

The Cultural Evolution of Mesopotamia

In about 2300 BC, a Semitic-speaking people, the Akkadians, moved in from the north and conquered the Sumerians. Although they tried to dominate the entire world, their rule was not long-lasting, and the Sumerians gradually regained their

self-rule. The most important of the New Sumerian rulers was *Gudea of Lagash*. Many statues of Gudea still survive. The one shown here (fig.5-13) is carved in diorite, a very hard, imported black stone. The pose is relaxed and worshipful. The muscles and facial features are sculpted carefully.

After several centuries of warfare, the Babylonians emerged in 1700 BC



Protected by mountains and nourished by two large rivers, the area once known as Mesopotamia provided an ideal environment for a thriving culture. Why do you suppose the coastline of the Persian Gulf has changed over the years?



6000 BC
Fishing with harpoons in the Nile and East African lakes

4000 BC
Village planning begins, China

World Cultural Timeline

5000 BC
Rice cultivation established, China

3300 BC
Chili peppers domesticated, China



5-13 About twenty statues of Gudea have been found. They depict him seated or standing with hands tightly clasped. This fragment probably was part of a standing figure.

Gudea of Lagash, about 2255 BC, Neo-Sumerian. Diorite with traces of gilt, 29 1/2" (74 cm) high. British Museum, London.



5-15 The Assyrians and the Sumerians had very different ideas about how to portray people. Compare this low relief sculpture to the *Praying Nobleman*.

Winged Genius, about 875 BC, Assyrian. Alabaster, 7' 9" (236 cm) high, The Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Anna Bing Arnold.

Sidelight

Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Picture it: A splendid kingdom with a huge ziggurat at its center and a royal palace overhung with luxuriant gardens. This was the fabulous city of Babylon, capital of Babylonia. It was ruled between 604–562 BC by King Nebuchadnezzar II, the greatest ruler of the late Babylonian empire.

Nebuchadnezzar II is most often remembered as the builder of The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Built within the walls of the royal palace, the gardens did not actually "hang." Instead they rose into the air in a series of terraced roof gardens filled with flowers, shrubs and trees. They appeared as a miracle of greenery within a desert city. The terraces were irrigated by water pumped from the Euphrates River. It is believed that King Nebuchadnezzar II built the gardens to console his wife, Amytis, because she missed the mountains and greenery of her homeland, Media, in Persia. Babylon itself was flat and sunbaked.

Greek and Roman writers described how the terraces were lined with reeds, bitumen and lead so that there would be no seepage. The historian Diodorus Siculus wrote about the gardens in the first century BC and described them in the following manner: "This garden was 400 feet square, and the ascent up to it was as to the top of a mountain."



5-14 Although these figures are in relief, the cylindrical forms seem to have great volume. *Stele of Hammurabi* (upper part), about 1760 BC. Basalt, approx. 28" (71 cm) high, from Susa. Louvre, Paris.

as the masters of Mesopotamia. Their first leader was *Hammurabi*, a powerful figure, who composed a generally humane code of laws. The code of Hammurabi was inscribed on a black basalt *stele*, or upright slab. Above the code is a relief sculpture of Hammurabi before the seated sun god (fig.5-14). It is clear that this encounter must relate to the creation of the code of laws.

The Hittites defeated the Babylonians in 1595 BC and, in turn, were overruled by a succession

Mesopotamia was overwhelmed by the powerful Assyrians who descended on the plains from the north. They expanded their control as far away as Egypt and built marvelous palaces in the northern parts of the plain. Stone from nearby mountains was used to line these huge structures. The walls, carved in *low relief*, showed mythical figures and the exploits of the kings (fig.5-15). The sculptors were superb craftspeople who could create a feeling of depth on a wall.