

THE STANDARD OF UR

From Ur, southern Iraq (about 2600-2400 BC)

This object was found in one of the largest graves in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, lying in the corner of a chamber above the right shoulder of a man. Its original function is not yet understood.

When found, the original wooden frame for the mosaic of shell had decayed, and the two main panels had been crushed together by the weight of the soil. As a result, the present restoration is only a best guess as to how it originally appeared.

The main panels are known as 'War' and 'Peace'. 'War' shows one of the earliest representations of a Sumerian army. Chariots, each pulled by four donkeys, trample enemies; infantry with cloaks carry spears. The 'Peace' panel depicts animals, fish and other goods brought in procession to a banquet. Seated figures, wearing woollen fleeces or fringed skirts, drink to the accompaniment of a musician playing a lyre.

SILVER LYRE

From Ur, southern Iraq (about 2600-2400 BC)

This lyre was found in the 'Great Death-Pit', one of the graves in the Royal Cemetery at Ur. The burial in the Great Death-Pit was accompanied by seventy-four bodies laid down in rows on the floor of the pit. Three lyres were piled one on top of another. They were all made from wood which had decayed by the time they were excavated, but two of them, of which this is one, were entirely covered in sheet silver attached by small silver nails.

Such instruments were probably important parts of rituals at court and temple. There are representations of lyre players and their instruments on cylinder seals, and on the Standard of Ur being played alongside a possible singer.

CHICAGO STONE

2600 BC - 2350 BC

The cuneiform script, like our own alphabet, was used to write many different languages. This black basalt tablet, written in Sumerian, is referred to as the "Chicago Stone," and is one of the oldest known documents pertaining to Sumerian economic life.

The nine columns of text inscribed on both the obverse (front) and reverse (back) of this tablet record the sale of a number of fields, probably to a single buyer. The purchases recorded were all made in silver, although in some cases additional payments in items such as oil, wool, and bread are also noted. Because stone was such a rare and expensive commodity in ancient Mesopotamia, its use here indicates that this document was extremely important, and that it was intended to be a permanent record.

CAST OF THE LAWS OF HAMMURABI

Original Site Unknown (about 1792 BC - 1750 BC)

This stela upon which the Laws of Hammurabi are inscribed ranks as one of the most important historical documents ever discovered.

This is a plaster cast (or reproduction) of an original stela (made of diorite) in the collection of the Musée du Louvre, Paris. The original stela was one of several copies of the laws produced during the reign of King Hammurabi of Babylon (1792-1750 BC). It is inscribed in cuneiform with a prologue, almost 300 laws (or legal verdicts), and an epilogue. Above the laws is a relief that shows Hammurabi receiving the "rod and ring," traditional emblems of kingship, from the sun god, Shamash.



Detail image of the surface of the stela

CUNEIFORM TABLET WITH SCHOOLWORK

Old Babylonian, about 1900-1700 BC

Literacy was not widespread in ancient Mesopotamia. Schooling began at an early age in the 'tablet-house'. Much of the initial instruction and discipline seems to have been in the hands of an elder student known as a 'big brother'. The first thing a boy (and very rarely a girl) had to learn was how to make a tablet and handle the stylus which made the impressions in the clay. The teacher would write out some lines on one side of a tablet (here it is a proverb). The schoolboy studied these, turned over the tablet and tried to reproduce what the teacher had written.

After completing their training, the students became entitled to call themselves *dubsar* or scribe. They then became a member of a privileged class. School tablets have been found in almost all of the private houses in southern Mesopotamia of this date that have been excavated. This suggests that in wealthy families all the male children went to school.

CYLINDER SEAL WITH PLOWING SCENE

Tell Asmar 2350 BC - 2150 BC

This cylinder seal was made of mottled black stone. It would have been rolled onto clay to produce a unique impression, or "signature," that was used either to indicate ownership or to safeguard personal possessions. The seal shows two gods plowing; the first god holds a plow pulled by a lion and a snake-like dragon that are guided by the second god. In the field surrounding the figures can be seen a bird, an eight-pointed star, a crescent, and an inscription.

ZIGGURAT OF UR

2100 BCE

By the mid-third millennium B.C., some temples were being built on huge stepped platforms. These are called ziggurats in cuneiform texts. While the actual significance of these structures is unknown, Mesopotamian gods were often linked with the mountains, and ziggurats may have represented their lofty homes.

In a Sumerian city, the largest and most important building was the ziggurat. Ziggurats continued to be built throughout Mesopotamia until Persian times (ca. 500 B.C.), when new religious ideas emerged. Gradually the ziggurats decayed and the bricks were robbed for other buildings.

PLAQUE WITH BANQUET SCENES

2700 BC - 2600 BCE

This square plaque is divided into three horizontal sections, each of which contains a scene from a banquet. In the upper section, a seated man and woman are shown taking part in a feast. They are attended by servants. In the middle section, more servants are shown in the process of preparing for the meal. In the lower section, musicians and dancers are shown providing entertainment.

Plaques like this one formed part of door-locking systems for important buildings. Each plaque was embedded in a doorjamb, and a peg, inserted into the central hole, was used to hold a hook or cord that secured the door.

