Chapter 9: Early Dynastic Mesopotamia

# Chapter Summary [Copied from Olszewski 2019, Chapter 9]

* Early farming villages in Mesopotamia were established during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, although they are not found in southern Mesopotamia because they are deeply buried in floodplain sediments. By the Pottery Neolithic, some groups were using irrigation agriculture.
* The earliest known sites in southern Mesopotamia date to the ‘Ubaid period. Most were small villages, but some were towns. Towns had architecture interpreted as temples, and by the late ‘Ubaid period trading colonies had been established as far north as central Turkey.
* During the Uruk period, the city of Uruk became a city-state with a complex bureaucracy, social classes, secular rulers, and priestly elites. Large temple complexes were built, and many trading colonies were established in northern Mesopotamia and northwestern Syria.
* The Early Dynastic period is sometimes called Sumerian civilization. It was characterized by many competing city-states in southern Mesopotamia.
* Some of the earliest writing is Sumerian cuneiform, which often was used to record economic transactions in the *oikoi* economy that was typical of the city-states. Cuneiform writing also is a record of myths, songs, recipes, legends, and the exploits of rulers.
* Social roles and social statuses during the Early Dynastic period can be seen in artistic depictions and in burials. Men and women were shown engaged in different types of tasks such as herding (men) and weaving (women), whereas elite rulers were drawn much larger than other people. Elaborate burials with lavish grave goods, including probable human sacrifice, also mark elite individuals who had access to significant amounts of “wealth.”
* Sumerian religion had a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Each city-state had one or more patron god/goddess.
* Most people owed labor obligations to rulers and to temples. This labor was used to construct monuments, work in agricultural fields, weave textiles, and fight battles.
* Early Dynastic city-states often fought battles with each other, and losers became slaves to the winners. Slaves were put to work in agriculture and weaving as well as serving other labor obligations. In addition to fighting each other, city-states also fought battles against nomadic peoples from elsewhere in the region.
* The Early Dynastic period ended when Sargon of the city-state of Akkad managed to unite all of southern Mesopotamia under his rule. This period is known as the Akkadian Empire. Later complex political entities include the Third Dynasty of Ur and the Babylonian Kingdom. However, outsiders such as the Gutians, the Assyrians, and the Elamites controlled parts of Mesopotamia at various points in time. Eventually this region became part of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire.

# Key Terms

**Akkadian Empire**: established by Sargon I from the city-state of Akkad in 2334 BC, this was the first period of unification of many of the city-states of southern Mesopotamia under one ruling dynasty and one city-state.

**Ali Kosh**: a Pre-Pottery to Pottery Neolithic site situated in the Deh Luran Plain of Iran, which is part of extended southern Mesopotamia. It contains evidence for early settled life based mainly on the use of wild plants and wild animals and a later focus on domesticated plants and animals.

**City-State**: a term used to describe a political unit that includes an independently ruled city with its surrounding territory. Early Mesopotamia was characterized by city-state political organization during the Sumerian period.

**Cuneiform**: a writing system developed in southern Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic period. It was a syllabic language whose written signs are made up of combinations of lines and wedge shapes. It was used to record economic transactions, as well as inscriptions on buildings, proverbs, hymns, myths, and royal inscriptions.

**Değirmentepe**: an ‘Ubaid period site in Anatolia (central Turkey) that seems to represent an ‘Ubaid colony with local manufacture of ‘Ubaid style vessels and the use of seals and sealings with northern Mesopotamian designs. It is situated near sources of silver, copper, and lead, and contains evidence for the manufacture of copper objects.

**Early Dynastic Period**: often called the period of “Sumerian civilization,” the Early Dynastic (2900 to 2350 BC) was characterized by more than a dozen city-states in southern Mesopotamia. These were largely independent of each other in terms of political control, although they shared many traditions such as cuneiform writing, a belief system oriented to the same pantheon of gods and goddesses, and similar forms of administrative, economic, religious, and political organization.

**M’lefaat**: a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in Iraq in northern Mesopotamia, dating to 9500 BC. It is a permanent village with evidence for the use of wild bitter vetch, lentils, barley, einkorn wheat/rye, and goat-grass, and the hunting of gazelle and hare.

***Oikoi* Economy**: an economy based on “superhouseholds” in which kin-based households are combined with nonkin labor. These were typical economic units seen during the Early Dynastic and later periods of Mesopotamia, and were capable of generating large quantities of surplus materials such as textiles and crops such as cereals. *Oikos* refers to a single superhousehold, while *oikoi* is the plural (or many superhouseholds).

**Qermez Dere**: a small Pre-Pottery Neolithic village site in northern Iraq (northern Mesopotamia) that has evidence for use of some rooms for ritual activities. People living here hunted wild animals and used wild plant foods in the period leading up to the appearance of domesticated plants and animals.

**Royal Cemetery at Ur**: an Early Dynastic cemetery containing 16 elaborate tomb burials, including that of Puabi. In addition to vast quantities of jewelry made of silver, gold, and semiprecious stones such as carnelian and lapis lazuli, many of the graves of these socially important people also contain stone, copper, gold, and silver vessels, tables, elaborately decorated chariots and the animals that drew them, and dozens of burials of retainers who either were sacrificed or died willingly to accompany the elite individuals into the afterlife.

**Tell Oueili**: a site in southern Mesopotamia that has the earliest known ‘Ubaid period levels. These date to 6300–4500 cal BC and include examples of buildings that have long rooms with attached smaller rooms, ‘Ubaid style pottery, and an economy heavily invested in domesticated plants and animals.

**Tell as-Sawwan**: a pottery Neolithic period site of the Samarran period in northern Mesopotamia, occupied from 6400 to 5700 cal BC. It represents the expansion of agricultural systems to include irrigation agriculture.

**Third Dynasty of Ur**: during this period (also known as the Neo-Assyrian Empire), southern Mesopotamia was again reunited under one ruler from the city of Ur. It lasted only a short time, from 2112 to 2004 BC.

**‘Ubaid period**: during this period of the Chalcolithic, from 6300–4500 cal BC, increased interaction between southern and northern Mesopotamia is evident in the establishment of ‘Ubaid colonies in Turkey. The first towns and temples appear, suggesting increasing social and political complexity.

**Uruk (Warka)**: the first city-state of southern Mesopotamia, which developed during the Uruk period. It had a population of 50,000 people, a complex political and bureaucratic administration, massive building projects, and sacred precincts with temples and palaces.

**Uruk period**: an important period (4000–3100 BC) of social and political development that resulted in the first city-states of southern Mesopotamia. It is characterized by specialized labor (scribes, bricklayers, priests, bureaucrats, etc.), tribute payments to temples, and accumulation of surplus agricultural products used as funding for construction projects.