GLIMPSES OF MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Fifteen thousand years ago, in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains of northeastern Mesopotamia, our ancestors began experiments that would change mans' destiny. The flint tools they left behind provide for a trained archaeological detective, an outline of when and where they did it. But even experts can only speculate how.

Barley, sprouting from a bit of spilled grain, perhaps inspired a normal gatherer to plant his own crop; thinning herds of wild goats and sheep maybe tempted a hunter to trap a pair for breeding stocks. Whatever sparked the process, mans' first great revolution had begun as slowly as the hunter learned to exploit his environment. By 6000 B.C, here at Tell Es-Sawwan near Baghdad, farmers and shepherds were building rectangular houses and complete with courtyards, kitchens with hearths and granaries, and corals for there livestock and wearing beads and bracelets and rings of bone, clay, and stone. Now these small votive statues offered clues to early religious beliefs. Most were found in the graves of children, suggesting each served as a substitute mother for the helpless child on his eternal journey.

By the 5th millennium B.C lower Mesopotamia was already a melting pot. People from the north, Hassuna, Tell Es-Sawwan, Jarmo, filtered down both the Tigris and Euphrates bringing their knowledge of farming, architecture, religion, and art. Other groups pressed northwards from the East Arabia and the Arabian Gulf.

Most geologists agree that the shallow Arabian Gulf was dry land in Lower Paleolithic times. The world was cooler, passing though an ice age, and ocean shorelines were 300 feet lower. The Tigris and Euphrates flowed through separate green valleys, emptying into the Gulf of Oman. Then 15,000 years ago, the world warmed, ice caps melted, and the oceans began to rise. The slowly rising Gulf squeezed populations northwards for 10,000 years. As people were driven slowly from their lost paradise, they brought with them, to Mesopotamia epics, myths, and memories of the flood that drowned their land, of the Eden they lost.

During the fourth millennium B.C, the Mesopotamian mix began to tame alluvial plain and marshlands between the two rivers, the land we call Sumer, with roads and canals. Here Sumerians farm villages evolved into small city-states, each clustered around a temple and ruled by an ensi or "priest-ruler". Mankind was poised for another momentous leap forward.

Mans' first attempt to record his thoughts came as mere jottings, lines and dots on patties of clay, to tally sheep, or fish, or sheaves of barley. Archaeologists uncovered the oldest of these at Uruk and Ur. Later, notes or workers' rations and long lists of temple offering appear, using more sophisticated pictographs: a head to signify "man" a bowl to stand for "food", a human foot could mean "foot" or "to walk". By 3000 B.C. the scribes of summer had perfected grammar and vocabulary using phonetic cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") characters. On durable clay tablets they recorded waybills, recipes, building dedications, math lessons, and later epics, proverbs, legends, laments and love songs. The hundreds of thousand of surviving cuneiform tablets document intimate day-to-day life in civilizations long turned to dust. Now, with the

invention of writing, history formally began.

In 2350 B.C. King Sargon welded with nearby city-states of Sumer to those of his own Semitic Akkadians, to rule from his capital, Akkad near Babylon. His armies pressed south toward the Gulf, east into Elam, in present-day Iran, and into northwest Syria, for the first known Empire. His grandson, Naram Sin demarcated the dynasty's authority with lavish inscribed victory stele like those we found at Sippar, west of Baghdad, and in the eastern mountain borderlands.

Eastern Zagros Mountain tribes, the Gutians, ended Akkadian rule for almost a century, laying waste to much of the countryside. In 2120 B.C. Utu-Higal, ruler of Uruk, rose up against the Gutians and with the help of other Sumerian cities drove them out, in the earliest liberation war on record. From their seat at Ur, his successors revived the Sumerian Culture and power for more than one final flourishing century.

The Amorites, the "dwellers of the west", may have had origins in Arabian Peninsula. After the fall of Sumer they migrated into Mesopotamia establishing cities at Mari on the Syrian Euphrates, Assur on the upper Tigris, Larsa in the south, finally uniting their holdings to form the first dynasty of Babylon, Babylon's King Hammurabi, during the first half of the 18th century B.C. established Mesopotamian's second empire and promulgated the first comprehensive law statuettes, the famous "Code of Hammurabi". About this time a minor tribal sheikh set out with his people from Ur. His departure probably caused little fanfare; Babylonian history accords him no mention at all. But his name was Abram and he marched west across the desert toward a new land, and history.

A rich prize, at the crossroads of Asia, Mesopotamia constantly suffered invaders. Hittites swooped through northern Syria to snuff out Babylon. After looting the temple treasures they quickly retreated back to their native Anatolia, Kassites, originally from the Zagros, filled the political vacuum left by Babylonians fall to rule for 400 years. At the Kassite ruins of Dur Kuriigalzu, 20 miles outside Baghdad, the tallest ziggurat surviving from ancient times still stands, 180 feet high. Early travelers mistook it for Biblical "Tower of babel".

Kassite rulers were contemporaries of Egypts' Amenhoteb IV well known as Akhnaton, with whom they exchanged princesses in marriage. Letters, cuneiform tablets, found in the Pharaoh's library at Tell el-Amarna, arranged the nuptials.

By this time the Assyrians in the north were consolidating military and political power. These Assyrians, perhaps an ancient group from the Arabian Peninsula, entered the north of Iraq at the beginning of the 3rd millennium, mingling with the local inhabitants. By the beginning of the first millennium B.C. they had the strongest army in the ancient world. Sargon II (721-705 B.C.) spread an empire across most of the ancient Middle East, as far as Egypt. Masterpieces of Assyrian sculptures and room-sized bas-reliefs from Khorsabad, Nineveh, Nimrod today, grace many of Europe's museums. Splendid ivory panels, removed from an Assyrian well in Nimrud display the work of craftsman brought from Egypt, and Phoenicia. Nor did the Assyrians neglect scholarship. King Asurbanipal's royal library excavated in the late 19th century yielded a trove of cuneiform literature, some 25,000 tablets in all. At Khorsabad I laid bare a long buried temple for Assyrian scribes. Its stone furniture survived intact,

the dais of the teacher and rows of stools and desks for the students.

Combined forces of the chaldeans and Medians burned Nineveh in 612 B.C. along with Nimrod, Assur, and other Assyrian cities. The Chaldean king Nebobolasser founded a second dynasty in Babylon, inheriting all the land from the gulf to Syria the Assyrians had ruled. His son Nebucadrassar widened Chaldean (New Babylonian) dominion over all of Syria to Mediterranean then started ambitious building program in his capital Babylon. He strengthened the city's double walls, raised palaces, widened streets, and installed the world famous Hanging Gardens making Babylon into the world metropolis of its day, Babylon of the Old Testament. The empire declined after his death, weakened by internal religious differences. In 539 B.C., Cyrus I of Persia occupied the city. For the next millennium, Mesopotamia languished, under the rule of the Parthians, Greeks, Romans and Sassanians.

The unfolding of our long history has only begun. Experts from around the world continue to converge on Mesopotamia each season: Iraq has trained more than 500 archaeologists of its own. Hundreds of Tells dot our landscape waiting for the patient spade and brush. Even old digs continue to yield surprises.

The Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage was working in the NW Palace of Assurnasirpal II in the city of Nimrod, to prepare for preservation and restoration, digging below the floors of some rooms, the Iraqi team found several graves, one was for two women, a queen perhaps and her daughter. One possibly a wife of Sargon II, they were decked in gold material, gold earrings, bracelets, anklets, headdress, crowns, bowls, cups and utensils, all in beautiful imperial gold, almost 63 Kilos of Gold!!

As an archaeologist, I can think of few professions more rewarding than the study of history, of man and his society. But Mesopotamia is more than a history of Iraq. Anyone who can read and write or who tills the soil, anyone who cherishes religion, practices law, or studies the stars owes a silent thanks to those who pioneered along the Euphrates.