





Ancient Near East

Ancient Near East

The history of the Ancient Near East, documented in various sources, unfolded in different geographic locations scattered across nearly 9 million square kilometres, a region that stretched from the Aegean to the Indus Valley and from Central Asia and the Caucasus to the Arabian Peninsula, with two vital arteries, the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, flowing through some of these territories. The chronological history of the ancient Near East spans approximately eleven thousand years, from 11000 BC to 632 AD, as the comparative timeline in Gallery 32 shows.

106

The region known as the Fertile Crescent was the birthplace of agriculture and animal husbandry; and in 3500 BC the first cities, states, royalty and writing appeared, later followed by the wheel. Science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, irrigation techniques, metallurgy, law and engineering are the legacy of the peoples of the Near East. Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Achaemenids, Parthians, Sasanians, Canaanites, Hebrews, Aramaeans, Phoenicians and eventually the members of the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Arabic worlds shaped the long and fascinating history of this region, whose extraordinary breakthroughs and inventions are part of our own past.

In the National Archaeological Museum, Gallery 32 is dedicated to the artefacts from the Near East in its collections, with exhibits that primarily focus on the sources of knowledge about this region but also include examples of the material culture of Mesopotamia, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula.

Sources of Knowledge

Written Sources

The vast majority of documents in the different languages and dialects of the ancient Near East were written in cuneiform, a script made by etching in clay using a triangular stylus. Bricks in Sumerian and Akkadian and documents in Aramaic, Phoenician and Nabataean describe events that occurred in every region. Seals and cylinder seals appeared around the same time as writing, and from the outset they were used to identify the owner or his duties.



^ Brick with cuneiform inscription

Spanish Travellers and Archaeologists in the East

107

Although Spain was not traditionally known for its ancient eastern scholarship, some Spaniards –generally ambassadors, pilgrims, merchants, collectors and archaeologists– did play a leading role in the «rediscovery of the East». Benjamín de Tudela, González de Clavijo, García de Silva and Rivadeneira, the latter splendidly portrayed in Pellicer’s large painting of his arrival in Dezful, all wandered across those lands. Spanish archaeology has made significant inroads in the Near East in recent years, uncovering vital clues that have enriched our knowledge of the region’s history.

The Legacy of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia occupied what is now Iraq, between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The inhabitants of the «land between rivers» were governed by kings who were the earthly representatives of their cities’ protective deities. Mesopotamia had a vast network of urban centres, and the territory became a hub of human and commercial exchange.

Clay was the raw material used to fashion figure vessels and farming tools, and mudbrick was essential in building: brightly-coloured glazed bricks were often used as facade cladding.



^ Sumerian worshipper

The Mesopotamian pantheon contained many deities. In some cases ziggurats or step pyramids were built alongside temples, with a chapel at the top which served as a residence and symbolic point of encounter between the god, the king and the priests.

The Legacy of Iran

The Iranian plateau was part of the ancient Persian Empire, although its fertile plains had been inhabited since the 4th millennium BC. The people of this land relied on animal husbandry for daily subsistence, and they mined alabaster, diorite, turquoise, lapis lazuli, amber and gold, materials that led to the development of trade relations along established routes.

In the late 2nd millennium BC, Medes and Persians migrated to this territory, and the Sasanians later seized control of the region.

Iranian pottery is the most important collection of artefacts held at the National Archaeological Museum. These vessels are made of whitish, black and or greyish paste with geometric motifs painted in ochre pigment, found at Tepe Hissar, Tepe Giyan and Tepe Sialk. The jugs with very long spouts ending in horse or bird shapes are particularly beautiful.

The bronze pieces on display were found in male and female tombs in the necropolises of Luristan. They were part of lavish grave goods which also included daggers, pins, riding tack, ornaments and vessels –the famous «Luristan bronze»– that testify to the high degree of skill achieved by local artisans.

The Legacy of the Arabian Peninsula

The Arabian Peninsula has only recently been included in Near Eastern studies. Until a few years ago, passing mentions in two sources constituted the sum of knowledge about the period before pre-Islamic Arabia: the *Arabia Felix* described in classical literature, a land believed to hold fantastic riches, and the Biblical account of the Queen of Sheba.

Around the 1st millennium BC, southern Arabia experienced significant growth. Between the eighth and first centuries BC, the hegemony of Sheba and the oasis cultures was consolidated. From the second half of the first century until the seventh century AD, Himyar emerged as the predominant kingdom. In 662 Islam wiped out the cultural and religious traditions of ancient Arabia.

The display cases in this section contain Old South Arabian inscriptions and a stela with prominent eyes evoking the goddess Ulluzza.



^ Luristan bronze