

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Mesopotamia

in a Hurry

The first cities and the first writing

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The Whole Thing in One Page

Mesopotamia is the most influential civilisation you have never thought about. It is the flat, hot floodplain of the Tigris and the Euphrates, in what is now Iraq, and it is where human beings first did nearly everything: built cities, invented writing, wrote down laws, lent money at interest, mapped the sky, cut the day into hours, and told a story worth retelling. Then it was forgotten. Its cities slumped into featureless mounds that nobody could name, its script went unread for almost two thousand years, and the story the West tells about itself now skips from the pyramids to the Parthenon as though the ground between them were empty.

That is what this book is about. Egypt you look at. Mesopotamia you use. Every hour of sixty minutes, every minute of sixty seconds, every circle of 360 degrees, every seven-day week, every contract with a witness on it, and every loan with interest attached is an inheritance from this place. It is not a ruin you visit. It is the floor you are standing on.

Begin with the land, because it is Egypt's inverse. The Nile flooded on schedule and made Egypt rich and safe. These rivers flooded violently, at the wrong time of year, and left salt behind. The valley had no stone, no timber, and no metal, so its people traded for everything, and no defensible borders, so they were invaded roughly forever. What it had was mud, and mud is what they built with: the cities, the tablets, the writing itself.

Out of that came the rest. The city, first at Uruk, which is the invention that makes the others possible. Writing, which began as accountancy rather than poetry, because a city is a thing that has to keep track. Law and the contract, which is the ancestor of every piece of paperwork you have ever signed. A bleak cosmos, in which humans were made to do the gods' work for them, the gods were unpredictable, and the afterlife was a dust-filled dark that everyone entered regardless of merit. And, out of that bleakness, The Epic of Gilgamesh, which arrives at exactly the opposite answer from the one Egypt spent three thousand years building.

Two cautions. This was never one civilisation. It was a place, which Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians occupied in turn, each inheriting the same culture, so the thread here is the city and the script rather than a people. And its famous firsts come with an asterisk: clay survives, papyrus rots, and some of what looks like the first invention of a thing may only be the first surviving record of it.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

Look at a clock. Why are there sixty minutes in an hour, and sixty seconds in a minute, and 360 degrees in a circle, when every other measurement you use runs in tens? Nobody decided this recently. It is there because roughly five thousand years ago, in southern Iraq, people counting barley and beer and workers' rations used a counting system built on sixty, and it turned out to be superb for dividing things up and for tracking the sky, so the Babylonians kept it for their astronomy, and the Greeks took it from the Babylonians, and it has been running ever since. The seven-day week and the zodiac came the same way. You are using Mesopotamian software right now. It is the oldest technology still in continuous daily operation anywhere on earth, and almost nobody using it could name the people who wrote it.

That is the case for the subject in one object. Mesopotamia is not a civilisation that influenced the modern world; it is the one where the package we call civilisation was first assembled. Cities, writing, literature, schools, libraries, law codes, courts, contracts, witnessed agreements, interest-bearing loans, standardised weights, the wheel, and the first empire in history all appear here first or close to it. Egypt is roughly contemporary and did some of it independently, so this is not a claim that everything descends from Iraq. It is a claim about a starting point, and about the fact that the starting point is the piece of the story most people are missing entirely.

It is also, unexpectedly, underneath the Bible. On 3 December 1872, a self-taught former banknote engraver named George Smith stood up in London before the Society of Biblical Archaeology, with the Prime Minister in the audience, and read out a broken clay tablet from Nineveh describing a god-sent flood, a man told to build a boat, the boat coming to rest on a mountain, and birds released to find dry land. It was a thousand years older than Genesis. Be precise about what that does and does not prove: the flood is the clearest case of the Hebrew scriptures drawing on Mesopotamian material, close enough in its details that even scholars who resist such claims concede this one, while broader parallels around creation and Eden are argued over. But the argument itself only exists because this literature was dug up, and it changed how the West reads its own founding book.

Then there is the reason the subject grips people who care nothing for any of that. The first long story human beings ever wrote down is about a king who cannot bear that he is mortal. The Epic of Gilgamesh is four thousand years old and it concerns grief, friendship, terror, and a search that fails. Egypt met the same fear by building pyramids and refusing the premise for three thousand years. Mesopotamia, in the same era and a few hundred miles away, concluded the reverse: there is no way out, so go home, eat your dinner, and love whoever is in the room. Two river valleys, two answers, and one of them sounds like it was written this year.

The limits are real. This is a short introduction, the evidence is broken clay, translations are disputed, and much of the chronology is argued over. And the record is being destroyed now, not in

some colonial past: looted in 2003, dynamited since, and sold off piecemeal to collectors.

The rest of the book is that Mesopotamia.

The Core Ideas

1. The Land Between the Rivers

Mesopotamia is a Greek word meaning between the rivers, and the first thing to know is that nobody who lived there ever used it. This was never a country and never a nation. It is a place: the silt plain the two rivers built, which a long succession of different peoples occupied, inherited, and handed on. If you are looking for the Mesopotamians, you will not find them. You will find Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and others, sharing a landscape and a culture across three thousand years.

That landscape is Egypt's opposite in every respect that matters, and the differences generate everything else. The Nile flooded on a timetable, gently, in late summer, leaving fresh silt exactly when the farmer wanted to plant. These rivers flooded in spring, which is the wrong time: too late to help the planting, early enough to threaten the ripening crop. They flooded unpredictably, sometimes catastrophically, and the Tigris could shift its course and abandon a city outright. Egypt's river made agriculture nearly automatic. Mesopotamia's had to be fought.

Which meant irrigation, and irrigation is why the state exists here. Canals need digging, dredging, allocating, defending, and arguing over, which requires organised labour, records, an authority to compel people, and a way to settle it when the upstream city takes more than its share. Egypt got rich by accident of geo-

graphy. Mesopotamia had to engineer its wealth, and the engineering required the apparatus. The bureaucracy is not a by-product of this civilisation; it is what made it possible.

The engineering had a defect, and the Mesopotamians recorded their own slow poisoning without understanding it. Irrigating a hot plain and letting the water evaporate leaves the salt behind, year on year, until the soil turns saline and yields fall. You can watch it in the tablets: the southern fields shift from wheat to barley, which tolerates salt better, and then the barley sags too. This is one of the earliest documented cases of a civilisation degrading the ground it stands on, which is a rather modern thing to find at the very beginning.

Then there is what the plain did not have. No stone. No timber worth the name. No metal ore. Everything hard had to be imported, from the mountains of Iran, from Anatolia, from the Gulf, from as far as Afghanistan for lapis. So Mesopotamia traded obsessively and over enormous distances, and trade at distance requires records, which is a large part of why writing happened here. The poverty of the soil in raw materials is directly responsible for the invention.

And it had no edges. This is the political fact of the whole subject. Egypt sat behind hundreds of miles of desert and was close to unconquerable for two thousand years. Mesopotamia is flat, open, and approachable from every direction: Elamites from the east, Amorites and Arameans from the western desert, Gutians and Kassites down from the Zagros mountains, Persians, Greeks, and

everyone else in due course. Where Egypt's history is long stretches of continuity punctuated by rare collapse, Mesopotamia's is a churn of conquest, and the cities built walls because they needed them. It is the difference between a house in the country and a house on a crossroads.

What the plain had was mud, and mud is the material of this civilisation. They built in sun-dried mudbrick, which is cheap, effective, and dissolves in the rain, so their abandoned cities did not fall into picturesque ruin but slumped into featureless mounds, called tells, that look like natural hills and can be walked over without noticing. And they wrote on mud, which is where the deepest irony in the subject lives. Egypt built in eternal stone and wrote on papyrus that rotted. Mesopotamia built in mud that melted and wrote on clay that lasts forever. So Egypt left magnificent buildings and little paperwork, and Mesopotamia left almost no buildings and a hundred thousand receipts.

2. The City

Around 3200 BCE, on the lower Euphrates, there was a place called Uruk that was probably the largest settlement in southern Mesopotamia and quite possibly the largest on earth. Scholars are careful about the superlative, and so should you be, but the essential claim survives the caution: this is where the city, as a way of living, first appears at scale, and the city is the invention that contains all the other inventions in this book.

Be clear about what a city actually is, because the word has gone soft with familiarity. A city is not a big village. A village is a place where you know everyone. A city is the first environment in human history where you spend your day surrounded by strangers, and almost every institution we have exists to solve a problem that only strangers create. Where everyone knows everyone, reputation does the work of contracts, the elders do the work of courts, and memory does the work of money. You need no police, no bureaucracy, no standardised weights, no archive. Put forty thousand strangers in one place and every one of those things becomes necessary at once.

That is what happened at Uruk, and the compression is startling. Within a few centuries: monumental public buildings, full-time specialists who do not farm, an administrative class, mass-produced pottery, the cylinder seal, the accounting that turns into writing, and stratification steep enough to see in the graves. The city is a machine for generating complexity, and it ran the moment it was switched on.

At the centre stood the temple, and the crucial thing is that it was not simply a religious building. It was the largest economic institution in the place: it owned land, held herds, stored grain, employed weavers and brewers and scribes, lent seed, and redistributed produce. The ziggurat, the stepped tower that is the region's signature image, was not a temple people entered but a platform, a mountain built by hand in a country with none, on which the god's house sat. The god lived there and the city belonged to him. Uruk was Inanna's, Ur was Nanna's, Nippur was Enlil's. Your city was not a

place you came from; it was a household you were staff in, which follows exactly from the theology in the fifth idea below.

And there was never just one. This separates Mesopotamia sharply from Egypt, unified under a single god-king within a few centuries of its start and stayed that way. Sumer was a scatter of independent city-states, each with its own god, ruler, and ambitions, fighting continually over land, borders, and above all water, which on an irrigated plain is the thing worth fighting for. The plural, competitive, mutually suspicious city-state is Mesopotamia's default condition, and every empire that came later was an attempt to hold that centrifugal thing together by force.

The point to carry forward is that this was invented once, in mud, on the Euphrates, and never uninvented. The problems of the first city are the problems of the current one, and Section 6 returns to them.

3. Writing, and Why It Was Invented by Accountants

Cuneiform means wedge-shaped, from the Latin, and it describes the marks rather than the language, which is the first thing people get wrong. Cuneiform is not a language. It is a script, and like our alphabet it was used to write completely unrelated languages: Sumerian first, which is related to nothing on earth, then Akkadian and its Babylonian and Assyrian dialects, which are Semitic, and later Hittite, which is Indo-European, along with Elamite, Hurrian, Urartian, and Old Persian. Saying someone wrote in cuneiform tells you as much as saying someone wrote in the Roman alphabet.

The second thing people get wrong is what it was for. Writing was not invented to record thoughts, or prayers, or the deeds of kings. It was invented to count things. The earliest tablets from Uruk, from around 3200 BCE, are accounts: quantities of barley, numbers of sheep, jars of beer, allocations of rations to workers. The first writing in human history is a receipt, and literature does not show up for the better part of a thousand years. If that sounds deflating, consider what it tells you: writing is a technology that emerged from the specific administrative agony of trying to keep track of a city's grain, which is a problem nobody had before there were cities.

The most influential account of how it happened runs through tokens. For thousands of years people used small clay shapes to stand for commodities, a cone for a measure of grain, a disc for a sheep, and to record a transaction you sealed the relevant tokens inside a hollow clay ball and marked the outside. Then someone noticed that if the outside carried the marks, the tokens inside were redundant. Picture-signs became abstract wedges, partly because a reed pressed into wet clay makes triangular impressions naturally and cannot draw a curve worth having. This reconstruction is elegant, widely taught, and debated rather than settled, so hold it as the best available story.

The genuine leap came with sound. As long as a sign means only the thing it pictures, you can write inventories and nothing else; you cannot write a name, an idea, a verb, or a negative. The breakthrough is the rebus principle, using a sign for its sound rather than its sense, the way a picture of a bee and a leaf could write

belief. Once signs carry sound, writing stops being a bookkeeping aid and becomes capable of recording language itself, which is the moment the technology becomes the one we are still using.

It was never easy. Mature cuneiform has hundreds of signs, many readable several ways depending on context, and mastering it took years of school. We know about those schools because the exercise tablets survive, including ones where a pupil's wobbling attempt sits next to the teacher's model.

Which brings us to the accident that makes this whole book possible. Clay is close to indestructible. Left alone it survives; thrown in a fire it bakes hard and survives better. Mesopotamian cities were sacked and burned with great regularity, and every time an archive burned, its contents were fired into permanence. So the destruction preserved the record. Hundreds of thousands of tablets have been recovered, a substantial proportion of them still untranslated for want of specialists, and what they contain is mostly, gloriously, ordinary: contracts, loans, tax assessments, school homework, inventories, letters, and complaints. Among the most famous objects in the British Museum is a tablet from around 1750 BCE in which a customer named Nanni informs a merchant called Ea-nasir that the copper he supplied was substandard, that his messenger was treated with contempt, and that Nanni is unimpressed. It is the oldest surviving customer complaint in the world, and its tone is instantly recognisable to anyone who has ever written one.

4. Law, Contract, and the Invention of Paperwork

Around 1754 BCE, Hammurabi of Babylon had 282 laws carved onto a two-metre pillar of black diorite, with an image at the top of the sun god Shamash handing him the authority to issue them. It is the most famous legal document in the ancient world, it is on the wall of the United States Supreme Court, and almost everything the general reader believes about it is wrong in some instructive way.

It was not the first. The stele turned up at Susa in 1901, looted in antiquity by Elamite raiders, and the French archaeologists who shipped it to the Louvre had every reason to think it the oldest law in the world. Then the earlier ones surfaced between 1947 and 1952, decisively the Code of Ur-Nammu, three centuries older, with fragments of Urukagina's reforms at Lagash older still. Hammurabi was working in a tradition several centuries deep.

Nor is it the humane charter its reputation suggests. The monument announces that the strong shall not oppress the weak and that widows and orphans shall have justice, and then the laws scale penalties by rank with total frankness. Put out the eye of a man of your own class and you lose an eye; put out the eye of a commoner and you pay silver. This is the famous eye for an eye, and read properly it is not a principle of equality but a tariff, with social class written into it.

There is even a live argument about whether it is a law code at all. Actual Babylonian court records almost never cite it, judges do not appear to have consulted it, and no copy has been found in a

courtroom context, which has led a good many scholars to read the stele as a monument rather than a statute book: a king's advertisement of himself as the just ruler, aimed at the gods and at posterity, which happens to be a list of ideal judgments. That reading may or may not win, but the fact that it is seriously held should adjust how confidently you talk about the thing.

Meanwhile, the real legal revolution is sitting unregarded in the tablet piles, and it is not the code. It is the contract. Mesopotamia produced, in staggering volume, records of loans, sales, leases, partnerships, marriages, adoptions, apprenticeships, and receipts, in standard formulas, dated, and witnessed by named people who could later be produced to testify. To sign, you rolled your cylinder seal across the wet clay, which produced a unique image and served as your identity, making it the ancestor of the signature. The invention is not any particular rule. It is the idea that an agreement between two people can be lifted out of their heads, made external and durable, and enforced by a third party who was not there. That is the foundation of commerce, and the most consequential thing in this section.

They lent at interest, at rates fixed by custom rather than markets, conventionally a fifth on silver and a third on barley, which is steep and tells you something about risk on a floodplain. And they found the consequence: on bad harvests debt compounds, families borrow against their land and then their children, and free citizens end up in bondage. The answer was radical and periodic. New kings, and kings in trouble, proclaimed a general cancellation, wiping consumer debts, freeing debt slaves, and returning for-

feited land, often enough for the practice to have its own vocabulary. The debt jubilee is not a modern policy fantasy. It is four thousand years old, invented by the same people who invented the loan, because they were the first to watch one eat a society.

5. The Anxious Cosmos

Every civilisation has an origin story that quietly explains what it thinks people are for. Egypt's placed humanity inside a moral order it was obliged to uphold. Genesis has humans made in the image of God and given dominion. The Mesopotamian account, preserved in the poem known as Atrahasis, opens with the gods themselves doing the work of the world, digging the rivers and the canals, and hating it. The junior gods eventually go on strike. So the senior gods solve the labour problem by making a substitute worker out of clay mixed with the blood of a slaughtered god, and that worker is you.

Sit with that, because it is the root of everything else here. Humanity was not created for glory, or love, or moral instruction, but because somebody senior did not want to dig the canal himself. You exist to maintain the irrigation, feed the gods through their temples, and keep the system running. That is the entire brief. It is the bleakest anthropology any major civilisation has produced, it is delivered without a shred of self-pity, and it is why Mesopotamian literature feels so startlingly adult.

The gods themselves are numerous, powerful, and unreliable. They are not evil and not especially interested in your morals. They have

moods. The best illustration is the reason given for the flood, stranger by far than the biblical version: humanity had multiplied and grown noisy, and the chief god Enlil could not sleep, so he resolved to wipe out the species. Not wickedness. Noise. That is a cosmos where catastrophe arrives for reasons that have nothing to do with you and cannot be argued with, which is a fairly accurate description of how the world behaves.

From that follows the defining activity of Mesopotamian intellectual life: divination. If the powers running the universe are capricious but do send signals, reading the signals is the most valuable skill available, and Mesopotamia pursued it on an industrial scale. Specialists matched the livers of sacrificed sheep against reference collections, and clay models of livers survive, marked up like a textbook. They read oil poured on water, the flight of birds, malformed births, dreams, and above all the sky, and compiled enormous compendia of omens that were copied for centuries.

And here is the twist that redeems the whole anxious enterprise. Watching the sky for omens, night after night for century after century, produces something nobody set out to produce: data. The records the Babylonians kept were unmatched in the ancient world for length and consistency, and out of them came real mathematical astronomy, able to predict eclipses and planetary positions accurately. Superstition, pursued with sufficient rigour for long enough, turned into science, which is one of the more encouraging accidents in human history. Section 6 returns to it.

Then there is the ending, where the contrast with Egypt becomes total. Egypt built a three-thousand-year technology to secure an eternity resembling the best day of your life repeated forever. Mesopotamia answered the same question with: dust. The dead went down to a place sometimes called the House of Dust, where they sat in the dark, dressed like birds in feathers, and ate clay. There was no judgment, no reward for virtue, no torment for wickedness, and no exceptions: kings, slaves, and priests all went to the same grey diminishment. The living fed the dead with offerings, not to earn them a better place, since there was no better place, but simply so they would be less wretched and less inclined to trouble the household.

That is an astonishing thing for a civilisation to tell itself, and it has one enormous consequence. If nothing is coming afterwards, then whatever meaning is available has to be found here, in this life, in the time you have. Mesopotamia stared at mortality without flinching and without consolation, and drew the obvious conclusion, and then wrote it down. Which is the next idea.

6. The First Story

The oldest surviving long work of literature in the world is about a man who cannot accept that he is going to die. That fact alone should stop you. Of all the things human beings might have written first, once writing became capable of carrying more than inventories, what they wrote was this.

Gilgamesh was probably a real king of Uruk around 2700 BCE who became a legend. Sumerian poems about him circulated for centuries before someone assembled them into a connected epic in Akkadian, and the version most people read was shaped around 1200 BCE and survives because copies sat in the library at Nineveh. It is broken: gaps, variants, and lines still being recovered as fragments are identified in museum drawers, which means the text you read today is measurably better than the one available fifty years ago.

The story: Gilgamesh is king of Uruk, two-thirds divine, magnificent, and intolerable, a tyrant his people pray to be rescued from. The gods answer with Enkidu, a wild man of equal strength raised among animals, as a counterweight. They meet, fight to a standstill, and become inseparable, and the friendship is drawn with a tenderness surprising in a four-thousand-year-old text. Together they kill Humbaba, guardian of the cedar forest, and then the Bull of Heaven that Ishtar sends against them after Gilgamesh refuses her with spectacular rudeness.

Then the gods decide that somebody has to pay, and it is Enkidu. He does not die in battle. He sickens, lies down, curses the people who brought him into civilisation, is terrified, dreams of the House of Dust, and dies slowly over twelve days, which is a far braver piece of writing than a heroic death would have been. And Gilgamesh comes apart. He refuses to let the body be buried, sitting with his friend for six days and seven nights, until a maggot drops from Enkidu's nose. That detail is four thousand years old and it is

still the most devastating line in the poem, because it is the precise moment when grief loses its argument with biology.

What follows is the part that matters. Gilgamesh runs. He abandons his city, wears skins, roams the wilderness, and goes looking for Utnapishtim, the one man granted immortality after surviving the flood, hoping to extract the secret. On the way an ale-wife at the edge of the world tells him, in the older Babylonian version, the thing the poem believes: that he will never find it, because when the gods made people they kept eternal life for themselves and handed out death; so he should eat well, enjoy himself, keep his clothes clean, hold his child's hand, and take pleasure in his wife. Fill the days, because the days are the allocation.

He does not listen, and the rest is a catalogue of failure. Utnapishtim tells him the flood story and sets him a test: stay awake for a week. He falls asleep almost immediately. He is given a consolation prize, a plant that restores youth, and while he bathes a snake eats it and sheds its skin, which is why snakes renew themselves and Gilgamesh does not. He has lost on every attempt.

And then he goes home. The poem ends where it began, with Gilgamesh standing at Uruk showing off the walls of his city, the brickwork, the foundations, the scale of the thing, and the repetition of those opening lines at the close is the whole argument. He did not get immortality. He got the wall, and the city, and a story, and the knowledge of what he is. It is the oldest ending in literature and it is more grown-up than most of what has been written since.

Hold it against Egypt, because these were contemporaries a few hundred miles apart, facing the same problem, and their answers could not be further apart. Egypt refused the premise and spent three millennia and a national fortune on machinery to defeat death. Mesopotamia accepted it and wrote a poem saying go home, wash, eat, and love whoever is in the room. And yet notice what the two share at the very end, because it is the strand's quiet joke: Khufu is remembered for the thing he built, and Gilgamesh for the wall and the tablet. Both concluded, from opposite directions, that what survives you is the made thing.

7. The Inheritance

The question this book has to answer is why a forgotten civilisation is still running underneath everything, and the answer has two halves: what it made, and why it spread.

Start with the arithmetic, since it is the piece you touch daily. Mesopotamian counting was built on sixty, which sounds arbitrary and is in fact inspired, because sixty divides cleanly by two, three, four, five, six, ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty, and thirty. In a world with no decimal point, that makes fractions tractable in a way base ten never manages, since a third of an hour is a clean twenty minutes while a third of a hundred is a mess. The system was so good at dividing things, including the circle and the sky, that it was never dislodged, and it is why you have sixty seconds, sixty minutes, twelve hours on a clock face, and 360 degrees in a circle. The seven-day week is theirs too, tracking the quarters of the moon and

the seven moving lights in the sky, and it reached us through the Hebrew scriptures and the Romans. So is the zodiac, divided into twelve signs by Babylonian astronomers, which means that the star sign you do or do not believe in is a piece of Iron Age Iraqi administration.

The mathematics goes deeper than the clock. They used a positional number system, where a sign's value depends on its place, the principle that makes our arithmetic work and which nobody else managed for over a thousand years. They solved quadratic equations. A tablet at Yale gives the square root of two to about six decimal places, around 1800 BCE. Another, Plimpton 322, tabulates what we call Pythagorean triples roughly a thousand years before Pythagoras was born, and historians of mathematics still cannot agree what it was for.

The institutional firsts stack up beside them. The first empire, assembled by Sargon of Akkad around 2334 BCE, inventing the political form that Assyria, Persia, Rome, and everyone since has been iterating on. The first library, gathered at Nineveh by Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BCE, deliberately collected and catalogued rather than merely accumulated. And, in one of the more remarkable footnotes available, the first author in history known by name is a woman: Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon and high priestess at Ur around 2300 BCE, who wrote hymns and, unlike everyone before her, signed them and described the experience of composing them. How much of the surviving corpus is hers is debated, but that literary authorship starts with a named woman deserves to be far better known.

Which leaves the second half of the question: why did all this propagate when Egypt's did not, to anything like the same degree? The answer is the cruel one, and it closes the loop back to the geography in the first idea. Egypt was sealed behind its deserts, rarely conquered, and stayed itself, and its culture was correspondingly self-contained: magnificent, distinctive, hard to export. Mesopotamia had no borders, was overrun constantly, and traded in every direction because it had to import everything, and every conqueror who took the plain took the culture with it. The Akkadians kept Sumerian as their learned language. The Babylonians and Assyrians inherited Akkadian. The Persians took Babylon and kept the astronomy, the administration, and the script. The Greeks took the mathematics and the star charts. The Hebrews were carried there in exile and carried things back. The wrapper kept changing; the contents kept being passed along.

So the very thing that made Mesopotamia miserable to live in, its openness, its indefensibility, its endless subjugation, is precisely what made it the most transmissible civilisation in history. Egypt was preserved and became a monument. Mesopotamia was conquered and became the operating system. That is the trade, and it explains why the civilisation almost nobody thinks about is the one almost everybody is using.

How It Actually Works

Section 3 laid out the ideas. This section is the story, and it needs two warnings before it starts.

The first is that Mesopotamia does not offer the tidy rhythm Egypt does. There are no three kingdoms and two collapses here, because this was never one civilisation but a plain that many peoples occupied in turn. What it has instead is a cycle: independent cities squabble, somebody conquers them all, the empire overreaches and shatters, the cities go back to squabbling, and someone else tries again. Run that loop for three thousand years and one thing does change, steadily, and it is the best thread to hold. Power drifts north. It starts in the deep south, in Sumer, moves upriver to Akkad and then Babylon in the centre, and ends in Assyria in the north. The south's soil was slowly poisoning itself with salt while the cities upriver stayed fertile, and the political centre of gravity followed the agriculture. The story below is that drift.

The second warning is about dates, and it is more serious than Egypt's. Chronology before roughly 1500 BCE rests on king lists anchored by a tablet recording observations of Venus, and depending on how you read it there are four rival systems: high, middle, low, and ultra-low. The gap is not small. Hammurabi came to the throne in 1792 BCE, or 1728, or 1697, a swing of almost a century for the best-known king in the subject. The argument is unresolved and the literature on it famously ill-tempered. This

book uses the middle chronology throughout because it remains the common convention, not because it has won.

Before the cities

Farming villages appear on the plain by around 6000 BCE, and the crucial phase is the one archaeologists call Ubaid, roughly 5500 to 4000 BCE. It is easy to skip and should not be, because everything that follows is visible in embryo: a large central building that would become the temple, small-scale irrigation, and, tellingly, differences in what people were buried with. Ubaid pottery spread from the Gulf up into Anatolia, so the connections were running long before there was anything worth calling a city.

Eridu, the southernmost site, is where the Sumerians themselves believed the world began: in their own tradition it was the first city, the place where kingship descended from heaven. Archaeology broadly agrees it is among the oldest, which is a rare and pleasing case of a founding myth and a trowel pointing the same way.

The Uruk explosion

Then, from around 4000 to 3100 BCE, something happens at Uruk that has no precedent anywhere. The settlement grows to a size nothing on earth had reached, perhaps forty thousand people or more, with monumental precincts, mass-produced pottery turned out in standard shapes for rationing, the cylinder seal, and, by around 3200 BCE, writing. This is the invention of urban life, and it

happened fast enough that archaeologists call it an explosion without embarrassment.

It also went abroad. Uruk-style outposts turn up hundreds of miles away, up the Euphrates into Syria and east into Iran, which looks like a trade network reaching for the timber, stone, and metal the plain lacked. Then, around 3100 BCE, it contracted and the outposts were abandoned, for reasons nobody can confidently give. The cities went on growing regardless.

The city-states

From about 2900 to 2350 BCE, the plain settles into its default condition: a dozen or more independent city-states, each with its god, its ruler, and its walls, trading with each other, marrying into each other, and fighting each other constantly. This is the Early Dynastic period, and it is the world of Sumer proper.

Two things are worth pulling out. The first is that the fighting was mostly about water and land, which follows directly from irrigation: if your neighbour upstream diverts the canal, you starve, so the border matters more here than almost anywhere. The dispute between Lagash and Umma over a stretch of irrigated frontier ran, on and off, for something like a hundred and fifty years, and it is the earliest border conflict in history documented from both ends.

The second is the Sumerian King List, which is a wonderful object and a trap. It presents kingship descending from heaven and passing from city to city in an orderly succession, and it assigns

the earliest kings reigns of twenty-eight thousand years and more. It is not a chronicle. It is a political argument, composed later, insisting that legitimate rule is single and has always passed from one city to the next, which is precisely what a king trying to unify a plural region would want people to believe. Read as history it is nonsense; read as propaganda it is evidence of something real.

Sargon and the first empire

Around 2334 BCE a man of obscure and possibly invented origins, who claimed to have been born in secret, set adrift in a reed basket, and raised by a gardener, took power in the north and then took everything else. Sargon of Akkad conquered the Sumerian cities one by one and welded them into a single state, and in doing so he invented a political technology: the empire.

The elements are all recognisable. A capital, Akkad, whose site has never been located, one of the great outstanding puzzles of the field. Governors installed in conquered cities rather than local dynasts left in place. A standing army. His daughter made high priestess at Ur, marrying the new power to the old religion. And Akkadian promoted into the language of administration, though Sumerian was kept for learning and liturgy for two thousand years afterwards, roughly as Latin was.

It lasted about a century and a half. Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin pushed it further and declared himself a god, which no Mesopotamian king had done, and then it came apart under pressure from the Gutians out of the Zagros mountains and, on the current evid-

ence, a severe regional drought around 2200 BCE, the same climate event implicated in the fall of Egypt's Old Kingdom. Two civilisations, a thousand miles apart, collapsed at roughly the same moment, which is one of the more sobering coincidences in ancient history and a reminder that neither of them was as much in control as their monuments claimed.

Ur III: the bureaucratic state

Out of the wreckage, around 2112 BCE, the city of Ur produced a dynasty that reunified the south and ran it for roughly a century, and the Third Dynasty of Ur deserves attention for one reason above all: it is the most thoroughly documented state in the ancient world, and possibly the most bureaucratic society that has ever existed.

The volume is absurd. Something like a hundred thousand administrative tablets survive from about a century of this state, recording labour, rations, herds, textiles, and produce in almost pathological detail. Dead animals were counted. Individual workers' days were logged. The state ran huge centralised workshops and redistributed the output, and it built the great ziggurat at Ur that still stands. Ur-Nammu, its founder, issued the law code that predates Hammurabi's by three centuries.

Then it collapsed, and the collapse is legible in its own paperwork. Grain yields fall in the records, consistent with the salt problem. Amorite pastoralists press in from the west, and the state builds a wall to keep them out, which does not work. Bureaucratic control

frays. In about 2004 BCE the Elamites came from the east and took Ur, carrying off the last king, Ib-bi-Sin, and the Sumerians composed a lament for their ruined city that is one of the oldest surviving poems about the destruction of a place. Sumerian died as a spoken language not long after, and survived for two millennia purely as a written and liturgical one.

Babylon and Hammurabi

The centre of gravity moves north. The following centuries belong to competing Amorite kingdoms, and out of them, around 1792 BCE, comes Hammurabi of Babylon, who took an unremarkable city and spent most of a long reign turning it into the capital of the plain by patient diplomacy and late, decisive violence.

What he built did not survive him by much; his son lost most of it, and in 1595 BCE the Hittites came down the Euphrates, sacked Babylon, and went home again, which is one of history's stranger raids. But the city's status did survive, and this is the important thing. Babylon became the cultural reference point of Mesopotamia for the next fifteen hundred years, its god Marduk was promoted to head of the pantheon, and its dialect became the prestige language of learning. The Kassites, a people from the east whose origins remain unclear, then ruled Babylonia for something like four centuries, quietly and rather well, and were thoroughly Babylonianised in the process, in a pattern that should be familiar from the Hyksos in Egypt: the conquerors get absorbed.

Assyria: the war machine

The drift north completes. Assyria, based on the upper Tigris around Ashur and later Nineveh, had been a trading power for centuries, and from around 900 BCE it became something else: the most effective military state the world had yet seen, and the template for empire in the Near East.

The Assyrians were innovative, and most of the innovations are unpleasant. A professional standing army rather than a seasonal levy. Iron weapons at scale. Siege engineering and the systematic reduction of walled cities. Cavalry. A road system with staging posts for royal messengers, which the Persians inherited. And deportation as policy: whole populations moved hundreds of miles to break their attachment to their land, applied to the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and responsible for much of the region's subsequent map. They advertised their brutality deliberately, covering palace walls with reliefs of flayings and impalements, because terror that is properly publicised saves you the cost of fighting.

At its height, under Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BCE, the empire ran from Iran to Egypt. Ashurbanipal is also the reason this book can exist, because he was a literate king with a collector's obsession who assembled a library at Nineveh, sending agents out to acquire and copy texts from across Mesopotamia and cataloguing what they brought back. Then, in 612 BCE, a coalition of Babylonians and Medes took Nineveh and burned it, and the fire that destroyed the Assyrian empire baked Ashurbanipal's clay tab-

lets hard and preserved them for two and a half thousand years. We have the epic of Gilgamesh because the library was destroyed.

Babylon again, and the end of independence

The victors took over, and for a brief and glittering period Babylon was the greatest city on earth. Nebuchadnezzar II, ruling from 605 to 562 BCE, rebuilt it on a scale intended to overawe: the Ishtar Gate faced in glazed blue brick with bulls and dragons on it, which you can walk through today in Berlin, vast walls, and a ziggurat that is the probable original of the Tower of Babel. He also, in 587 BCE, took Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported the population to Babylon, which is why this civilisation is embedded in the Hebrew scriptures, and why Babylon is the villain of them.

It did not last a lifetime past him. In 539 BCE Cyrus of Persia took Babylon, apparently with little fighting and some local welcome, and Mesopotamia stopped being independent. It never was again. Persia ruled it, then Alexander took it in 331 BCE and died there eight years later, then his successors, then Parthia, then Rome briefly, then Persia again.

The long fade

The ending is not a conquest but an evaporation, and it looks a great deal like Egypt's.

Under Persian and then Greek rule, Babylon slowly emptied. Alexander's successors founded a new capital nearby and the population drifted to it. Aramaic, written in an alphabet on perishable materials, had already displaced Akkadian as the everyday language, which is a quiet catastrophe for the historical record: the moment people stop writing on clay, the evidence stops surviving. Cuneiform contracted into a specialist priestly and scholarly script, kept alive in a few temples by astronomers who went on making observations because the observations still worked.

The last datable cuneiform tablets are astronomical texts from the first century CE, roughly seventy-five years into our era. They are almanacs. The final act of a three-thousand-year written tradition was a handful of priests in a decaying temple, still tracking the planets, writing in a script that almost nobody left could read, for a religion that had almost no adherents. Then that stopped too, and the plain fell silent, and the cities became mounds, and for the better part of two thousand years the whole civilisation was known only through hostile Hebrew scripture and garbled Greek report.

How we know

The way back in was, as with Egypt, a trilingual inscription, and the story is considerably more dangerous.

Carved into a cliff face at Behistun in western Iran, a hundred metres up and deliberately placed beyond reach, is a huge inscription of Darius the Great from around 520 BCE, giving his ac-

count of how he took the throne in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. In the 1830s and 1840s an East India Company officer named Henry Rawlinson had himself repeatedly hauled up and lowered down that cliff, standing on ladders over the drop and at one point employing a local boy to free-climb the worst section, to copy an inscription positioned specifically so that nobody could do what he was doing. Old Persian went first, being simpler and partly guessable. Babylonian, which is Akkadian, took longer, and it was cracked in the 1850s by Rawlinson and others working in parallel, notably Edward Hincks, an Irish clergyman who did much of the hardest linguistic work in a country parish and gets a fraction of the credit.

The field was so aware of how implausible the decipherment sounded that in 1857 it ran an actual test: four scholars were sent an unpublished Assyrian text independently and sealed their translations, which were opened together and found to agree. Assyriology is the only discipline that began by proving itself in public, on purpose.

What followed was excavation on an industrial scale at Nimrud, Nineveh, Khorsabad, Ur, and Babylon, largely by Europeans, largely for European museums, and the ethics were of their time. The Ishtar Gate is in Berlin. Hammurabi's stele is in Paris. Ashurbanipal's library is in London. Much of the actual finding was done by local workers whose names went unrecorded, with the significant exception of Hormuzd Rassam, an Assyrian Christian from Mosul who discovered, among much else, the tablets carrying the flood

story, and who spent years being patronised by the British establishment he worked for.

Two cautions to close on, and the second is not historical.

The first is the shape of the evidence. Clay skews the record towards whatever people bothered to write down and fire: administration, law, business, scholarship. We know the price of barley in Ur in a given month with more confidence than we know what most people believed. And much of it is unread. Hundreds of thousands of tablets sit in storage awaiting specialists who do not exist in sufficient numbers, so the evidence outruns the scholarship, which is the reverse of the usual problem.

The second is that the record is being destroyed now. This is not a colonial-era grievance to be tutted over at a safe distance. The Iraq Museum was looted in 2003 during the invasion, losing thousands of objects, many never recovered. Sites across the south have been pitted with illegal digging, which destroys the context that makes an object mean anything, in order to feed a market. Nimrud was bulldozed and dynamited in 2015, and Nineveh and Hatra were attacked, and the destruction was filmed for propaganda. And the demand side is not abstract: an American retail chain was fined for importing thousands of smuggled tablets, and the United States seized a tablet carrying part of the epic that had been trafficked out of Iraq on false paperwork and sold for over a million and a half dollars, returning it in 2021. The oldest story humanity possesses was, within living memory, stolen goods

in a corporate collection. That is the condition of the evidence for this book.

What People Get Wrong

“Hammurabi gave the world its first laws”

He did not, and Section 3 gave the evidence. What is worth adding is why the error is so stubborn, because it is a case study in how knowledge fails to travel. When the stele reached the Louvre in 1901 it was, at that moment, the oldest law known to anyone, and the world was told so in books whose titles said exactly that. The earlier codes surfaced half a century later. The correction is now over seventy years old, is not controversial, and has comprehensively lost to the head start. Hammurabi is carved on the wall of America’s Supreme Court. Ur-Nammu is not.

“Cuneiform is an ancient language”

Cuneiform is a script, not a language, as Section 3 set out, and the distinction is not pedantry. Saying a text is in cuneiform is like saying a text is in the Roman alphabet: it does not tell you whether you are holding Latin, Vietnamese, or Welsh. The confusion matters because it flattens three thousand years of wildly different peoples into one undifferentiated ancient blur, which is precisely the mistake this book exists to correct.

“The Sumerians appeared out of nowhere”

This one is repeated in respectable places and it is the doorway through which a great deal of nonsense enters. The claim is that Sumerian civilisation arrives suddenly, fully formed, speaking a language unrelated to anything, with no developmental sequence behind it, which is then offered as a mystery requiring an exotic solution.

The sequence is not missing. Ubaid villages occupy the same sites for two thousand years before Uruk, with one trajectory visible throughout: bigger settlements, a central building growing into the temple, expanding irrigation, widening inequality in the graves. Eridu has occupation layers stacked continuously into the Sumerian period. It is one of the better-documented developmental sequences in world archaeology.

What is true is narrower. Sumerian is a language isolate with no established relatives, which is unusual but not miraculous; Basque manages the same trick in modern Europe without anyone invoking spacecraft. And scholars do argue whether the Sumerians were the plain's original inhabitants or arrived, an old debate that has never been settled and probably rests on a bad question, since a people, a language, and a culture are three things that need not arrive together. Unsolved is not the same as inexplicable.

“The Hanging Gardens were in Babylon”

Probably not, and possibly nowhere. Of the seven wonders, the Hanging Gardens are the only one whose location has never been established, and the reasons are awkward. No Babylonian text mentions them, which is remarkable given how comprehensively Nebuchadnezzar documented his own building work. No archaeology at Babylon has confirmed them. Herodotus described the city and said nothing about a garden. Of the classical writers who do describe them, none was an eyewitness, only one names Nebuchadnezzar as the builder, and another credits an Assyrian king.

The leading solution, argued by the Oxford Assyriologist Stephanie Dalley, is that they were real but in the wrong city: a terraced garden built at Nineveh by the Assyrian king Sennacherib around 700 BCE, three hundred miles north and a century early. The evidence is decent. Sennacherib's inscriptions boast of a palace garden he called a wonder for all peoples, describe bronze water-raising screws centuries before Archimedes, and record an aqueduct bringing mountain water to the city, parts of which survive with his name on them. Assyrian reliefs show terraced gardens watered by an aqueduct, and Nineveh's hilly setting makes the engineering plausible where Babylon's flat plain does not. And Sennacherib, having sacked Babylon in 689 BCE, restyled Nineveh as a new Babylon and renamed its gates after Babylon's, which supplies a mechanism for the confusion.

Call this the best available answer rather than a proven one; Dalley's case has persuaded many and not everyone. Two smaller corrections come free. The gardens did not hang: the Greek and Latin words mean overhanging, as a terrace does, not suspended in mid-air. And if Dalley is right, the most famous thing about Babylon was the achievement of the city that Babylon's own people regarded as the enemy.

“Babylon was a byword for decadence”

Babylon has been shorthand for corruption, luxury, and sexual excess for two and a half thousand years, and the reputation is almost entirely the work of people who hated it. The Hebrew scriptures were substantially shaped by the experience of deportation to Babylon after 587 BCE, and unsurprisingly they do not present the city sympathetically; the Book of Revelation later promoted it into a symbol of everything worldly and damned, and the phrase attached to it there has been doing duty as an insult ever since. Herodotus contributed a lurid and almost certainly fabricated claim about sacred prostitution that scholars have spent a long time dismantling.

The Babylonian evidence shows a large, sophisticated, orderly city: temples, schools, a vast body of astronomical scholarship, working courts, commerce, and a bureaucracy documenting all of it. This is a place known almost entirely through the propaganda of its captives and its conquerors, and the lesson generalises: nearly every

ancient civilisation we call decadent was called that by whoever beat it.

“Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilisation”

This one is on the cover of a hundred books and it deserves a firm qualification, including from this book, whose subtitle leans on it.

Mesopotamia is a cradle. It is not the cradle. Agriculture, cities, writing, and states arose independently in several places: Egypt at almost the same time, the Indus valley, China, Mesoamerica, and Peru, none of them plausibly copying Iraq. The habit of naming Mesopotamia the cradle is partly a genealogy rather than a finding, because the West traces itself back through Rome to Greece to the Near East and the Bible, so Mesopotamia gets to be the cradle by being our cradle, which is a different claim than it sounds.

And there is the preservation asterisk from page one, which should now be pressed. Clay is immortal and papyrus rots, so this record survives at a density no contemporary can match. When we say something happened here first, part of what we may be saying is that this is where the evidence lasted. The firsts in this book are firsts among surviving records, which is not the same as firsts in fact.

“The Anunnaki were ancient astronauts”

And so, at last, the aliens. Every ancient civilisation attracts them, but Sumer attracts a specific and enormously popular version, which needs dealing with properly rather than dismissing, because it is the reason a great many people have heard of this subject at all.

The story, which comes almost entirely from one man, Zecharia Sitchin, writing from the 1970s onwards, runs like this. A planet called Nibiru orbits our sun every 3,600 years. Its inhabitants, the Anunnaki, came to earth to mine gold, found the labour tedious, and genetically engineered a slave species by crossing their own DNA with local primates. That species is us. The Sumerian texts, properly read, record all of this, and Nibiru is due back.

Take the claims against the tablets. Nibiru does appear in Mesopotamian astronomical texts, where it names a visible planet, nearly always Jupiter, is observed every year, and is never described as inhabited. It is never a world beyond Pluto, which is unsurprising, since the Babylonians recorded five planets and could hardly track a body nobody would see for another two thousand years. There is no 3,600-year orbit. And Nibiru is never connected to the Anunnaki in any text at all, which undoes the central joint of the whole structure.

As for the Anunnaki, they are gods. The name renders roughly as the offspring of Anu, the sky god; Sitchin's version, those who came down from heaven, is not accepted by anyone who reads the language. And the gold-mining slave species is not in the liter-

ature. What is there, as Section 3 set out, is clay, a murdered god's blood, and a labour dispute. There is no genetic engineering, no primate hybridisation, and no spacecraft.

Which leaves the question of what is going on here, and there are two answers. The first is the one the Egypt book met in the same place: this genre clusters tightly around Iraq, Egypt, Africa, and the Americas, and loosely around Europe, and the nineteenth-century race science it grew from was explicit about why. The suspicion that brown people could not have built it did not evaporate. It acquired a spaceship.

The second is worth naming. Look at the shape of Sitchin's system: it explains where humanity came from, promises an apocalypse when Nibiru returns, offers redemption when the makers return for us, and supplies powerful beings who made us and may yet save us. That is not a historical thesis with an evidence problem. It is a religion, doing what religions do, which is why producing tablets rarely works as an argument. It also requires that every Assyriologist for a hundred and fifty years either missed the true content of texts they gave their lives to, or hid it, while a man with no training in Sumerian read it correctly. That is a very large claim to rest on a translation nobody can reproduce.

There is a practical cost, too. This material inflates a market. Collectors want Sumerian tablets because they have been told the tablets contain secrets, sites in southern Iraq are pitted with looters' holes to supply them, and the context that would let anyone actually read the past gets destroyed in the process. The fantasy

is not harmless entertainment for the people whose heritage is being dug out and sold.

Here is the part that should annoy you most. The real text is better. A civilisation concluded that people were manufactured to spare the gods some digging, that they might be wiped out for being too loud, and that death leads to a house of dust where everyone eats clay forever. That is among the strangest and bleakest things any people has written down, and it is sitting in the British Museum, and it is real. Sitchin took it and made it a story about mining. The genuine Sumerians were far more interesting than the invented ones.

Use It

Egypt asked you to look at something that had ended. Mesopotamia asks the opposite: to notice something that never stopped. The work here is not excavation but recognition, and what it gives you is a set of lenses, four of them practical, one of them the reason the book exists at all.

See the substrate

Start with the cheap trick, because it is not really a trick. For a day, notice the Mesopotamian furniture. The hour of sixty minutes and the minute of sixty seconds. The twelve on the clock face. The 360 degrees in a circle, and therefore every angle, every compass bearing, every turn of a steering wheel. The seven days of the week and the fact that nothing in nature has seven of anything relevant. The zodiac, whether or not you believe a word of it. And then the bigger ones: the written contract, the named witness, the signature, the loan at interest, the receipt, the archive, the idea that a debt is a thing that exists on a document rather than in someone's memory.

This is not a party trick about trivia. It is a demonstration of how inheritance works, which is that the most consequential things you use are the ones you have never once questioned, because they arrived before you did and arrived without a label. Nobody teaches you why an hour has sixty minutes. You use it, all day,

forever. Once you have seen that with the clock, you start wondering what else in your life is a fossil of somebody's ancient administrative convenience, and the answer is: a great deal.

Read your own city

Every problem Uruk had, your city has, and the resemblance is not poetic. Inequality visible on a single street. Anonymity, and the freedom and loneliness in it. The need to be counted, registered, and identified by an institution that does not know you. Trust manufactured by paperwork because acquaintance cannot supply it. Specialisation, which makes you good at one thing and helpless at the rest. Waste, crowding, and the permanent argument about who gets the water.

We did not solve these. We invented them, and we have been living in the sequel ever since, at a scale Uruk could not imagine and on the same underlying design. When urban life exhausts you in some way you cannot name, it is worth knowing that the thing exhausting you is five thousand years old and was, in its time, a stunning technical achievement.

Notice what measurement cannot do

Recall Ur III from Section 4: a hundred thousand administrative tablets in a century, dead animals counted, individual workers' days logged. Its officials could presumably tell you the position of nearly everything in the kingdom at nearly any moment.

It collapsed inside that century, and you can watch it happen in its own numbers: yields sagging as the salt built up, nomads at the edges, a wall that did not work.

The useful lesson is not that records are pointless. It is that measurement is not control, and that a system can be exquisitely well informed about its own decline and unable to do anything about it, because the numbers tell you what is happening and not what to do. Ur III knew. Knowing was not enough. Anyone who has watched a well-instrumented organisation walk calmly off a cliff with the dashboards all lit up will recognise the shape immediately, and it is oddly consoling to learn that the failure mode is not modern, it is original.

Watch rigour rescue a bad premise

Babylonian astronomers watched the sky because they believed the gods were sending messages about the king's fortunes in the movements of the planets. That premise is false. There are no messages.

And out of that false premise, pursued with obsessive consistency for centuries, came the finest astronomical record in the ancient world: predictive mathematics, eclipse tables, and observations good enough that Greek astronomers used them and modern ones have measured the slowing of the earth's rotation with them. The theory was wrong and the data were superb, and the data outlived the theory and became science.

The lens this gives you is worth carrying. Careful, systematic, honest record-keeping has value that survives the collapse of the reason you started keeping it. What you observe can be right while what you believe about it is wrong, and if you write down what you actually saw rather than what your theory required, someone later can use it. That is close to a definition of intellectual honesty, and it was being practised, for entirely the wrong reasons, four thousand years ago.

Ask who can read it

Section 5 dealt with Sitchin at length, and the transferable part is a single question. When someone tells you what an ancient text really says, ask whether anyone else can check.

That is the whole test, and it is devastating in its simplicity. Real translation is reproducible: the signs are published, the grammars exist, and any of the small number of people who read Akkadian can look at the same tablet and tell you whether the reading holds. A claim that survives only in the mouth of the one person making it, where every qualified reader disagrees and the disagreement is explained as a conspiracy, is not a translation. It is a story with a footnote attached. The test works far beyond cuneiform: on statistics, on scripture, on leaked documents, on anything where an authority stands between you and a source you cannot read yourself. Can anyone else check? If the answer is structurally no, you are not being informed. You are being told.

The limits, and one warning

This is a short introduction to an enormous field, and the field itself is stranger than most. The evidence outruns the scholarship: hundreds of thousands of tablets sit unread for want of people who can read them, which means this subject is unfinished in a way that Egypt is not, and books about it will keep needing revision.

The dates are worse than you have been led to believe. A century of uncertainty hangs on the reign of the best-known king in the story. Every date in this book carries that.

The record is skewed to what was written and fired: accounts, contracts, law, and scholarship. We know the price of barley better than we know what most people felt.

And the warning is not about the past. Mesopotamia's heritage is being destroyed right now, by looting, by war, and by a market that pays for it, and unlike Egypt's colonial grievance this is not a matter for retrospective tutting. It is happening while you read. If the subject moves you, that is the fact to sit with, because the tablets that would answer the questions this book leaves open are the ones being dug out of context and sold.

The one thing to keep

Keep Gilgamesh.

Four thousand years ago, at the very beginning of written literature, before philosophy, before scripture, before anyone had worked out what stories were for, a person sat down and wrote about a man who lost his friend and could not bear that he too would die. He searched, and he was told by an ale-wife at the edge of the world that there was nothing to find, because the gods kept eternal life for themselves and handed out death instead, so he should eat well, keep himself clean, enjoy his days, hold his child's hand, and love his wife. He ignored her, failed at everything he tried, and came home to his city, and the poem ends with him showing off its walls.

Egypt heard the same question and refused the answer, and built the pyramids. You have now read both replies, which is the point of reading them in this order. Mesopotamia's is the older one, the bleaker one, and the one that turned out to be true. There is no way out. There is only the allocation, and the people in it, and whatever you manage to build while you are here. That advice is the oldest surviving thought humanity has about how to live, it has never been improved on, and almost nobody knows it was written in mud, in Iraq, by someone whose name we do not have.

Terms

A glossary of the words used in this book, and the ones you will meet the moment you walk into a museum.

Mesopotamia. Greek for the land between the rivers, applied by outsiders to the Tigris and Euphrates floodplain, mostly modern Iraq. Nobody who lived there ever called it that, and it names a place rather than a people.

Sumer. The southernmost region, and the culture that built the first cities there. Its language has no known relatives anywhere, and it died out of everyday speech around 2000 BCE while surviving in writing for another two thousand years.

Akkadian. The Semitic tongue, cousin to Hebrew and Arabic, that replaced Sumerian in daily use and became the diplomatic language of the whole Near East. Its two great dialects were Babylonian and Assyrian.

Cuneiform. From the Latin for wedge-shaped, describing the marks a reed makes in wet clay. A writing system rather than a language, used across three millennia for at least a dozen unrelated tongues.

Tell. An artificial mound, built up from centuries of mudbrick buildings collapsing and being rebuilt on their own rubble. Most ancient cities in the region now look like low natural hills, which is why so many went unnoticed for so long.

Ziggurat. A stepped tower of solid brick supporting a shrine at the summit. Not a building the public entered but a constructed mountain, raised in a country that had none.

City-state. An independent city with its farmland, its own god, and its own ruler. The default political unit of early Mesopotamia, and the thing every later empire was an attempt to weld together.

Uruk. The site on the lower Euphrates where urban life first appears at scale, around 3200 BCE, along with the earliest writing. Also the city Gilgamesh ruled.

Ur. A southern city, home of a spectacular royal cemetery and, around 2100 BCE, of the most obsessively record-keeping government of the ancient world.

Babylon. The city that dominated the plain culturally for fifteen hundred years without dominating it politically for much of that time. Home of Hammurabi and later Nebuchadnezzar, and a by-word for wickedness thanks entirely to its enemies.

Assyria. The northern power on the upper Tigris that built the first great military empire, ruled from Nineveh, and pioneered mass deportation as a tool of policy. Destroyed in 612 BCE.

Cylinder seal. A small engraved stone, worn on a cord, rolled across wet clay to leave a unique image. It served as a signature, and the images on them are among the finest miniature art anyone has produced.

Sexagesimal. Counting on a base of sixty, chosen because sixty divides evenly so many ways. Still governing your clock, your compass, and the degrees of any angle.

Anunnaki. A collective term for the gods, rendered roughly as the offspring of the sky god Anu. They are not, and have never been in any text, extraterrestrials.

Enlil. The chief god for much of the period, associated with wind and authority, and the one who resolved to drown humanity for making too much noise.

Inanna, later Ishtar. Goddess of sexual love and of war, which the Mesopotamians did not consider an odd pairing. The most vivid personality in the pantheon and the patron of Uruk.

Marduk. Babylon's city god, promoted to head of the pantheon as Babylon rose. His statue's whereabouts was a matter of national morale, and rivals kept stealing it.

Gilgamesh. A king of Uruk who became a legend and then a poem. The epic bearing his name is the earliest long work of literature anyone has recovered.

Enkidu. The wild man raised among animals, created by the gods as Gilgamesh's match, who becomes his closest friend. His death is what sets the whole story moving.

Utnapishtim. The man who survived the great flood and was granted immortality afterwards, making him the one person Gilgamesh believes can help. The obvious ancestor of Noah.

Atrahasis. A poem preserving the Mesopotamian account of creation and flood, in which humanity is manufactured to take over the manual labour the junior gods refused to keep doing.

The House of Dust. The underworld: dark, silent, and universal. Nobody was judged, nobody was rewarded, and everyone went, which makes it the bleakest afterlife any major civilisation has proposed.

Divination. The reading of the future in physical signs: sheep livers above all, but also oil on water, animal behaviour, malformed births, and the sky. The central intellectual industry of the region, and the accidental parent of astronomy.

Code of Hammurabi. The 282 rulings carved on a diorite pillar around 1754 BCE, now in the Louvre. Famous as the first law code, which it is not, and as a charter of equality, which it is not either.

Ur-Nammu. Founder of Ur's great dynasty and author of the earliest law code we can actually read, roughly three centuries before Hammurabi and considerably less famous.

Sargon of Akkad. The conqueror who welded the squabbling cities into one state around 2334 BCE, inventing the empire as a political form. His capital has never been located.

Enheduanna. High priestess at Ur and daughter of Sargon, writing around 2300 BCE. The earliest author in world history known by name, and a woman, which deserves to be better known than it is.

The clean slate. The periodic royal cancellation of debts, freeing of debt slaves, and return of forfeited land. The society that first charged interest was also the first to build a release valve for it.

Behistun. A cliff face in western Iran carrying a royal inscription in three scripts, placed deliberately out of reach. Copying it at considerable personal risk is what cracked cuneiform in the nineteenth century.

Go Deeper

This was a short map of three thousand years and one of the largest fields in ancient history. Here is where to go next, and what each book is for.

The narrative.

Amanda Podany, *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings: A New History of the Ancient Near East* (2022). The best current single volume, and the right follow-on from this book because of how it is built: Podany tells three thousand years through the lives of more than a hundred actual named individuals recovered from the tablets, rich and poor, women and men, which is the most effective possible answer to a subject drowning in mystification. It is hard to believe in ancient astronauts while reading a weaver's pay dispute. If you want something breezier and more anecdotal, Paul Kriwaczek's *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (2010) is the most readable short introduction in print, though it is looser with the scholarship.

The poem.

Andrew George, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin Classics). George worked directly from the cuneiform and this is the most accurate English version available, but the reason to read it is that it is also the best as literature. He includes the older Sumerian

poems alongside the standard epic, so you can watch the story assemble itself across a thousand years, and he marks the gaps honestly rather than smoothing them over, which tells you something true about how fragile the connection is.

Everything else they wrote.

Stephanie Dalley, trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford World's Classics). The scholarly standard, and the volume that supplies the texts this book leans on: Atrahasis, with humanity manufactured to take over the gods' labour; the Babylonian creation epic; the descent into the underworld; and the epic of Gilgamesh again. Read Atrahasis first. It is short, it is four thousand years old, and it will do more damage to your assumptions about the ancient world than anything else here.

What real expertise looks like.

Stephanie Dalley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon* (2013). A scholar who reads Akkadian goes back to an inscription translated in the 1920s, notices that one passage had been rendered as nonsense, retranslates it with seventy years of better dictionaries, and ends up relocating a wonder of the world three hundred miles and a century away from where everyone had it. It is a detective story, and it is the precise antidote to Section 5: this is what it looks like when someone who can actually read the evid-

ence overturns a consensus, and it looks nothing whatever like Sitchin.

Notes and Sources

Assyriology has a vast and technical literature. The notes below cover the datings used, the foundational texts, and the specific claims this book rests on. All dates follow the middle chronology and are approximate; before roughly 1500 BCE they are disputed by up to a century, and where a point is contested that is flagged in the text.

The Core Ideas

Geography and salt. The contrast between the Nile's predictable late-summer flood and the violent spring flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates underlies the whole argument. Progressive salinisation of the southern fields, visible in the shift from wheat to barley and in declining yields recorded on administrative tablets, is widely accepted as a factor in the decline of the south, though its weight relative to political causes is debated.

Uruk. By around 3200 BCE Uruk was the largest settlement in southern Mesopotamia and possibly the largest anywhere, with monumental architecture, mass-produced ration pottery, the cylinder seal, and the earliest writing. Scholars hedge the global superlative and this book follows them.

Cuneiform. A script, not a language, used for Sumerian, Akkadian and its Babylonian and Assyrian dialects, Hittite, Elamite, Hurrian, Urartian, and Old Persian. The earliest tablets are administrative.

The derivation of writing from clay accounting tokens sealed in bullae is the most influential reconstruction and remains debated rather than established.

Hammurabi. The stele carries 282 laws, dates to around 1754 BCE, was looted to Susa in antiquity, was found there in 1901, and is in the Louvre. It was not the earliest collection: the Code of Ur-Nammu is roughly three centuries older, with the Laws of Eshnunna and the Code of Lipit-Ishtar between them and fragments of Urukagina's reforms earlier still. Penalties are explicitly graded by the social rank of the parties. Whether the text functioned as a working statute book or as royal self-advertisement is an open question, since court records rarely cite it.

Debt cancellation. Periodic royal proclamations wiping consumer debts, freeing debt slaves, and restoring forfeited land are well attested across Mesopotamian history and had their own standing vocabulary.

Atrahasis and the flood. The poem opens with the gods bearing the labour of the world themselves before creating humanity from clay to take it over. The flood is sent because humanity has grown too numerous and too noisy for Enlil to sleep, not because of any moral failing.

The afterlife. Mesopotamian sources describe a single dark underworld to which everyone went, without judgment or reward, in which the dead ate clay and dust. Offerings to the dead were made to relieve their condition rather than to improve their standing.

Astronomy. Systematic dated observation over centuries produced predictive mathematical astronomy. Babylonian records were used by Greek astronomers and have been used by modern ones to measure long-term changes in the earth's rotation.

Mathematics. The Babylonians used a positional sexagesimal system. The tablet YBC 7289 gives the square root of two to roughly six decimal places; Plimpton 322 tabulates what we would call Pythagorean triples, and its purpose remains disputed.

Enheduanna. High priestess at Ur and daughter of Sargon, writing around 2300 BCE, and conventionally the earliest author known by name. The extent of her personal authorship of the surviving corpus is debated.

How It Actually Works

Chronology. Absolute dates for the earlier periods rest on king lists anchored to the Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa, whose interpretation supports four rival systems: high, middle, low, and ultra-low. Hammurabi's accession falls in 1792, 1728, or 1697 BCE depending on which is adopted. This book uses the middle chronology, which is the prevailing convention rather than a settled conclusion.

Sargon and Ur III. Sargon of Akkad founded the first empire around 2334 BCE; the site of his capital has never been identified. The Akkadian empire fell after roughly 150 years, with Gutian pressure and a severe regional drought around 2200 BCE both implic-

ated, the same event associated with the collapse of Egypt's Old Kingdom. The Third Dynasty of Ur ran from about 2112 BCE and fell to Elam around 2004 BCE.

Assyria and Babylon. Nineveh fell to a Babylonian and Median coalition in 612 BCE, and the fire preserved Ashurbanipal's library by baking the tablets. Nebuchadnezzar II ruled 605 to 562 BCE and deported the population of Jerusalem after 587 BCE. Cyrus of Persia took Babylon in 539 BCE.

The last tablets. The latest datable cuneiform texts are astronomical almanacs from the first century CE, roughly 75 CE.

Decipherment. The trilingual inscription of Darius I at Behistun, carved around 520 BCE in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, was copied by Henry Rawlinson in the 1830s and 1840s at considerable physical risk. Akkadian was cracked in the 1850s by several scholars working in parallel, notably Rawlinson and Edward Hincks. In 1857 the Royal Asiatic Society tested the claim by having four scholars translate an unpublished text independently; the sealed results substantially agreed.

The flood tablet. George Smith read his translation of the Babylonian flood account to the Society of Biblical Archaeology on 3 December 1872, with Gladstone present. The tablets came from Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh, excavated by Hormuzd Rassam. The flood narrative is generally regarded as the clearest case of Genesis depending on Mesopotamian material, the bird episode in particular; broader claims of dependence for the creation accounts are contested.

Modern destruction. The Iraq Museum was looted in 2003. Extensive illegal excavation has continued across southern Iraq. Nimrud was destroyed in 2015. A major American retailer was penalised for importing thousands of illegally exported tablets, and a tablet bearing part of the epic of Gilgamesh, sold for over 1.5 million dollars on false provenance, was seized by the United States and returned to Iraq in 2021.

What People Get Wrong

The Hanging Gardens. No Babylonian text refers to them and no archaeology at Babylon confirms them; they are the only one of the seven wonders whose location is unestablished. Herodotus describes Babylon without mentioning them. Stephanie Dalley argues they were the terraced garden built at Nineveh by Sennacherib around 700 BCE, citing his inscriptions describing a wonder for all peoples, bronze water-raising screws, and a surviving aqueduct system, together with Assyrian reliefs and Sennacherib's restyling of Nineveh as a new Babylon. The case is the leading hypothesis, not a consensus.

Nibiru and the Anunnaki. In Mesopotamian astronomical texts Nibiru names a visible planet, most often Jupiter, observed annually; it is never a body beyond the known planets, is never described as inhabited, and is never linked to the Anunnaki. The Babylonians recorded five planets. Anunnaki is a collective term for gods, rendered approximately as the offspring of Anu. The claims made by Zecharia Sitchin from the 1970s onward are not

accepted by any professional Assyriologist, and the detailed rebuttal by Michael Heiser sets out the textual case at length.

Cradles. Cities, writing, and states arose independently in Egypt, the Indus valley, China, Mesoamerica, and Peru. Mesopotamia's apparent priority is partly a function of preservation, since fired clay survives where papyrus and other organic materials do not.

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