Uruk: The World's First Big City (780 L)

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela; Source: https://school.bighistoryproject.com

Between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the soil was rich and easy to farm. It is there that the world’s first major city sprang up in a region called Mesopotamia.

The first city

Cities began to appear in several places around the world at about the same time. But most archaeologists agree that Uruk was one of the world’s first cities.

What makes a city? Things like: social rank, specialized jobs, political control, literature, religion, and public architecture. The people of Uruk had all of these about 5,000 years ago.

To support a city, you must have people growing extra food nearby. People in the city had to find ways to distribute the food fairly.

Location, location, location

Uruk (pronounced OO-rook) arose in what is now Iraq. Greek historians called this area Mesopotamia, or “the land between the rivers.” Those rivers were the Euphrates in the west and the Tigris in the east.

By 4000 BCE, the Mesopotamians had settled down. They cared for domestic sheep and goats. They grew wheat, barley, and peas. But their climate was changing. Less rain was falling, so they needed to move to find new water sources.

People migrated into the two river valleys. They found soil that was very fertile because of repeated flooding of the rivers. Thanks to the soil, farmers could grow more than enough grain. The extra food could support others who didn’t farm.

Priests probably collected and handed out the extra grain. In addition to grains and domestic animals, people had plenty of fish and fowl from the rivers and marshes. Beer had been invented and people worshipped Ninkasi, the goddess of beer.

Writing, beliefs, and everyday life

We know a lot about Uruk because of archaeological digs that began in 1850. Uruk had the earliest writing system in the world. It dates back about 5,500 years. People in Uruk wrote on clay tablets with reeds. The writing is called “cuneiform.” It’s named after the reeds that writers pressed into wet clay. Because clay is durable, many tablets have survived. Museums around the world take care of them.

We learned from the tablets that the people of Uruk built a temple to a sky god called An. They also built a temple to Inanna, his daughter. Inanna was goddess of love and war. Inanna was also the patron goddess of Uruk. The city’s people worshipped her by building a special house, staffed with priests and servants.

Because the temples were also used to store and hand out excess food, priests became more powerful.

As people learned to farm, they stopped wearing clothing made from wild-animal skins. Instead, they made clothes from domesticated animals and plants. This meant that most people wore woolen clothes made from their sheep, even in hot weather. Only high-ranking people could wear linen, a textile made from flax plants. Linen took much longer to make than wool.
Uruk at its height

Uruk had 40,000 to 50,000 people by 5,000 years ago. A few hundred years later, it reached its peak population of 50,000 to 80,000. By that time, there were 11 other cities between the rivers. The cities frequently fought with each other over land, water, and other resources. Priests gradually had to share their power with warrior leaders. Eventually, this led to a system of a single king ruling each city.

Early clay tablets in Uruk contain a list of jobs. These lists included the king, ambassadors, and priests. They also listed stonemasons, gardeners, weavers, smiths, cooks, jewelers and potters. A small group of priests were at the top of the social rank. Most people belonged to a much larger group of commoners. At the bottom was a small group of slaves, prisoners of war, criminals, and people who were in debt.

Historians say that the first state appeared at the same time as the first city. The state was made up of high-ranking people who could give orders and collect valuable goods. Why did the majority of people allow a few people so much power?

This is difficult to answer. On one hand, rulers took power as more resources became available. On the other hand, citizens gave power in exchange for organization. Organization allowed the development of big, important projects like irrigation, and for security and protection.

The first writing in Uruk was used to track goods passing through central warehouses. It began with pictures in wet clay that represented animals or grain. After 400 years, people were using symbols instead of drawing a picture for each item. In this system, a small wedge stood for one. A small circle stood for 10. A large wedge, or triangle, meant 600. Large circles stood for 3,600. Their system of numbers was based partly on 10 and partly on 60. We still use the system based on 60 today. For example, a circle has 360 degrees.

After about a thousand years, people in Uruk had developed their system of writing. It was advanced enough to allow them to write hymns, funeral songs, and superhero stories. Here are some lines from “The Lady of the Evening,” a hymn to the evening star, which represented Inanna. Sumer is mentioned. It refers to the area from modern-day Baghdad down to the Persian Gulf:

My Lady looks in sweet wonder from heaven.
The people of Sumer parade before the holy Inanna.
Inanna, the Lady of the Evening, is radiant
I sing your praises, holy Inanna.
The Lady of the Evening is radiant on the horizon.

Poets in Uruk also gave us our first superhero story, The Epic of Gilgamesh. In fact, it is the first recorded story of any kind. The tale imagines Gilgamesh as two-thirds divine and one-third human. His friend Enkidu becomes a city person and stops living as a wild hunter. They go on many adventures together. One of these results in Enkidu being sentenced to death. This beautiful story has several modern versions. Here are a few lines describing the city of Uruk:

Gilgamesh said to the boatman, “This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine. Approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty. Walk on the wall of Uruk. Follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built. Observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares…”
**The legacy of Uruk and Mesopotamia**

Despite the innovations by its people, Uruk eventually declined. After Mesopotamia experienced several hundred years of warfare, Sargon of Akkad conquered most of it. A serious drought occurred in about 2250 BCE. By 1700 BCE, all of southern Mesopotamia had declined and been absorbed by other empires.

The main reasons seem to be environmental. The irrigation that the Mesopotamians used increased the salt content of the soil. As the sun evaporated the water standing in the fields, it left behind the mineral salts that had been dissolved in the water. This caused the salt levels in the soil to increase. The high salt content meant farmers couldn’t grow as much grain. By 1700 BCE, crop production had fallen by about 65 percent.

Mesopotamia had a new time of glory as Babylonia, under Hammurabi (ruled 1792–1770 BCE). Other empires warred with Babylonia until it had a final moment under King Nebuchadnezzar. In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and Jerusalem. He sent at least 10,000 Jewish people into exile in Babylon, 250 miles from Uruk.

Traditions from southern Mesopotamia also were adopted by Greek scholars. Ideas from Mesopotamia live on today, especially in mathematics. Our day is still divided into 24 hours. Each hour is divided into 60 minutes. And each minute into 60 seconds. A circle still consists of 360 degrees. Cuneiform writing was used regionally until the beginning of the Common Era, when it disappeared.

By 300 CE, people had mostly abandoned Uruk. By the time of the Arab conquests in 634, it was completely empty.

Five thousand years ago, people in Uruk put together all the pieces of what we call civilization. They had kings and writing, temples and palaces, jobs and literature. The culture they built is similar to what we know today.