

Mesopotamia



The 'Ram in a Thicket'
from Ur, southern Iraq,
2600-2400 BC

Visit resource for teachers

Key Stage 2

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Before your visit

Background information

Mesopotamia is the area of land between the River Euphrates and the River Tigris. In ancient times, both rivers frequently flooded the surrounding land. Each time the floodwater receded, it left behind a layer of silt, creating a fertile area of soil near the rivers. The first people to live in Mesopotamia led a nomadic life. Then around 6000 BC people began to keep animals and grow their own food crops on the fertile river soil in northern Mesopotamia. In the south, where there was less natural rainfall, they built canals to bring water from the river to water the fields. These first farmers settled in one place and lived in small villages. Some of these villages grew into towns, and in turn some of the towns grew into cities. The cities grew wealthy from agriculture and trade. Across Mesopotamia, different groups of people settled, based around particular cities. The Sumerians were to be found in southern Mesopotamia, the Akkadians, and then the Babylonians, in central Mesopotamia and the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia. Sometimes, the whole of Mesopotamia was ruled by one of these groups of people. Sometimes, it was ruled by people who came from outside Mesopotamia. Nowadays, most of Mesopotamia is the country of Iraq with its capital city at Baghdad, in central Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamian cities were centres of knowledge and learning. The Sumerians developed a number system based on 60. The Assyrians occasionally used a system based on 10. To help with mathematical calculations, people used multiplication tables written on clay tablets. Babylonian astronomers studied the night sky and recorded the movement of the moon and planets. The Sumerians started to write down stories about their kings and gods from about 2500 BC. Cuneiform tablets were kept in the royal palaces and temples. The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (reigned 668 to 631 BC) collected a library of about 25,000 clay tablets at his palace at Nineveh. The tablets included letters, legends, dictionaries and histories, mathematical and medical texts. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (reigned 605 to 562 BC) started a museum in Babylon, which contained objects, statues and clay tablets, some of which dated back to Sumerian times.

Writing began in the Sumerian cities around 3200 BC. This writing was used to record the collection and distribution of food supplies in the cities. The first Sumerian writing used pictograms; simple pictures which represent objects. Gradually, these pictograms were simplified into a form of writing which used wedge-shapes. This writing is known as cuneiform. Cuneiform symbols represented syllables which could be combined to make a word, or used by themselves to represent a complete word. Eventually, there were more than 600 cuneiform symbols. The first cuneiform represented the Sumerian language. Later, the Assyrians and Babylonians wrote down their language using cuneiform. Most of the writing from Mesopotamia is on small clay tablets. Damp clay was formed into a flat tablet, which could be held in one hand. The writer pressed a stylus made from reed, wood or ivory into the clay to make the cuneiform symbols then left the tablet in the sun to harden. From about 2000 BC ivory tablets covered with a layer of wax were also used for writing. These could be reused, since the wax could be smoothed over ready for the next piece of writing. Cuneiform signs were also carved onto stone. Early numbers were recorded by making circular or semi-circular marks in the surface of a clay tablet. Cuneiform was used in Mesopotamia for over 3000 years. The last known use of cuneiform is a second-century AD Babylonian astronomy text.

Mesopotamian cities were home to specialist craft workers. These workers used a wide range of materials to create different craft and art objects. Mesopotamian pottery included bowls, plates, saucers and jars. At first pottery was shaped by hand. Then, from about 3500BC, the potter's wheel was developed, enabling potters to make pots with thinner sides and in more elaborate shapes. Many pots were left undecorated. Others were decorated with a thin wash of coloured liquid clay, burnished (polished so that they had a shiny surface) or painted with patterns. The process of making glass was invented in Mesopotamia about 1600 BC, and by the 700s BC a wide range of glass vessels was being produced. A variety of stones were used to make statues, cylinder seals and carved wall reliefs. There is little stone in the south and there are no metal mines in Mesopotamia, so both materials had to be imported. Copper, bronze, silver and gold were used to make weapons, farming equipment, cups, vases, dishes, bowls and jewellery. Metal was also used to decorate objects made from other materials such as wooden musical instruments and stone statues.

The people of Mesopotamia believed that the universe was controlled by gods and goddesses who had to be obeyed, and worshipped with prayers and offerings. There were many myths and legends about these gods and goddesses. Temples were the centres of religious activity where priests and priestesses served a particular god or goddess. People believed that the god or goddess lived in the temple. All temples contained a statue of their god or goddess, together with an offering table. Special feasts and festivals were held in honour of the gods and goddesses. At some periods, important people were buried with some of the possessions and food perhaps they believed they would need them in the afterlife.

Resources

British Museum websites

Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

www.teachinghistory100.org

Books

For adults

Reade, Julian, *Assyrian sculpture*, British Museum Press, 1998/2007

Reade, Julian, *Mesopotamia*, British Museum Press, 2000/2006

Walker, C.B.F., *Cuneiform*, British Museum Press, 1987/2007

For children

Donoghue, Carol, *The story of writing*, British Museum Press, 2007

Wiltshire, Katharine, *Pocket Timeline of Ancient Mesopotamia*, British Museum Press, 2005

Gallery information

Rooms 56-55 contain material from ancient Mesopotamia. Many of the objects are the result of excavations in the region from known sites. The galleries run in chronological order.

Objects on display in Room 56 illustrate the rise of agriculture, the invention of writing, developments in technology and artistry, and other achievements of the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians, who lived in Mesopotamia 6000 – 1550 BC. Objects found at the Royal Cemetery at Ur are of particular importance. Room 55 traces the history of Babylonia under the Kassites and the growth of the Babylonian state and empire until it was taken over by the Persian King Cyrus in 539 BC. The development of the Assyrian state and empire, until its fall in 612 BC, is illustrated by objects excavated in its palaces. Mesopotamia's highly-developed literature and learning are demonstrated by clay tablets from the library of King Assurbanipal (668-631 BC) at Nineveh, written in cuneiform script.

What is it like to visit these galleries?

Rooms 56-55 are on the upper floor of the Museum and form part of the through route which takes visitors round the upper floor. The doorway at the west end of the galleries leads into the landing for the west stairs whilst the east end leads onto the landing for the east stairs. The galleries contain a large number of wall and free standing cases. At the centre of Room 56 is a cross route which takes visitors back into the upper level of the Great Court or into the ancient Egyptian galleries. This point in the gallery can get busy. The galleries run parallel to the ancient Egyptian galleries and therefore tend to have fewer visitors than the galleries immediately next door.

Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

Preliminary activities

General introductory activities

Locate the area covered by ancient Mesopotamia in an atlas. Which modern countries form ancient Mesopotamia?

The region of Mesopotamia covers a long period of history and several different cultures so you may want to divide your searches down into objects relating to Sumer, Babylon or Assyria.

Activities to support gallery activities

Talk about the link between animals and environment, for example what animals are found near/in water. What is the difference between a wild and a domesticated animal? Think of, and group, examples.

Look at examples of very busy pictures such as the pictures in *Where's Wally* where several things are happening at the same time. How easy is it to see all the different activities? Has the artist arranged the picture to help the viewer?

Discuss the role of personal adornment – functional, decorative, display of wealth/status. Confirm vocabulary used to describe different types of jewellery – e.g. necklace, pendant, brooch, finger ring. Look at examples (real and in catalogues) of modern jewellery. What are they made from and what decorative motifs (images, writing, patterns) are used to decorate them.

Talk about the role of clothing. What materials do we use to make clothing nowadays? Where do these materials come from? Why do we wear different types of clothing? Look at pictures and paintings of people in the past – can you identify the different items of clothing they are wearing? Are these the same or different from clothing we wear nowadays?

During your visit

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in the Mesopotamia Galleries. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Gallery activity: Animals

- Ancient Sumerians kept a range of domesticated animals.
- This activity asks the students to look for evidence of animals in the gallery and think about their relationship with humans.

Gallery activity: Standard of Ur

- The images on the Standard of Ur provide information about life in ancient Sumer. One side shows a banquet and the other side a military campaign.
- This activity encourages the students to study one object closely and gather information about what is shown on the object.

Gallery activity: Jewellery

- Archaeologists found a large number of pieces of jewellery in the royal graves at Ur. The jewellery was made from precious metals and colourful semi-precious stones.
- This activity requires the students to identify different types of jewellery and use the items on display to inspire their own necklace design.

Gallery activity: People of Sumer

- Votive statues were small statues of themselves which ancient Sumerians placed in temples to worship and honour their gods and goddesses.
- This activity requires the students to use the statues as a primary source of evidence to investigate clothing in ancient Sumer.

Animals

Ancient Sumerians kept animals to provide food and raw materials. There were also many wild animals living in the landscape around the cities.

- Look around the room and find the four objects shown below. The labels for the objects have got mixed up. Can you join the right label to the right object?



sheep



goat



lion



cow

The goat, the sheep and the cow are all domesticated animals that were kept by humans.

- Match each animal to what you think it provided for humans. Remember some things might come from more than one animal.

milk

goat

wool

sheep

leather

cow

When you have finished, have a look for other animals in the gallery. What would they have provided for humans to use?

Standard of Ur

The Standard of Ur was found in a royal grave. Archaeologists are not sure exactly what it was used for.

It has two sides – one shows a war scene and the other a peacetime scene. Look at the side below which is the peacetime scene showing a banquet.

- Find the details in the boxes then join the boxes to the picture.

people sitting
down drinking

a flock of
sheep

a musician
playing a lyre

donkeys



someone carrying
things on their back

someone
leading a goat

someone
carrying fish

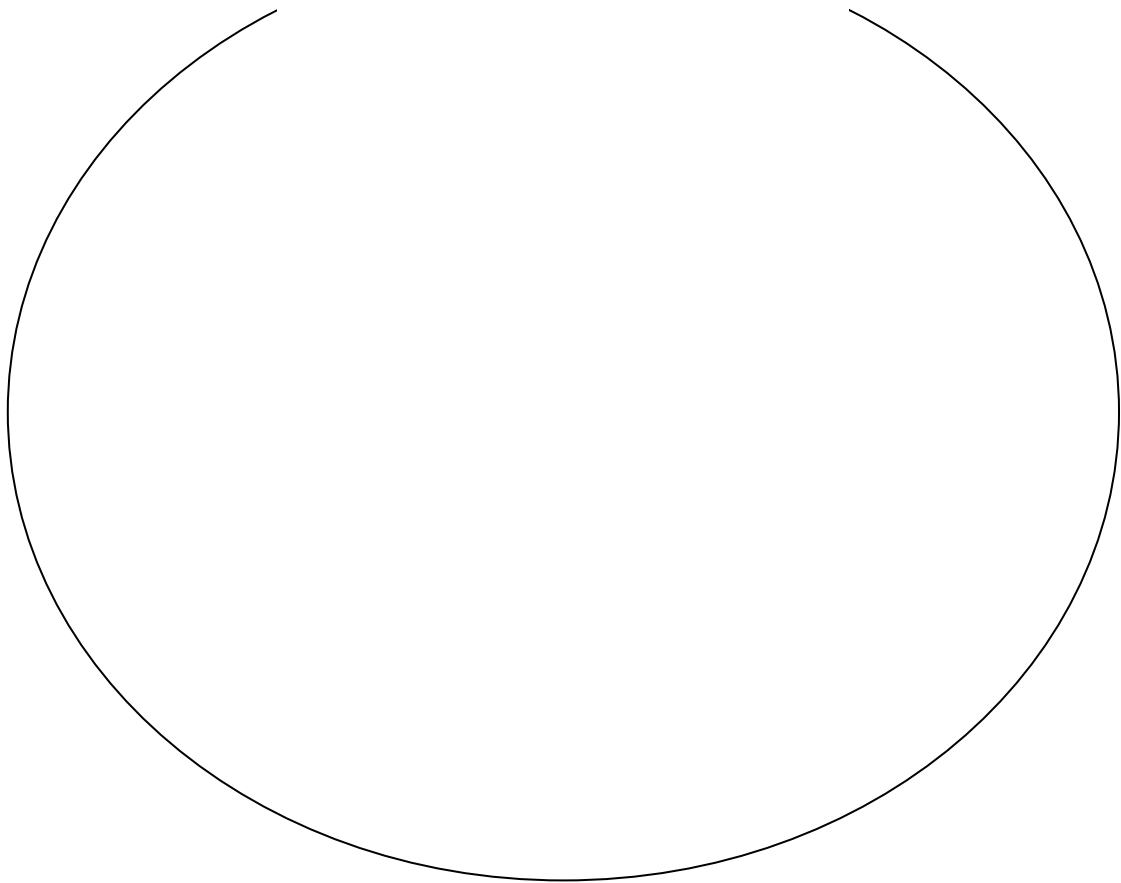
When you have finished, have a look at the other side of the Standard of Ur and discuss what you can see happening with the others in your group.

What do you think the Standard was used for originally?

Jewellery

The objects in cases 6, 12, 13 and 14 come from the royal graves in Ur. Look at the necklaces which are made from gold and semi-precious stone beads.

Use the string below to design a necklace. Before you start decide if you are going to have single different beads, matching beads on each side of the necklace or a repeating pattern of beads. As you find a bead or gold shape that you like add it to the necklace



Now, look around the gallery and find the following pieces of jewellery:

a pair of earrings ☐ a decorative pin ☐ a finger ring ☐

People of Sumer

Look in Case 4. Wealthy Sumerians put small statues of themselves in temples to worship and honour the gods on their behalf.

Tick the box as you spot each of the following types of clothing

headband ☐ knotted belt ☐ fleecy skirt ☐ cloak ☐

Now copy the pose of one of the statues. Think carefully about how they are holding their arms and hands. Why do you think they are holding their hands like this? (Remember they are statues for a temple.)

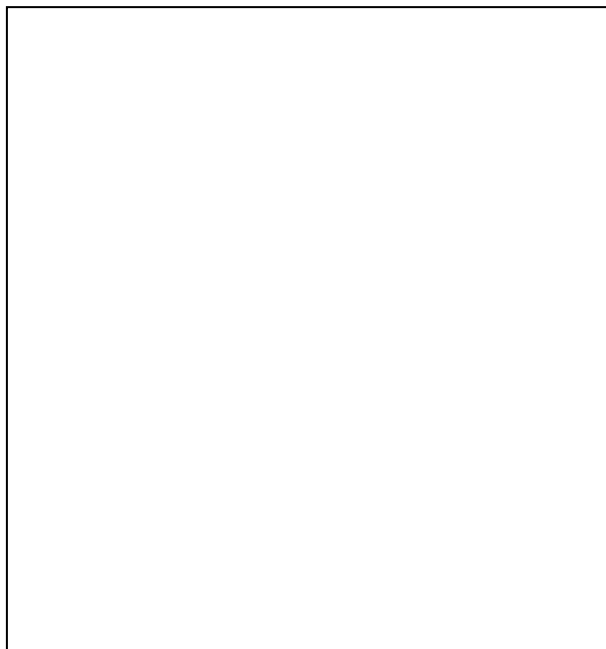
Look carefully at the different hair styles and find a statue with

no hair (bald) ☐ long curly hair ☐ a rolled bun over each ear ☐

Now go to Case 2 and look at the right hand end for the “eye figurines”. These were placed as offerings in Sumerian temples in earlier times.

Nobody is sure why they have such big eyes.
What do you think?

Choose one of the figurines and draw it in the box.



After your visit

Follow-up activities: introduction

These classroom activities aim to encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the Mesopotamian galleries during their Museum visit.

Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.

Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.

Follow-up activity: Animals

Curriculum links: history, science, citizenship

- Think about the relationship between humans and animals. Begin by naming individual animals and then deciding if they are wild animals or animals that might be kept by humans. What about lions in a safari park – are they wild or tame? What do the kept animals provide for humans?
- Research the development of early farming – what were the first animals kept by humans and why?
- Discuss contemporary issues around the relationship between animals and humans. Possible themes might be sacred animals, animal welfare, zoos, vegetarianism.

Follow-up activity: Standard of Ur

Curriculum links: history, literacy, citizenship

- Make your own school standard – one side could be a classroom side and the other a playground side. Arrange representative activities in registers (lined rows) on both sides or display them side by side on a display board.

Follow-up activity: Jewellery

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Ask students to study the necklace design they created in the gallery.
- Use this information to create a necklace in 3D using materials such as string, beads, shiny foil paper, shells, wire.
- Make a Mesopotamian jewellery shop display by pinning the necklaces on boards or creating a papier mache head and shoulders as a display model.

Follow-up activity: People of Sumer

Curriculum links: history, science, citizenship

- Wool was an important raw material for the ancient Sumerians. Wealthy people are shown wearing skirts which look like they are made from whole fleeces. Discuss the different material we use nowadays to make clothes. Where do they come from – are they a plant (e.g. linen from the flax plant), an animal (e.g. wool from a sheep) or mineral (e.g. nylon, a synthetic material made from oil by-products).
- A fleece skirt worn by a member of the Sumerian elite would have looked impressive but would not have been very practical for everyday use. Ask the students to think about the different clothes which we wear for different occasions and purposes. How do people nowadays show status and identity through their clothing?