

THE ANCIENT CIVILISATION OF
SUMER

BY

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(OLIVIA SAMPLE)

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INTRODUCTION

There was a time, before the Ancient Greeks and the Romans, when other more ancient civilisations existed. Of course, the Greeks and Romans gave us many riches such as literature and drama, science, maths, law and democratic rule but the civilisation I want to concentrate on, the Sumerian civilisation, gave us just as much and yet we are not taught about it in our schools and in the media. This is nothing new- even the Father of History, Herodotus, did not fully recognise the importance of the people of Sumer: the individuals behind the wheel, who developed writing and ended the age of the hunter-gatherer. After they became farmers and traders, they formed the first towns and cities and began to lead lives that are recognisable to us today. No wonder that the land of the Fertile Crescent between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, Mesopotamia, is known as the Cradle of Civilisation.

I first became interested in the history of Mesopotamia when I was seven years old when my mother used to read to me about famous kings such as Ashurbanipal, Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar. I became even more intrigued in the Sumerian civilisation after visiting the British Museum in London and taking a free guided tour in Room 56 with a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide who made me want to find out more about all sorts of things: the Royal Graves of Ur, CL Woolley and even Agatha Christie! During the tour, I also began to feel a connection with the ordinary people of Sumer as I looked at the Standard of Ur (the original was in Japan when I visited). I have spent hours looking at pictures of the Standard since and I think it is an amazing primary historical source.

On the tour, the British Museum guide told us that hundreds of clay cuneiform tablets stored at the museum are being slowly interpreted by dedicated researchers who even come in at weekends to work out the secrets of the Mesopotamian past. This project is my attempt to do the same and also record some of what is known about the mysterious but fascinating Sumerians. I hope you enjoy my discoveries.

Olivia Sample, July 2015

CHAPTER 1: Writing, cylinder seals and the potter's wheel- the role of clay

Meaning	Uruk 3500-3200 BC	Uruk 3200-3000 BC	Uruk 3000-2700 BC	Uruk 2700-2500 BC
1. The sun				
2. God, heaven				
3. Mountain				
4. Man				
5. Ox				
6. Fish				
7. Heart				
8. Hand				
9. Hand and arm				
10. Foot				
11. Grain				
12. Piece of wood				
13. Net				
14. Enclosure				

Figure 1



Figure 2

In the Uruk period (3500-3200BC), a ground breaking invention arrived in Sumer: writing. Thanks to King Ashurbanipal who kept many of these ancient clay tablets in his library in Nineveh, but also Nebuchadnezzar and world museums today, we have an insight into the world of the Sumerians.

The first Sumerian writing used pictograms (Figure 1); simple pictures to represent objects and these were read right to left at first in portrait orientation then landscape and then in columns. Gradually, these pictograms were simplified into a form of writing which used wedge-shapes. This writing is known as cuneiform (Figure 2). 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.

Clay was used for everything as there was a plentiful supply of thick mud from the flooding of the Tigris or Euphrates. Damp clay was formed into a flat tablet, which could be held in one hand. The writer pressed a stylus made from reed from the river banks, wood or ivory into the clay to make the cuneiform symbols then left the tablet in the sun to harden and to make a permanent record for us today.

To begin with, the clay tablets were used to keep an eye on trade and food supplies and were often just lists of administration but later stories such as the tale of Gilgamesh were written down.

I think the invention of writing in Sumer went hand in hand with people's need to become wealthy and comfortable and that has not changed much over the centuries! The abundance of clay and its creative use is an example of history happening in the right place at the right time in my opinion.



As the Sumerians started to develop writing to communicate with each other, they began to use shortcuts and quick, easy to use technology similar to Twitter, Facebook or Instagram- the cylinder seal was born. The seals were made from calcite (alabaster) and later lapis lazuli and could be expensive and often worn around the neck by a cord. They were rolled along damp clay to make clay records (Figure 3). The patterns on these seals often had amazing detail on them so limitless combinations were possible and these were not easily copied. This was important in trade and the chasing of wealth which the Sumerians seemed keen on! Later, some seals became more about stories and heroic myths and again were very elaborate and looked similar to the stories told on Greek vases many centuries on.



Figure 3

5.



Figure 4

Clay was also used for pottery which was initially shaped by hand in a very skilled way. Then, from about 3500BC, the potter's wheel was developed; now potters could make pots with thinner sides and more complicated shapes. Many pots were left undecorated especially if they were for everyday use or to be disposed just like our takeaway foil tins today. Other pots were polished so that they had a shiny surface or painted with patterns, often geometric ones which I am sure inspired the Ancient Greeks (Figure 4). Perhaps the ovens used to fire the pots were also made from clay.

The potter's wheel was now modified for weaving and to grind wheat and barley. The wheel also started to be used on chariots from 3200BC, and although this allowed travel and trade to increase, it also marked the start of warfare in this region....

Perhaps the circular wheel was the inspiration behind the Sumerian number system based on 12, 60 and 360.





Mesopotamia is the area of land between the River Euphrates and the River Tigris. In ancient times, both rivers often flooded the surrounding land. Each time the floodwater decreased, it left behind a layer of fertile silt, on the river banks, just like the River Nile did.

Around 6000 BC people stopped being nomads and began to keep animals and grow their own crops on the fertile river soil in northern Mesopotamia. In the south, where the climate was dry and hostile, they built canals to bring water from the river to irrigate the fields and try and stop floods.

The rivers were crucial for water supplies for people, animals and crops to survive. There are also examples, for instance on the Peace side of the Standard of Ur, where people are seen carrying fish and in an excavation in Ubaid they even found fish remains on the floor! I am sure the people of Mesopotamia were excellent fishermen, swimmers and boaters too. I imagine the most expensive boats might have been made from cedar wood from the Lebanon but reed canoes may also have been used and bitumen was probably used as a glue and for waterproofing.



Figure 5

So, these first farmers settled in one place near the rivers and lived in small villages. There is a wonderful frieze (in the British Museum; Figure 5), preserved in bitumen from the Ninbursag Temple, showing a farming scene with cows being milked, calves standing by looking on and what looks like a milking shed in the centre and butter making going on. It looks just like any dairy farm from modern times!

The people of Sumer also grew wheat and when the salt levels in the soil started to increase, barley—so at least they always had beer and bread! Once again, the clay cuneiform tablets tell us even more—the beer brewing was done by the women. Other crops showed that the diet of the people of Sumer was never boring and actually quite delicious. They ate chickpeas, lentils, lettuce, leeks, dates, onions and garlic, mustard and saffron were used to flavour food. There are some temple votive figures which I saw in The British Museum which showed that new born babies were breast fed by their mothers.

CHAPTER 2: From farming to city life

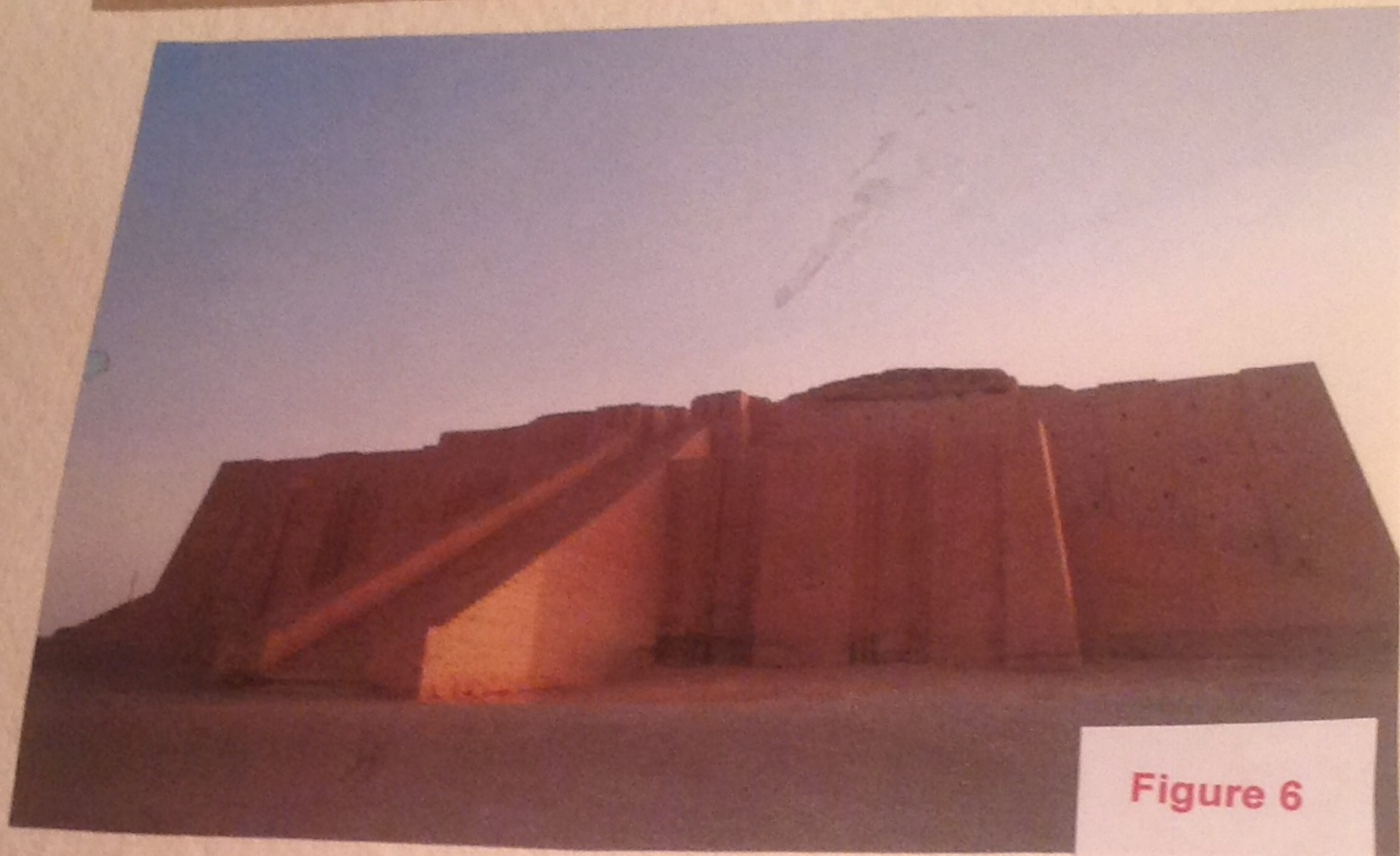
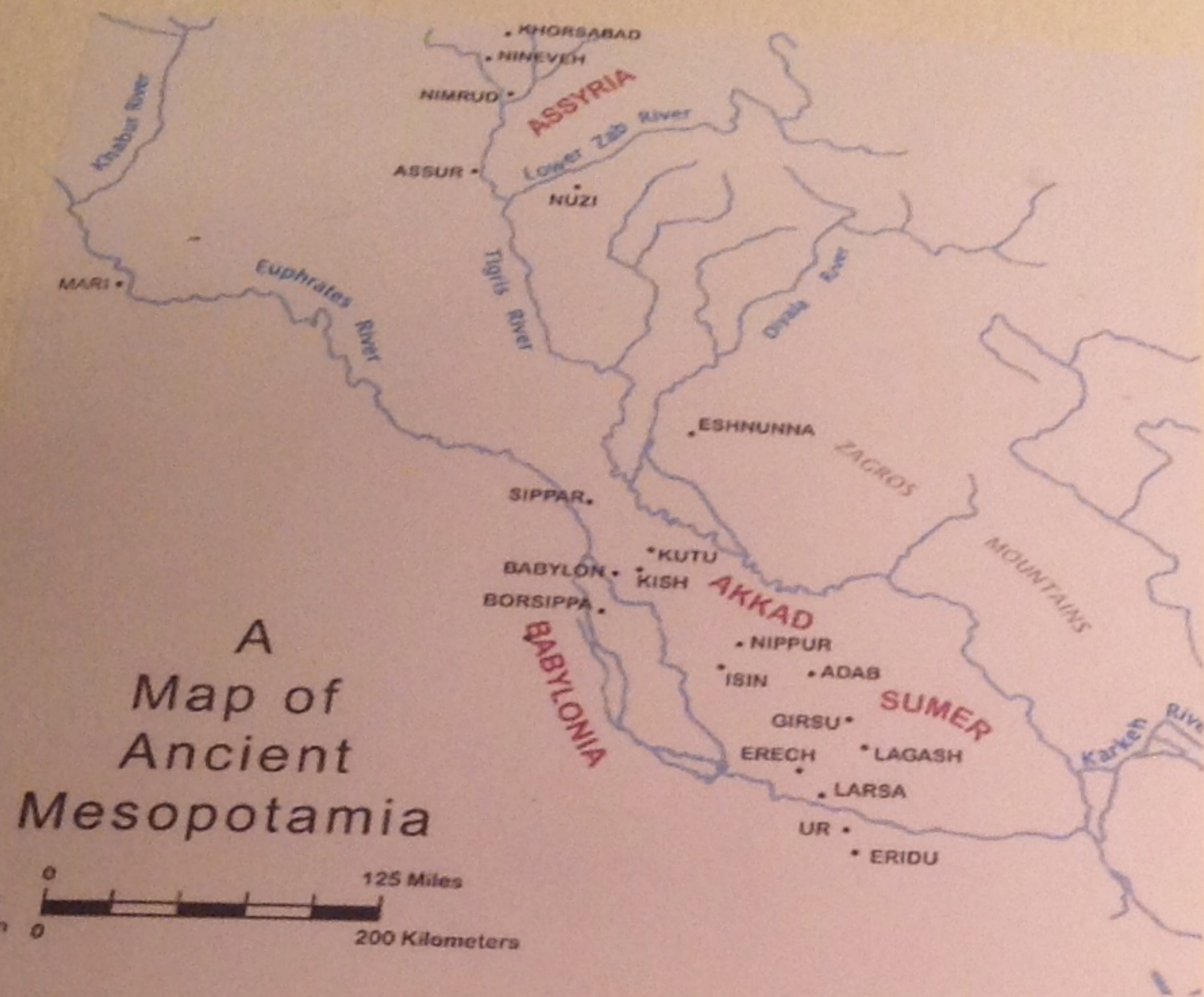


Figure 6

Some of the villages grew into towns, and in turn some of the towns grew into wealthy cities such as Ur, Uruk and Eridur. These cities had city walls for security, streets, canals and suburbs. There was a central temple with stairways to the city god or goddess called a ziggurat (Figure 6) which I am sure inspired the Egyptians, Mayans and Aztecs. The ziggurat to the moon goddess Nanna still exists in Ur.

Like writing, clay and mud bricks were a very important material for buildings as they were easy to produce in large quantities and kept the living space cool in summer. The bricks had holes punched into them named weeper holes by CL Woolley. These holes allowed water to evaporate from the inside and keep the rooms free of damp.



This safe and comfortable lifestyle meant that in only 500 years the Mesopotamians went from farmers to literate, rich businessmen. The Sumerians lived in southern Mesopotamia, the Akkadians, and then the Babylonians, in central Mesopotamia and the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia. These areas today include Iraq, north east Syria and part of south east Turkey (Figure 7).



Figure 7

CHAPTER 3: An insight into Ur- The Royal Tombs



Figure 8

One of the main cities of Sumer was Ur. It may have been the capital of Southern Mesopotamia. From 1922-1934, with breaks in the summer, Charles Leonard Woolley from New College, Oxford and the British Museum, his wife Katherine and his faithful foreman Hamoudi (Figure 8) joined the University of Pennsylvania and performed an astonishing number of archaeological digs in Ur which in my opinion are just as important as those of Howard Carter and his discoveries in Egypt.

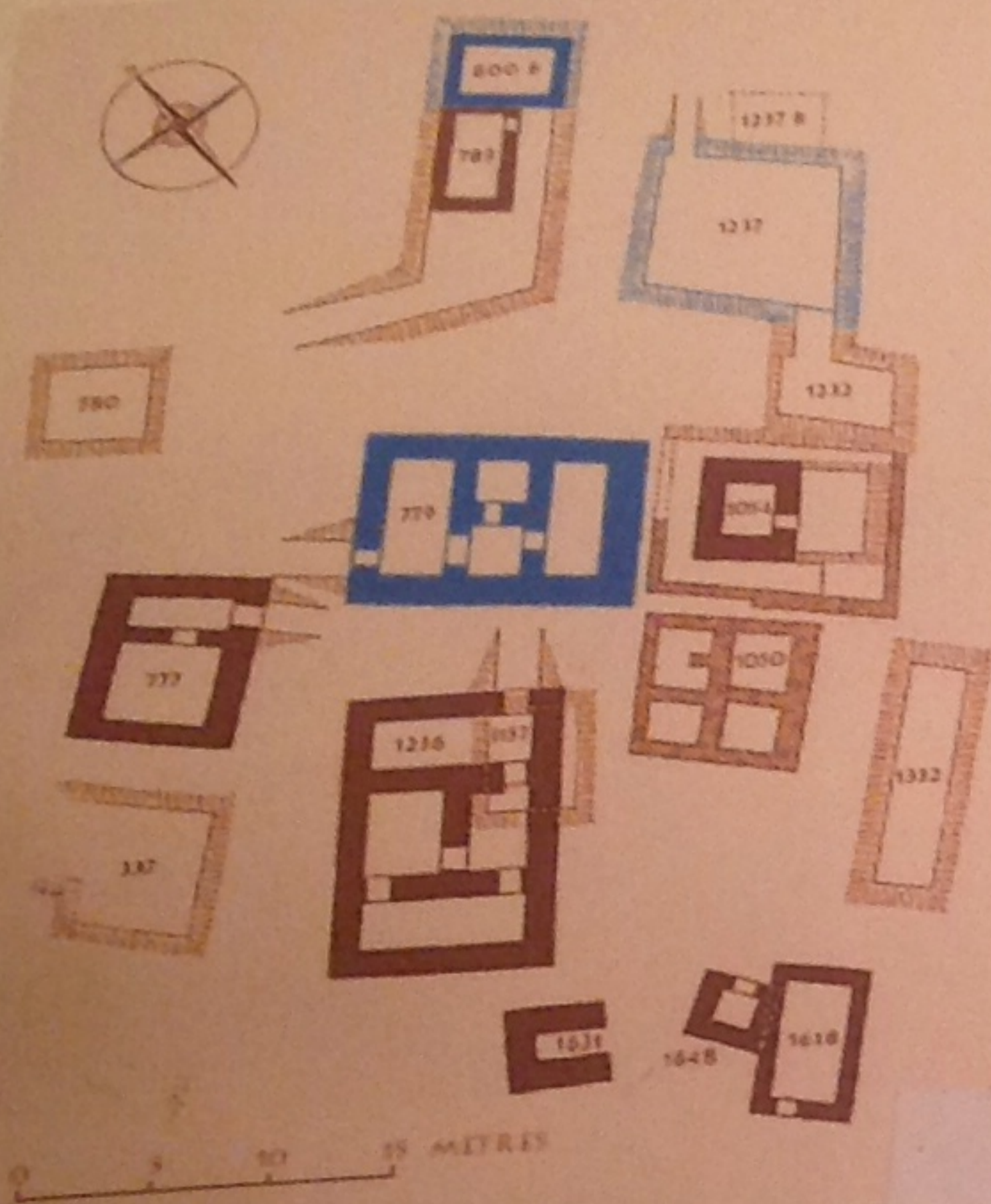
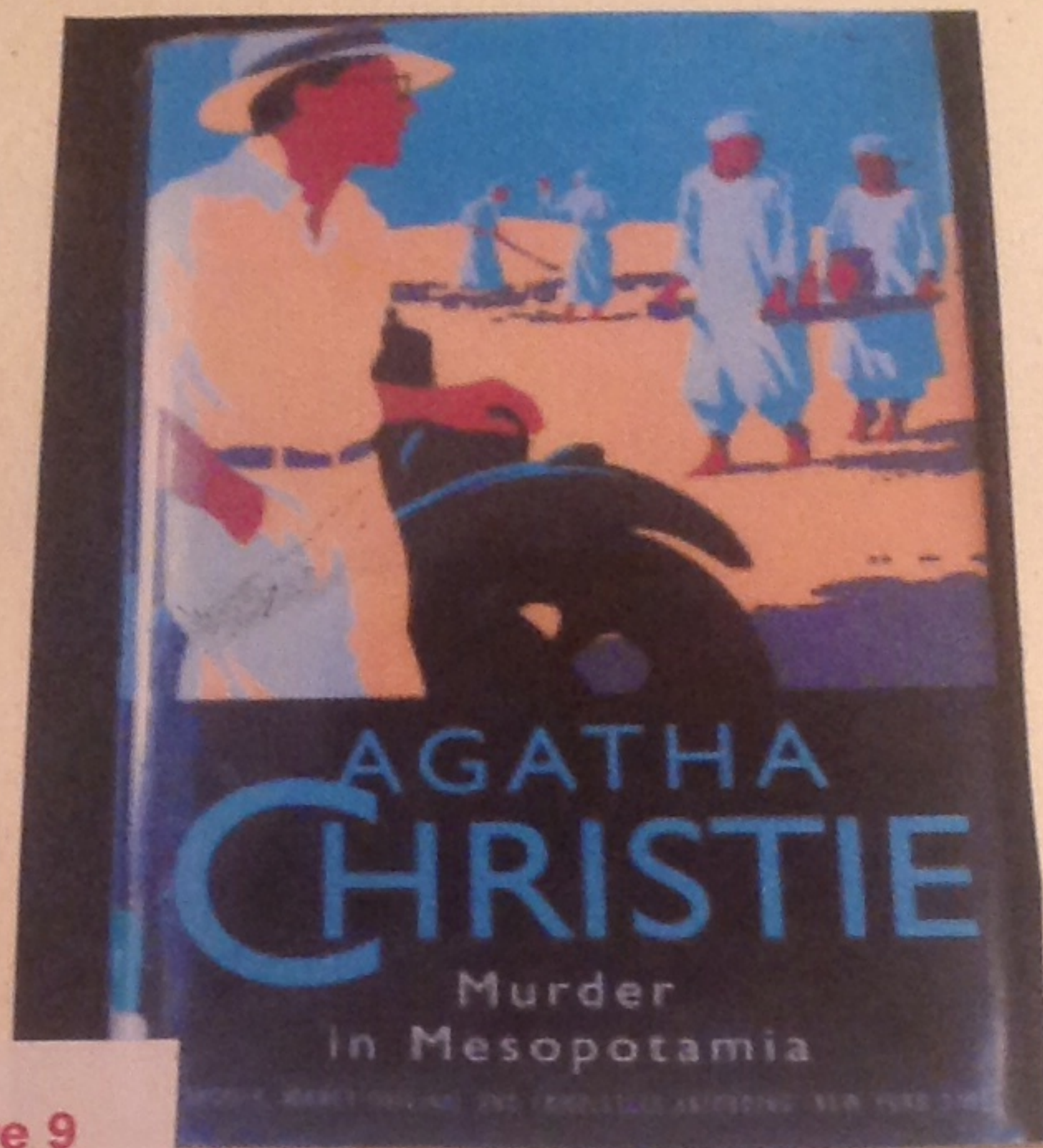


Figure 9



At the edge of the temple area of Ur, a cemetery was discovered by Woolley. He realised, a bit like archaeologists in recent times who have looked through the sewers at Herculaneum, that wonderful finds can be found in the most unattractive places! 1800 graves were excavated and 16 tombs, some with many chambers, with extremely valuable objects were found. In Trench A, known as the Gold Trench, the world famous Royal Tombs (Figure 9) were discovered and in them clay pots, jewellery, cosmetics and weapons were found. There was evidence that some tombs had belonged to kings and queens or perhaps the high priestess of Ur. It seemed that like the Egyptians later on, people were buried alive to serve these important people in the afterlife. Perhaps this inspired the writer Agatha Christie to write "Murder in Mesopotamia" after she visited the Woolleys in Ur. The tour guide at the British Museum said that one of the characters in the book is thought to be based on Katherine Woolley!

CHAPTER 4: Day to Day Life in Sumer- The Standard of Ur

One of the most important findings in the Royal Cemetery at Ur was in one of the largest private graves (PG) in the corner of Chamber D. The item was lying above the right shoulder of a man. Leonard Woolley therefore thought it might be a standard carried on a pole so it is called the Standard of Ur (Figure 10-12). The other possible use for it was a sound box for a musical instrument.

When the Standard was first found, it had been crushed by the weight of the soil but using an ingenious wax technique, Woolley was able to restore the panels of shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli. The Standard has two sides- one shows a war scene and the other a peacetime one. All the figures are in profile just like Egyptian art was later on.

For me, the Standard of Ur is one of the beautiful things in the British Museum. It is quite small and I found it much more useful to study each section of it online. I have annotated my observations of the Standard and in doing so was able to link my findings with objects excavated and then displayed in the British Museum.



Figure 10

1/1

The Standard of Ur: Peace Side

A banquet

The court-King and six attendants with cups in their hands; king is largest (he is probably considered god-like)



People sitting down drinking – beer most likely



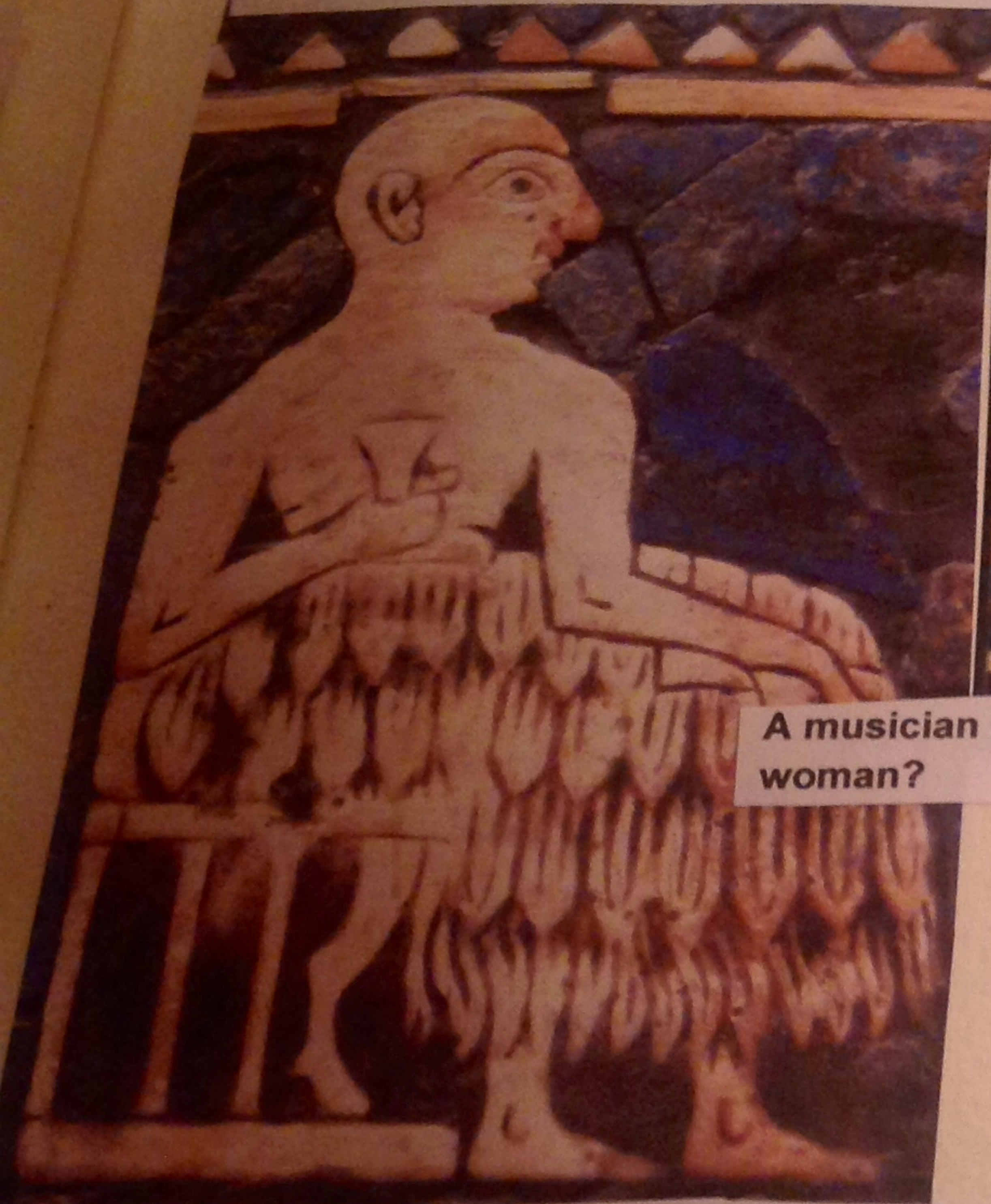
Abundance of the land- shaggy fleeced goats, bulls, donkeys and sheep; fishermen



Backpack carrying figures; supported by headbands; what is in the backpacks- wheat /wool? Are these slaves or free men?

Figure 11

Huge eyes - also seen in the temple votives of this time; bald (cooler in the heat) men; topless with bare feet; no women seen



A musician playing a lyre with a bull head; a bard next to him- long haired or is it a woman?

Music, drink and someone as the centre of attention- just like any party today!

Fringed wool skirts (probably impractical in heat)

The Standard of Ur: War Side

A Sumerian army

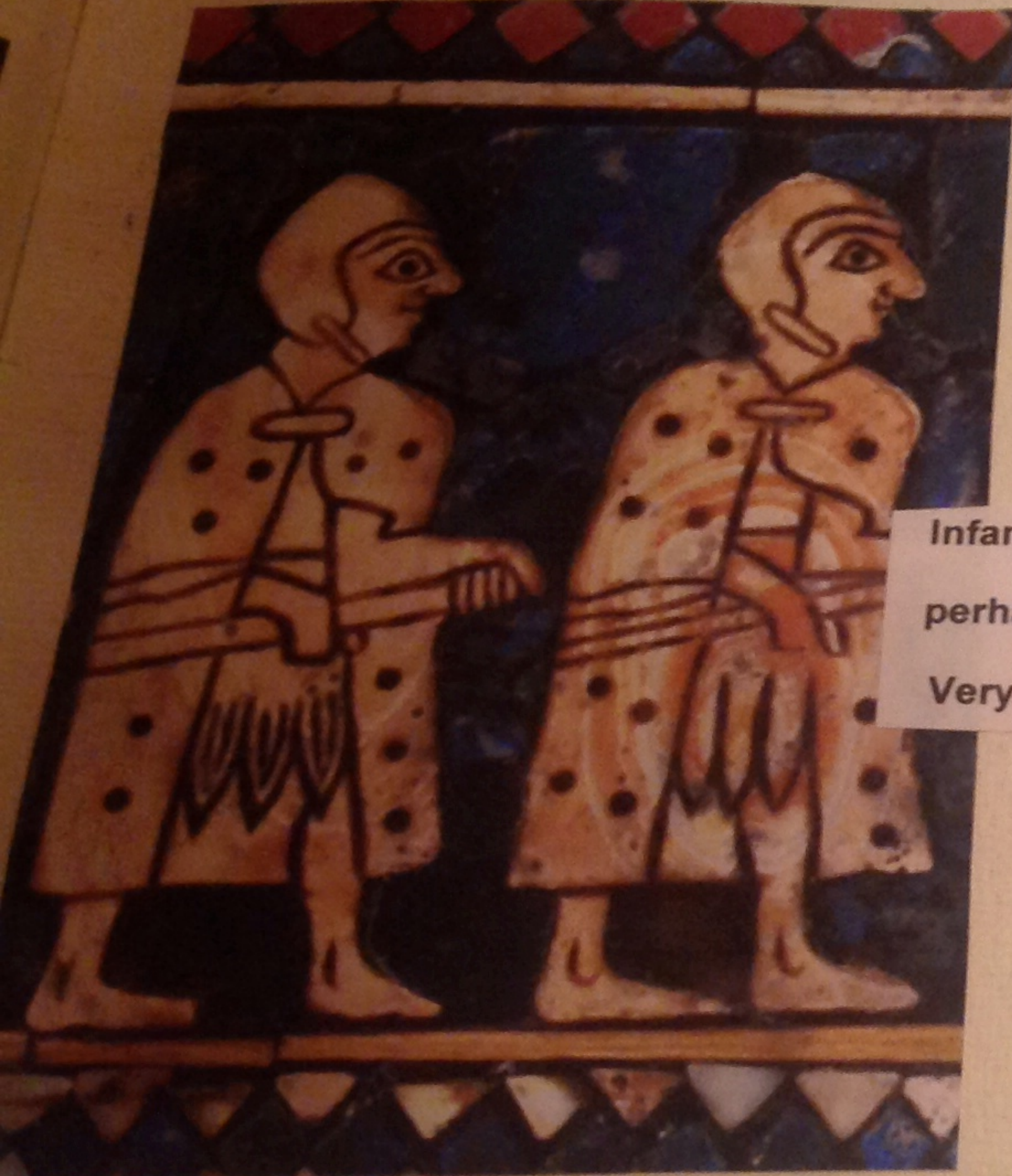
Tallest figure with spear is the king having enemies presented to him



Naked enemies-trampled underfoot or may have become slaves of the Sumerians and were probably traded

Figure 12

Chariots pulled by 4 donkeys known as onagers (horses not domesticated) with huge rein rings: The sides of the chariots look like they may be made of woven reeds.



Infantry men in leopard skin cloaks with spears and axes and soft helmets, perhaps of leather. Seem to be in uniform. Look like the Lewis Chessmen! Very ordered marching seen; probably professional soldiers.



CHAPTER 5: The importance of animals



Figure 13

Animals and nature were very important to the Sumerians as they provided food and raw materials. Clay and reeds have already been mentioned as products from nature but also goats (milk, wool, meat); cows (milk, meat, glue and leather) and sheep (wool and meat) were crucial for survival in the villages, towns and cities. There were also many wild animals living in the areas around the cities such as lions, leopards, wild dogs and horses and these appear in Sumerian art. I am not sure whether ostriches were wild or domesticated but there is a wonderful ostrich egg shell vase in Room 56 of the British Museum with a shell and lapis lazuli rim which I think is ingenious (Figure 13).

One of the animals that I think the Sumerians prized highly and perhaps was sacred was the goat. There is a tiny but beautiful shell inlay plaque in the British Museum (Figure 14) of a pair of goats with their front legs up in the air and it is a similar image to the famous Ram in a Thicket (Figure 15) discovered by Woolley in the Great Death Pit in Ur.

This exquisite piece is one of a pair as well and is in fact a goat not a ram which Woolley admitted before his death. He felt the name Ram in a Thicket fitted better because of the story in the Bible when Abraham was going to sacrifice his son to God but then was allowed to kill a ram instead.

The "ram" has his front legs entangled in a gold flowering plant. Gold is also used in the face, ears and legs of the ram and must be pure gold as it has not decayed. The body fleece is made of shell and lapis lazuli as are the horns. There is a gold cylinder attached to the back of the ram which could mean this piece was perhaps part of a small table. In any case, whoever made this put in a lot of effort and spent a lot of money to use many imported materials such as lapis lazuli from Afghanistan and gold from Turkey and the Gulf and perhaps India. This piece tells me that the Sumerians were beginning to possess some "bling" and enjoy luxuries as their lives became easier. They were trading right across the Gulf and beyond in their wheeled carts and boats and were not content to stay "between the rivers". They remind me in their adventurousness of the Vikings who are better known for their aggressive ways than their trading!



Figure 14



Figure 15

CHAPTER 6: Dressing up and having fun



Figure 16

Other luxuries include the stunning jewellery (Figure 16) found in the Royal Graves of Ur and made from precious metals and jewels such as carnelian from India and lapis lazuli and beaten gold. The jewellery was often in repeating patterns and in leaf shapes and the blue and gold necklaces are very similar to the ones seen in the tomb of Tutankhamen many years later! Gold earrings hung over the ears, gold hair ribbons and rings and amulets of stone and shell ones showing leaping leopards, birds and fish again show that the Sumerians were willing to import and trade to keep up appearances.

The Sumerians also decorated their houses and ziggurats to brighten up all those mud bricks. For example, they made clay cone mosaics (Figure 17) of red, black, white and blue which look almost like woven reed hangings but non perishable ones. Rosettes of white and pink limestone with black slate were a common sight and may have been symbols of fertility.

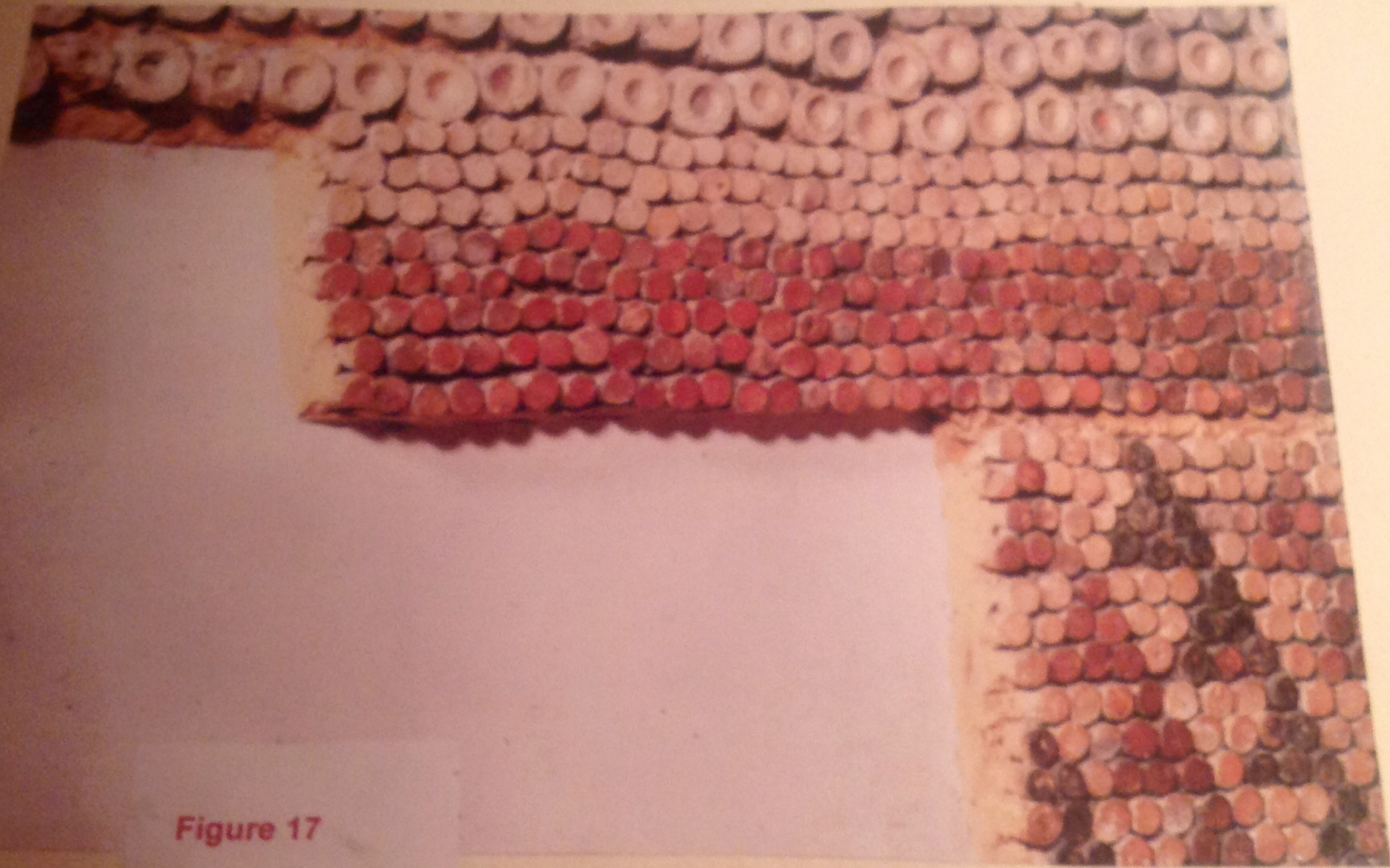


Figure 17

The Sumerians now seemed to have time not only to play music on lyres and create art and poetry but also to play a board game, named the Royal Game of Ur by Leonard Woolley (Figure 18). There is an example of this in the famous Room 56.

The game is on a stunning wooden board inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli and red limestone and was obviously created by someone very skilled and geometry-minded. The seven identical circular game pieces are made of shell and often have 5 dots on them similar to on a dice of today. The playing squares are decorated, some with rosettes, and a cuneiform tablet helpfully explains the rules.

Figure 18



This game is also played in Egypt and called Senet. One of my favourite games, and one I really enjoy with my grandfather, is Ludo, a game nearly every child in the world knows about. Ludo is very similar to the Royal Game of Ur. Ludo was incredibly popular in India when my granddad was a child and he says it has been played there for as long as he can remember.

CHAPTER 7: Everything was going so well...

By the time of the Royal Game of Ur, the people of Sumer seemed to be living a comfortable life. Food and water were easily accessible. Banquets, music, games and drinking were enjoyed at least by the rich. Sumerians lived in decorated houses, wore make up and jewellery and many ran successful businesses. Yet by 1600 BC, the Sumerian civilisation had almost disappeared.

It is not known why but it may have been due to invasion by neighbouring armies as Sumer had no natural boundaries and so was open to attack. Other possibilities include civil wars between different classes of Sumerians perhaps as food supplies decreased. This shortage of food was possibly from crop failure: water evaporation caused the soil to become too salty to grow wheat and even barley. I do not think anyone is entirely sure what happened to the Sumerians but thanks to the artefacts they left behind, we have a window into their lives and I am grateful for this.



WHY SHOULD WE LEARN ABOUT THE SUMERIAN CIVILISATION?

The land of Sumer was a creative and technological place, rather like a Silicon Valley of ancient times. Without the Sumerians, the life we know today of regular food supplies, housing, jobs, art and literature would not exist. The Sumerians developed trade and economics, the first wheel, mathematics using base 60 and 12 and astronomical observations such as the lunar calendar. The first great piece of literature, Gilgamesh, (who sounds rather like Herakles to me) was also created at this time, once writing had gone beyond simple pictograms on clay tablets. The famous code of Hammurabi where rules and punishment came from a central authority, rather than individuals, was founded on Sumerian law and is the basis of our codes of honour even to this day.

Unfortunately at the moment it is almost impossible to perform archaeological digs in "the land between the two rivers". It is heartbreaking to see the suffering of the people and also the museums in this area being destroyed and beautiful artefacts shattered into pieces or looted and sold on the black market. I really do hope that these dreadful events will stop very soon so we can all visit and admire these ancient lands again. What is ironic to me is that the silt from the two rivers has probably kept many artefacts buried deep underground and maybe this will be the only way of keeping them safe during these troubled times! Perhaps one day, we will once again be free to visit the land of the Mesopotamians and another CL Woolley will come along and discover even more about the fascinating people of Sumer. I hope I'm around to see it.



RESOURCES

Books

- "Mesopotamia" by Julian Reade (British Museum Press)

Television

- "Civilisation under attack". 2015; BBC4; presented by Dan Cruickshank

Internet sites

- <http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/menu.html>
- "Legacy: the Origins of Civilisation" presented by Michael Wood (YouTube)
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/.../room_56_mesopotamia.aspx
- <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/nov/10/ancient-world-mesopotamia>

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