

Penn Museum

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM
of ARCHAEOLOGY and ANTHROPOLOGY

THE MESOPOTAMIAN COLLECTION

Background Information for Teachers

Ancient Mesopotamia, the “land between rivers” (the Tigris and Euphrates), is present-day Iraq. The area was settled by Akkadians in the north and Sumerians in the south. The concepts of the city, writing, law codes, and words such as abyss, cane, and Eden, all came from ancient Mesopotamia. Of the many expeditions by the Penn Museum to Mesopotamia, perhaps one of the most spectacular was that at the site of Ur.

The Sumerian city of Ur, the Old Testament “Ur of the Chaldees,” was excavated by the Penn Museum and the British Museum over a twelve-year period, from 1922-1934, under the direction of the late Sir Leonard Woolley. In the so-called Royal Cemetery, he discovered the greatest extant treasure of the Early Dynastic period, about 2500 B.C. Penn Museum shares the material found in the excavated tombs with the British Museum and the Baghdad Museum, including: personal ornaments, headdresses, musical instruments, and all the paraphernalia of court and everyday life. Lady Pu-abi’s tomb (formerly called Lady Shub-ad) contained the remains of soldiers, ladies-in-waiting, and a sledge drawn by four oxen. When Sir Leonard Woolley and his team first discovered the large number of bodies within the royal tombs he suggested that the servants were peacefully marched to their final resting place and ceremonially poisoned. Now, however, high-tech reanalysis of several of the skulls is presenting a far different, and less gentle, picture, leading to new theories about how the retainers and servants died.

Artifacts in the exhibit display an amazing array of exquisite craftsmanship using precious materials imported from a number of distant lands: lapis lazuli, gold, silver, and carnelian. Both men and women wore decorative, jeweled adornment, most commonly as part of a headdress.

Penn Museum’s Ancient Near East collection covers the time period from about 6200 B.C. to 750 B.C. and was acquired through the Museum’s expeditions. Materials include artifacts from the Museum’s first excavation at Nippur, Iraq, in 1889, to recent excavations at the ancient city of Anshan in Malyan, Iran, which had its last season in 1974.

Early Writing System from Mesopotamia: Tokens and Tablets

Two important kinds of artifacts demonstrate: the earliest known forms of counting mechanisms (clay tokens, with examples in our collection dating from 6200 B.C.) and the earliest preserved writing (Sumerian clay tablets, examples of which date from 2600 B.C.).

The earliest writing kept track of business transactions, but soon people recorded events (the beginning of *history*) and wrote down stories and poems. Along with the ability to write came the desire to send letters to other people. The Mesopotamians invented the earliest example of what we consider a postal envelope: a letter would be written on a small clay tablet and enclosed in a clay envelope with the name and address of the recipient. Mesopotamia had few trees for making paper, but they had plenty of clay so writing was scratched or incised onto clay tablets.

Many of the tokens, cylinder seals, and cuneiform tablets in the Museum's collection are well-known examples of their period and genre, having appeared in academic and popular publications and on exhibit in America, Europe and Asia. Along with ancient ceramic vessels, stone and bone tools, luxury items and ritual objects, these examples of early writing are tangible evidence of the world of civilized peoples living as early as 6,000 years ago.

Penn Museum's Babylonian section does a range of research on the extensive collection of cuneiform tablets. Check out the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project at <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/> and the related links for more information on cuneiform writing and Sumerian literature.