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The Ur ziggurat still standing nowadays

[World's Oldest Cities](#)

From Jericho to Sumer

First cities could develop only when people learned to build settlements and transform them in permanent habitats. This happened 10-12 millennia ago, in a stretch of land along the Middle East, going from Turkey to Iran. The natives of these places first lived as hunters-gatherers, but gradually they started living in small communities, to cultivate the land and grow animals. But these settlements were not cities. The city is not only larger than a village, but most of its population is not involved in agriculture. People were craftsmen, traders, priests, soldiers and officials. Cities could exist only when farmers produced a surplus of food to feed those involved in other activities, indispensable for the development of the civilization. The existence of large settlements is very old. The city named Jericho in the Bible was continuously inhabited for 10,000 years, and Catal Huyuk, discovered in Turkey, flourished 8,500-7,000 years ago. As writing appeared 5,000 years ago in Sumer (southern Iraq), we have no written information about the oldest cities. Sumerians have an unknown origin. They reached Sumer around 3,500 BC. Physically, they resembled the Dravidian people of India (later, they got a mixed type with the Semites), but their advanced copper technology (the Sumerians processed the copper by casting it in clay molds, and Sumerian images present soldiers wearing copper axes, copper swords and spears with copper points) pointed to a relation to the tribes of northeastern Mesopotamia. They mixed with indigenous people and Semite people forming one of the most advanced civilizations of the antiquity. Sumer, unlike more northern zones, never had a good agriculture soil. Rich crops were obtained only if the swamps were drained and the terrains irrigated. That supposed an organized effort and required the participation of the whole population; similar efforts were made for maintaining functioning the system. Crops were kept in stores made of reed and palm leaves. Being productive and prosperous, around 3,500 BC, Sumer was divided in independent city-states, protected by walls, like in Ur, Uruk, Kish, Lagash, and Nippur, each one having the role of capital of the surrounding area. Excepting food, Sumer was devoid of resources, like timber and stones (too heavy to be transported in large amounts), that's why the buildings were made of adobe, dried at sun and burned in ovens. Taking into account how perishable this material is, it is a wonder that many of these crumbly structures survived. These are the ziggurats, tall pyramids having lateral steps, which initially led to the temple or sanctuary of a god. Each city had its god and was built around its imposing temple. Priests were powerful and first monarchs appeared in Sumer. The first code of laws appeared in Ur, during the rule of the king Ur-Nammu. Each city had its own god. However, some major gods existed all over the Sumer: Anu, the God of the Sky, Nanna, the Moon Goddess (both originated in Uruk), Enlil, God of the Universe (worshiped in Nippur and represented by the crescent moon and the sun) and Enki, God of the Water (worshiped in Eridu). Hunger causing floods, epidemics, war and death were considered punishments of the gods. Gods were given offerings and animal (cattle) sacrifices. Lagash had 36,000 inhabitants around 2,300 BC, during the rule of Uru-Kagina, and in the center of the walled city was the temple of the god Nin-Girsu. Around 2,000 BC, during the rule of patesi (king) Gudea, the city had 216,000 inhabitants and its walls were 9.5 km (6 mi) long, covering a surface of 435 hectares. Sumer contributed to the civilization with the first wheeled vehicles, potter's wheel, and especially writing. Starting with pictographs and ideograms, Sumerians developed the cuneiform writing, on slates of wet clay subsequently dried to keep the message. These slates preserved humanity's first literary texts, based on the myths and the legends of the Sumerians, 5,000 years ago. Writing appeared due as a trade necessity, enabling people to

record goods' prices, benefits, or clients' name. Initially, each character reproduced an object, but later the signs encoded phonemes. 4,000 years old calendars, written on clay plates, were found at Uruk. The year started with the spring equinox, it was divided in months of 29 days or 30 days, and the week had 7 days. The ziggurat of Ur was dedicated to the Moon Goddess Nanna and was 21 m (70 ft) tall. Ur houses, made of adobe, had two levels, and the rooms surrounded an inner central paved courtyard. Low class Sumerian men used to shave their heads, using large straight razors, and knot a strip around their head but priests and nobles wore curly beards and covered their heads with gold sheathed helmets. The helmets mimicked a real head, with ears, hair, wrinkled forehead and a strip surrounding the head and knotted at the nape, a proof of the skill of the Sumerian goldsmiths. Peasants and craftsmen wore simple tunics leaving uncovered one shoulder, while priests and nobles wore luxury clothing, adorned with gold. A Sumerian type of sport was the wrestling of two men, mutually grasped, attempting to knock down the pot maintained in balance on the head of the other. Sumerians knew the harp. Their sculptors made beautiful reliefs in diorite, a glossy black hard rock. The reliefs depicted from kings worshipping gods to wild animals (lions, eagles, vultures, aurochs, ibexes, mouflons). Sumerians never depicted hyenas, believed to be evil spirits, due to their sinister night "laughs" and the fact that groups of hyenas gathered on the places where battles had taken place to feed on the human corpses. The cities of Sumer involved in fights between them, encouraging external attacks. Sumerians managed to chase away their enemies several times and the dynasty of Ur, founded by Ur-Nammu, marked the peak of Sumer civilization around 2,500 BC. Around 2350 BC, Semite (Akkadian) tribes conquered the Sumer. The third dynasty of Ur was founded around 2,190 BC by Naram-Sin, who introduced war chariots, and built fortresses. The Gutians from modern western Iran represented a problem now. The Gutians practiced hit-and-run tactics, and would be long gone by the time regular troops could arrive to deal with the situation. Their raids crippled the economy of Sumer. Travel became unsafe, as did work in the fields, resulting in famine. Two centuries later, Amorites, a Semitic tribe, conquered Sumer, whose history is now integrated into that of the Babylonian civilization. In the Valley of the Indus River (today Pakistan), like in Sumer, civilization developed centuries before the emergence of the ancient Egypt. A mysterious urban civilization developed 4,500 years ago in the area: Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. They left few vestiges and their pictographs have not been decoded. These cities had the aspect of a road network, crossing in right angles, showing that the cities had been projected and built before being inhabited. The oldest clay figurine representing a chariot, 5,000 years old, was found at Mohenjo-Daro. For unknown reasons, this civilization collapsed around 3,700 years ago.