundation.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH, COMPOSED c. 2000 BC



c. 3500 BC

THE MOTHER OF CITIES ♦ The first urbanized civilization was born in the region of southern Mesopotamia, known in ancient times as Sumer or Sumeria. Now lying mostly in Iraq, Mesopotamia, meaning 'the land between the rivers', is the flood plain of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Southern Mesopotamia has a very hot arid climate and it remained a virtually uninhabited desert until c. 5500 BC when the development of irrigation made it possible for farmers to settle the region and unlock the potential of its fertile alluvial soils. The population grew rapidly as cultivation intensified, and by c. 4300 BC small towns were developing across the area. By c. 3500 BC the fastest growing of these, Uruk or Warka, with a population of tens of thousands, had become the world's first city. Such a large community was impossible to govern efficiently by word of mouth and unaided human memory. By 3300 BC administrators in the city had developed a form of

LEFT Egyptian scribe. This granite funerary statue shows Petamenope (c. 650 BC), the librarian and archivist of the temple of Amun at Karnak. Scribes enjoyed high status and could become very wealthy: Petamenope could afford to build himself a large and elaborately decorated tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

ABOVE The Warka Vase. This votive alabaster vase, discovered at Uruk (Warka), is one of the earliest surviving works of narrative relief sculpture, dating to c. 3200–3000 BC. The lower tier shows growing grain and sheep and oxen. In the second tier a procession of naked men carry votive offerings of fruit and grain, and in the top tier the procession is shown ending in the temple of Inanna, the Sumerian fertility goddess.

pictographic writing from an earlier system of clay tokens which was widely used across Mesopotamia. The script was inscribed on soft clay tablets, which were allowed to dry and could be stored in archives. Thanks to Mesopotamia's dry climate, thousands of these early documents have survived, buried in the ruins of Uruk and the dozens of other Sumerian cities which had grown up on the plain by 3000 BC.

It is clear that Sumeria remained primarily an oral culture because writing was, for centuries, used only for recording taxes paid, rations issued and other economic transactions. The only exceptions are teaching materials such as word lists. Not even the names of rulers were recorded. Though much has been learned about the region's social structure and economy, reconstructing the early political history of Sumeria from these documents is as difficult as it would be to reconstruct the political history of the modern world from bundles of tax returns, invoices and credit card bills. Each Sumerian city had its own independent government, which was always based in a temple precinct. A city's ruler was, in theory, its patron god. The city itself was regarded as the property of the god, who, it was believed, actually dwelt in its temple. In practice, the government was headed by an *en* (or, if it was a woman, a *nin*), a priestly figure who acted as the earthly administrator of the god's estates and as intercessor for his or her human subjects. Archaeological excavations show that temples physically dominated Sumerian cities, emphasizing the importance of a city's relationship with its god. Temples acted as storehouses where surplus agricultural production, offered in the name of the city gods, was gathered before being redistributed as rations to administrators and craft workers or traded for raw materials, such as timber, stone and metals, which were not available locally. The Sumerian people themselves remain something of a mystery. Their own name for themselves was 'the Black-Headed People'. Their language was unrelated to any other known language, so their origins will probably never be known.

c. 2400 BC

EANNATUM OF LAGASH CONQUERS UMMA ♦ As a result of conflicts over land and water, many of the smaller Sumerian cities had become tributaries of the larger cities and their kings had been demoted to governors. One of these conflicts, between the cities of Lagash and Umma, ran for over a century. Lagash's ultimate victory over Umma was commemorated by its triumphant king, Eannatum, in words and pictures on a monument known as the Vulture Stele, only fragments of which survive.

The stele has two sides, a 'historical' side and a 'mythological' side. The historical side shows scenes of battle against the rival city of Umma, with Eannatum leading a phalanx of helmeted spearmen; the king, again, leading a parade of warriors carrying battleaxes and spears in a four-wheeled chariot; vultures carrying off the heads of the slain; and the funeral ceremony of Lagash's fallen warriors. An inscription praises Eannatum's leadership and justifies his aggression on the grounds that Umma had seized some of Lagash's territory: 'Eannatum struck at Umma. The bodies were soon 3,600 in number. ... I, Eannatum, like a fierce storm wind, I unleashed the tempest!' The mythological side of the stele shows Ningursu, the patron god of Lagash, symbolically slaughtering the city's enemies. A long inscription describes the peace agreement between the rulers of the two cities, their sacred oath, and calls down the wrath of the gods upon Umma should it rebel.

OPPOSITE **King Menkaure.** *The slate sculpture portrays Menkaure wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt. He is flanked on his right by Hathor, the goddess of love and motherhood, wearing her symbols of cow's horns and a sun disc. To his left is a personification of Hathor's name with her standard over her head. The face of both representations of Hathor is that of Menkaure's queen Khamerernebtj II.*

c. 2360 BC

THE EARLIEST KNOWN LAW CODE ✦ Laws and customs to regulate social behaviour and avoid, or resolve, conflicts of interest are universal to all human societies. In preliterate societies, laws and customs were committed to memory and passed down by word of mouth from one generation to another. The size and complexity of urbanized civilizations greatly increased the possibilities of social conflict and required rulers to take a much more formal role in law-giving. The

earliest known manifestation of this is the law code issued by King Urukagina of Lagash c. 2360 BC. No contemporary copy of Urukagina's code has survived but it is known from extracts preserved in later Mesopotamian law codes.

Urukagina was concerned to prevent the exploitation of the poor by the rich in an increasingly unequal society. One of his laws decrees that the rich must pay in silver when buying from the poor. Another decrees that the rich cannot force the poor to sell their land, livestock, grain or other food against their will. Poor families who had been enslaved by the rich because of debt were freed. Widows and orphans were exempted from taxes. To prevent exploitation by the priesthood, the funeral expenses of the poor were to be paid for by the city, including the cost of the ritual offerings of food and drink for the deceased's journey into the underworld. The humanity of Urukagina's laws extended to punishment, and the death penalty



LEFT The Vulture Stele of King Eannatum. Detail of a stele celebrating the conquest of the Sumerian city of Umma by King Eannatum of Lagash, showing a phalanx of helmeted spearmen on the march (c. 2400 BC). The soldiers' main weapons are spears and axes. They wear helmets of metal or perhaps leather, and shaggy sheepskin skirts.

was rarely applied. Other measures dealt with corrupt practices by palace officials. Urukagina addressed his laws not to his subjects but to Ningursu, Lagash's patron deity. Justice pleased the gods, and the gods in turn would support the just king.

c. 2350 BC

TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD ♦ The age of the independent Sumerian city states was brought to an end by Lugalzagesi, the king of Uruk, who overthrew Urukagina of Lagash and went on to conquer the rest of Sumer. Lugalzagesi's power was not confined to Sumer. One of his campaigns took him northwest along the Euphrates River before crossing the Syrian desert to reach the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, which was considered by the Sumerians to be the edge of the world.

c. 2334 BC

SARGON THE GREAT BECOMES KING OF AKKAD ♦ Lugalzagesi's career of conquest was brought to an abrupt end by Sargon the Great. Sargon was the king of Akkad (or Agade), a city in central Mesopotamia whose exact location has never been identified: ancient sources describe it as being 'in front of' Babylon. Later legend supplied Sargon with a suitably noble pedigree but he was in fact a usurper, a high official who seized the throne of Kish from his employer King Ur-Zababa and then moved his capital to Akkad. Because Sargon's name (Šarru-kīnu) means 'the true king' it was probably not his birth name but one he



ABOVE Vase of Entemena. This silver vase was dedicated to the Sumerian storm god Ningursu by Entemena, the second successor to Eannatum as ruler of Lagash. The vase is decorated with images of the thunderbird, which was closely associated with Ningursu.

OVERLEAF Sumeria at war. Scene from the so-called 'Standard of Ur', actually the sound box of a musical instrument, found in a grave in the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The scene, made from shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli set in bitumen, shows a king (centre of the top tier) leading his army to war. On the lower tier, in the earliest representation of wheeled vehicles being used in warfare, vanquished enemies are shown being crushed under the solid wooden wheels of war wagons drawn by teams of asses.

adopted to establish his legitimacy after his usurpation. Sargon's first conquest was Lugalzagesi's Uruk, after which he imposed his rule on all of Sumer. Lugalzagesi was led off into captivity wearing a wooden collar. Sargon then campaigned in the east, conquering Elam (approximately Khuzestan in southern Iran) and parts of the Iranian plateau. Next, Sargon followed Lugalzagesi's route north, conquering the cities of Mari and Ebla in Syria, the 'Cedar Forest' (the Lebanon Mountains) and the 'Silver Mountains' (the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey). Sargon died c. 2278 and was succeeded in turn by his sons Rimush (r. c. 2278–2270 BC) and Manishtushu (r. c. 2269–2255 BC), both of whom were able soldiers like their father.

Sargon's conquests created a new type of state: an empire – a multi-ethnic hegemonic state.

As Sargon lacked the resources and administrative expertise to impose direct rule throughout his empire, conquered kings were demoted to vassals and required to pay annual tribute to Akkad. This form of overrule, which remained typical of Mesopotamian empires for the next 1,500 years, was inherently weak. Empires could expand rapidly under strong military kings who could enforce the obedience of their vassals.

Vassals contributed troops and supplies for further campaigns, feeding more conquests. If a weak king came to the throne, however, it was easy for vassals to declare independence and stop paying tribute. Deprived of the tribute which sustained it, the empire quickly crumbled.

Sargon's career is the first sign of a shift in the balance of power in Mesopotamia towards the north. Through the third millennium new city states arose in central



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ABOVE **Sargon the Great.** Cast copper sculpture from Nineveh thought to depict the Akkadian king Sargon the Great or his grandson Naram-Sin (late third millennium BC). The sculpture shows the great care Mesopotamian men took of their beards, oiling them and styling them by using tongs and curling irons to create ringlets and layered patterns.

THE BABYLONIAN LEGEND OF SARGON

Sargon the mighty, king of Akkad, am I. My mother was an en-priestess, I never knew my father. My father's brother lives in the highlands. My home city is Azupiranu [not a real city], which lies on the bank of the Euphrates. She conceived me, my en-priestess mother, and secretly gave birth to me, set me in a wicker basket made watertight with bitumen. She cast me into the river, from which I could not get out. The river bore me away, carrying me to Akki the water drawer. Akki the water drawer

when lowering his bucket lifted me up. Akki the water drawer raised me as his adopted son. Akki the water drawer set me to work with him as a gardener. While I was still a gardener, the goddess Ishtar grew fond of me. And so for 44 years I reigned as king, ruling and governing over the black-headed people [the Sumerians].

AUTHOR'S OWN REWRITING OF THE TEXT BASED ON COMPARISON OF THREE DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS

and northern Mesopotamia. These states were greatly influenced by Sumerian culture, adopting their writing systems, gods, mythology and political ideologies, but their inhabitants spoke Semitic languages related to Hebrew and Arabic. Sargon showed respect for Sumerian culture, using Sumerian and his own Semitic Akkadian language side-by-side in his inscriptions, but it would be the Semitic languages which prevailed in the long term.

c. 2254 BC

NARAM-SIN THE GOD-KING ✦ The Akkadian empire reached its peak under Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, who became king around 2254 BC. Mesopotamian kings claimed to rule as agents of the gods but this was not enough for Naram-Sin. He declared that he actually was a god and adopted the hubristic title 'king of the four quarters, king of the universe'. On his commemorative steles he was portrayed wearing horns, a symbol of divinity in Mesopotamian art. According to later Mesopotamian tradition Naram-Sin's presumptuousness offended Enlil, the god who granted kingly authority, who sent hordes of Gutian tribesmen from the Zagros mountains to the east to ravage Mesopotamia, causing his empire to collapse. It is true that no later Mesopotamian king ever claimed to be a god but in reality Naram-Sin defeated the Gutian invasions and passed on his empire intact to his son Shar-Kali-Shari when he died in c. 2217 BC.

Deprived of the tribute which sustained it, the empire quickly crumbled.

c. 2244 BC

KING PEPI'S PET DWARF ♦ After the construction of the great pyramids of Giza the authority of the Egyptian kings entered a slow decline. Royal wealth was steadily depleted by the luxuries placed in royal tombs for the king to enjoy in the afterlife and the land which was granted to the mortuary temples, where regular offerings were made, again for the kings to enjoy in the afterlife. As royal authority declined power became increasingly decentralized to local governors called nomarchs (from *nome* – a province) and other nobles who used their newfound wealth to build lavish tombs for themselves. Proud of their achievements, these *nouveaux riches* inscribed their autobiographies on the walls of their tombs, providing the earliest accounts of the lives of non-royal people. One of these self-commemorating nobles was Harkhuf, a caravan leader from Aswan on Egypt's southern border. Harkhuf led

armed trading expeditions south into Nubia and Darfur to find gold, ebony, ivory, incense and slaves. None of these was more valuable than a dwarf Harkhuf captured during an expedition to Darfur in the second year of the 94-year-long reign of King Pepi II (he came to the throne aged six and lived to be 100). A good judge of character, Harkhuf sent word ahead to the royal court at Memphis to tell the young king about the dwarf. Delighted, the young king sent word back ordering that the greatest care be taken of the dwarf. As Harkhuf's ship sailed down the Nile towards Memphis, the dwarf was given a chaperone to make sure he did not fall overboard and get eaten by a crocodile. Attendants checked on him ten times a night to make sure no harm came to him. Pepi was delighted by the dwarf but it is not recorded how long he continued to live his pampered life before the king lost interest in his new pet.

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c. 2193 BC

FALL OF THE AKKADIAN EMPIRE ♦ Shar-Kali-Shari's reign was one of mounting troubles, with continuous attacks by the Gutians and rebellions against the high taxes which were imposed to pay for the defence of the empire. The final straw was probably a long drought which began c. 2200 BC, causing a devastating famine and the complete abandonment of some cities. A Sumerian poem called 'The Curse of Agade' describes the sufferings of the people: 'For the first time since cities were built, the fields produced no grain. ... He who slept on the roof, died on the roof. He who slept in the house had no burial, the people flailed at themselves in hunger.' Following Shar-Kali-Shari's death in c. 2193 BC Mesopotamia collapsed into 80 years of political anarchy. No king was able to keep his throne for long before he was overthrown by a usurper, prompting a Sumerian chronicler to ask 'Who was king? Who was not king?' Akkad did not long survive the end of its empire. Deserted, its mud-brick buildings crumbled to dust and even its site was forgotten; the memory of the empire survived, however, as an inspiration for later generations of Mesopotamian conquerors.

2112 BC

SUMERIAN RENAISSANCE ♦ While Egypt tore itself apart, political stability was returning to Mesopotamia under Ur-Nammu (r. 2112–2095 BC), king of the Sumerian city of Ur. Ur-Nammu was originally the governor of Ur, appointed by Utuhegal of Uruk, the king who finally ended the Gutian threat to Mesopotamia. When Utuhegal drowned in an accident,

LEFT Boy king with his mother.
Calcite statuette showing the young king Pepi II sitting on the knees of his mother, queen Meryreankhnes. Pepi's reign was the longest in Egyptian

history: he came to the throne around 2246 BC and lived to be 100 years old. Disastrous famines afflicted the later years of his reign and after his death in 2152 BC royal authority collapsed.

Ur-Nammu declared independence and became king of Ur. Ur-Nammu subsequently built an empire which comprised all of Sumer and extended into northern Mesopotamia and east into Elam. Conquest certainly played a part in Ur-Nammu's empire building but his own inscriptions give the impression that diplomacy and marriage alliances also played a big part. He also made much of Ur's importance as a cult centre of the moon god Nanna. Ur-Nammu's most important legacy was the ziggurat he built in honour of Nanna at Ur. Among the most distinctive of Mesopotamian monuments, ziggurats are elevated temple platforms. Ziggurats may have been built before Ur-Nammu's reign but his is the oldest to have survived. Because the Mesopotamians built mainly in mud brick, time has not been kind to the ziggurats. Once they fell out of use in the last centuries BC, they gradually crumbled into undistinguished piles of mud and dust.

ABOVE Reconstruction of the ziggurat of Ur. *Now reduced by wind and rain to undistinguished piles of mud and dust, in their heyday Mesopotamian ziggurats were impressive buildings, rivalling the pyramids of Egypt in size. When built c. 2100 BC, the ziggurat of Ur consisted of three tiers rising over 100*

feet above the surrounding town which it would have dominated. When restored in the 5th century BC by the Babylonian king Nabonidus another four tiers were added. The temple on the highest tier was dedicated to Ur's patron deity, the moon god Nanna, whose home it was.

2004 BC

THE ELAMITES SACK UR ♦ The destruction of their city's temple was the most terrible calamity that could befall ancient Mesopotamians as it was believed that the gods literally dwelt there. If a temple was destroyed, its god was rendered homeless and was forced to abandon the city and its people. Without their god's protection, what would become of them? In wars between Mesopotamian states,

OPPOSITE **King of Ur.** *Cast copper foundation figurine of King Amar-Sin of Ur (r. 2046–2038 BC) carrying a basket of building materials on his head. Sumerians rulers placed such figurines, which probably symbolically represented the king laying the first brick, in the foundations of new temples. Amar-Sin*

was the grandson of Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Sumerian renaissance. Amar-Sin was remembered as a particularly active builder, commissioning the restoration of many ancient Sumerian monuments, including at the city of Eridu, which Sumerians believed was the place where the god Enki had created the world.

kings respected the gods of rival states, for fear of provoking their anger, and even embellished the temples of conquered cities. This was a highly political act, a direct appeal by the conqueror for the god to legitimize his rule through signs of divine favour, and a visible reminder to the conquered people of their subjection. The peoples who lived in the regions neighbouring Mesopotamia felt no such restraints however. In 2004 BC an army of Elamites, from the Khuzestan region of southwest Iran, invaded, captured and sacked Ur after a long siege. The victors killed or enslaved many of the city's people and left its temples in ruins. Ur's empire collapsed after the Elamite attack and no Sumerian city ever again achieved such a position of political dominance in Mesopotamia. Within 200 years, power had shifted irrevocably to the north.

Sumeria's failure to recover from the Elamite invasion was due to long-term environmental degradation caused by poor irrigation practices. As irrigation water evaporated from the fields under the hot Mesopotamian sun, it left behind mineral salts which, because of the low natural



THE RUINS OF UR

*Your city which has been made into ruins –
you are no longer its mistress,
Your righteous house which has been given
over to the pickaxe – you no longer inhabit it,
Your people who have been led to slaughter –
you are no longer their queen.*

LAMENTATION OVER THE DESTRUCTION OF UR, ADDRESSED TO THE GODDESS NINGAL, THE WIFE OF UR'S PATRON DEITY, THE MOON GOD NANNA, WHOSE TEMPLE WAS ONE OF THOSE DESTROYED IN THE ELAMITE ATTACK



rainfall, built up in the soil, gradually destroying its fertility. This was a slow-motion disaster, taking centuries to run its course. The Sumerians responded to declining fertility by introducing salt-tolerant strains of wheat and increasing cultivation of date palms, which are also salt-tolerant. However, as yields continued to decline Sumeria slowly became less and less able to support dense urban populations. By around the time of Christ, most Sumerian cities had been abandoned and their fields had reverted to desert. With its higher natural rainfall, farmers in central and northern Mesopotamia did not rely so heavily on irrigation and so did not suffer the same problems. The cities in these areas continued to grow, overtaking those in Sumeria in size and wealth by the beginning of the second millennium BC.

ABOVE Royal helmet. The golden ceremonial helmet belonged to Meskalamdug, king of Ur who ruled some 2500 years ago in the 23rd century BC. It is just one of many gold objects discovered in the king's tomb in the Royal Cemetery of Ur when it was excavated by

the pioneering British archaeologist Leonard Wooley in 1924. Meskalamdug's name is known only from inscriptions in the helmet, a golden bowl placed in the king's hands when he was buried, and a single bead found in the northern Mesopotamian city of Mari.

Nubia's resources at will. Following the fall of the Old Kingdom, a Nubian kingdom developed based on the city of Kerma, near the Third Cataract of the Nile. Middle Kingdom rulers reacted with campaigns of conquest to seize direct control of Nubian resources. These campaigns culminated in the reign of Senusret III, with the conquest of all of Lower Nubia (the area between the First and Second Cataracts of the Nile). A chain of over a dozen forts were built to defend the newly conquered lands. Senusret erected a commemorative stele at Semna, south of the Second Cataract, boasting of his conquests and exhorting his successors to defend them.

c. 1813 BC

THE BIRTH OF ASSYRIA ✦ In the period of weakness following the fall of Ur in 2004 BC, Amorite tribes from the Syrian desert seized control of many Mesopotamian cities. It was under Amorite rulers that Assyria and Babylon, the two kingdoms whose rivalry was to dominate much of the next 1,200 years of Mesopotamian history, first came to prominence. Ashur, the main city of Assyria, was a prosperous trade centre when it came under the rule of the Amorite Shamshi-Adad in c. 1813 BC. An excellent soldier and administrator, Shamshi-Adad was the younger son of an Amorite king from western Syria. Excluded from succession to his father's kingdom, Shamshi-Adad conquered his own. First seizing the city of Shubat-Enlil (Tell Lailan) in northern Syria, he used this as a base to conquer Ashur and the equally prosperous city of Mari on the Euphrates. Further campaigns extended his power to almost all of northern Mesopotamia. Shamshi-Adad shared power with his two sons. The elder, Ishme-Dagan, a good soldier who made his father proud, was given Assyria to rule; the younger, the petulant and immature Yasmah-Addu, was given Mari, where he soon immersed himself in the pleasures of wine and women and outraged his father by his neglect of government. Neither son prospered after their father's death in c. 1781 BC. Yasmah-Addu was soon expelled from Mari by its former ruler Zimri-Lim. More surprisingly, Ishme-Dagan failed to live up to his early promise and held on to Assyria for only about 11 years before he was expelled by the powerful Babylonian king Hammurabi. Assyria was reduced to a minor kingdom until the 14th century BC when its power recovered under a series of able kings who consciously emulated Shamshi-Adad's example of strong military rulership.

1792 BC

HAMMURABI BECOMES KING OF BABYLON ✦ Babylon was a minor city in central Mesopotamia when it came under Amorite rule c. 1894 BC. Its rise to become one of the great powers of the ancient world was due entirely to its sixth Amorite ruler, Hammurabi (c. 1792–1750 BC). When Hammurabi inherited the

throne from his father Sin-Muballit c. 1792 he did so as a vassal of Shamshi-Adad. To the south was another powerful ruler, Rim-Sin (r. 1822–1763 BC) of Larsa, who dominated Sumeria. It was against Rim-Sin that Hammurabi won his first victory when, early in his reign, he seized the Sumerian cities of Isin and Uruk. For the next 20 years Hammurabi concentrated on improving his kingdom's defence and irrigation systems, and on building diplomatic alliances with neighbouring rulers. After the death of Shamshi-Adad in 1781 BC, Zimri-Lim of Mari supported Hammurabi in his wars with Ishme-Dagan, the rival city of

THE LAWS OF HAMMURABI

Today Hammurabi is remembered not for his conquests but for his law code, which he probably issued in the 21st year of his reign (c. 1771 BC).

The code originally had 282 sections but sections 66 to 99 are now lost and the 13th section was deliberately left blank because the Babylonians considered 13 to be an unlucky number. The code is not a complete legal system as it is mainly concerned with commercial, family and property law, and with slavery, fees, prices and wages. One of the principles of the code is the presumption of innocence, with both plaintiff and accused being given the opportunity to give evidence. Following the tradition established by the Sumerians, Hammurabi described his code's purposes as 'to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong may not oppress the weak'. However, in its reliance on brutal retaliatory punishments involving the mutilation and death of the guilty or members of their families, it stands in stark contrast to the more humane punishments of Sumerian codes.



Eshnunna and the powerful Elamite kingdom to the east. In 1764 BC Hammurabi finally secured his eastern border when he defeated a coalition of Elamites, Gutians and other hill peoples. In 1761 BC he overthrew Rim-Sin of Larsa and brought all of Sumeria under his control. This established Hammurabi as the most powerful single ruler in the region and he immediately turned on his ally Zimri-Lim, defeating him in 1760 BC and destroying Mari in 1757 BC. Babylon's last significant rival in Mesopotamia, Eshnunna, was conquered in 1755 BC, after Hammurabi's forces had diverted its water supply. Babylonian power went into a period of gradual decline after Hammurabi's death c. 1750 BC but during his time as ruler the city had emerged as Mesopotamia's leading culture, a position it retained, through all the peaks and troughs of its political fortunes, until the 4th century BC.

The code was inscribed on a polished basalt stele which also showed Hammurabi standing reverently before Shamash, the god of justice. Fragments of the code are also known from copies made on clay tablets. Although the code includes instructions for plaintiffs to consult it, it is likely that Hammurabi ordered the stele to be made mainly for the benefit of the gods, so they might see what a just ruler he was. The stele's original location is, however, unknown: it was found far from Babylon, at Susa in modern Iran, where it was taken as loot by the Elamites after they sacked the city c. 1159 BC.

LEFT The stele of Hammurabi. The black basalt stele shows the Babylonian king Hammurabi standing before Shamash the Mesopotamian god of justice above a long inscription of his law code. The stele was probably originally displayed in a temple, rather than in public, as a reminder to the gods of Hammurabi's concern for justice.

Excerpts from the laws of Hammurabi

3 *If any one brings an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death.*

22 *If any one commits a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.*

129 *If a man's wife is taken in adultery with another man, both shall be bound and thrown into the river, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.*

195 *If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be cut off.*

196 *If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.*

197 *If he breaks another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.*

229 *If a builder has built a house for a freeman and has not made his work sound, so that the house falls down and causes the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.*

230 *If it causes the death of the son of the owner of the house, they shall kill the son of that builder.*

1915 TRANSLATION ADAPTED FROM L.K. KING