

The emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia: 'Ubaid and Uruk

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2008

- 'Ubaid period (I, II, III, IV; about 5600 - 3900 BC)
- 'Ubaid style pottery was made by the first settlers on the southern alluvium, the "'Ubaidans"
 - 'Ubaid I and II were contemporary with people who made Halafian and Samarran style pottery to the north and in the hills
 - 'Ubaid I (and, according to some authors, "'Ubaid 0") sites are on the natural ground surface; these are apparently the first settled occupations in southern Mesopotamia
 - there *may* have been mobile foragers or pastoralists earlier
 - who may have themselves settled down and become the 'Ubaid people
 - or who may have been displaced by the 'Ubaid people
 - or who may have mixed with incoming settlers to create the 'Ubaid culture
- One exception, the site of Tell Ouilli
 - underneath the lowest 'Ubaid levels are remains of buildings and artifacts that resemble Samarran material
 - suggesting that 'Ubaid culture was a development from Samarran settlers venturing into the southern alluvium
- Sea level was lower, coast may have been further out, much silt has accumulated
 - earlier sites may exist but be buried or under the sea
 - but generally nothing is found below the lowest 'Ubaid levels at known sites
 - since these were good places to live at the beginning of the 'Ubaid period, you would think that they would also have been good places in the centuries before that
 - so the consistent absence of earlier material under these mounds suggests that there just were not many people living in the region before the 'Ubaid period
- Lack of rain in Sumer required that they use irrigated agriculture
 - so the 'Ubaidans settled along rivers and streams
 - they farmed the basic wheat, barley, and lentils, plus sheep, goats, and cattle
 - also hunted gazelle and horse, and fished
 - Wenke suggests that these foods were made into one-pot stews and porridges
- 'Ubaid pottery was decorated, made on turnette (slow wheel)
 - like that of their neighbors and antecedents, the Samarrans
 - got simpler over time, more utilitarian
- other clay items:
 - clay sickles (!)
 - continued the tradition of clay figurines, both female and male
 - mud-brick houses
- Continued the tradition of making and using stamp seals
 - suggesting continued storage, tracking, possibly exchange of goods
- They did not have their own sources of building stone, precious stones, good wood, ores or metals, or many other materials
 - so they had to trade for them

- While people in the north continued on without developing larger towns or more complex social and economic organization, the 'Ubaid societies in the south became more complex
 - At least in part in order to get needed resources from neighboring areas and/or groups
 - they would have needed more substantial trade or procurement expeditions and associated economic and organizational arrangements
- Initially, all 'Ubaid settlements were small, relatively uniform, scattered along rivers over the entire alluvium
- by 4500 BC (middle 'Ubaid, or 'Ubaid II-III), there were a limited number of large centers (1000-3000 or even 5000 people), surrounded by a network of many small hamlets
 - small towns
 - rectangular houses of mud brick and reeds
 - the early levels at al 'Ubaid are an example
 - al 'Ubaid probably had some 750 residents
 - large towns
 - comparable in size to Jericho and Çatal Hüyük
 - but unlike Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, these 'Ubaid towns just kept expanding and getting more complex
 - and they had some distinctly different features:
 - densely packed rectangular houses and courtyards separated by alley-like streets
 - areas of larger, more elaborate residences with storage features (storerooms, storage pits, etc.)
 - central mounds with special architecture on them
- the largest known town in the 'Ubaid period: Eridu
 - first occupied 4750 BC; big by 4500 BC (Wenke and Olzewski have it founded in 5400 BC)
 - possibly up to 5000 people in 4500 BC
 - densely packed rectangular mud-brick houses
 - some built around courtyards
 - alley-like streets
 - large mud-brick special-purpose building: a temple
 - clearly not to live in, store things in, or for any utilitarian purpose we can identify
 - Nissen calls these structures “cult houses”
 - or we could consider them “assembly halls”
 - all variants of the same idea
 - the same spot was used for a temple from 'Ubaid through Ur III times (conservatively, 4500 – 2000 BC, or 2500 years!)
 - the later ones are highly decorated, obviously for ritual purposes, and are mentioned in written documents as temples
 - rebuilt 13 times (or 17 times, according to Wenke)
 - i.e. each successive temple was used an average of 150 to 200 years
 - comparable to historic government buildings in Boston or Washington DC – but 13 to 17 times in a row!
 - the temple was initially a modest, one-room structure
 - eventually built up to a large complex on a high platform mound

- that is, they got bigger and more elaborate with each rebuilding
- from the beginning, these buildings had distinctive features:
 - a central rectangular room (the first was 3.5 X 4.5 m, or about 11 X 15 feet)
 - with a recess at one end containing a pedestal, possibly an altar
 - and a second, similar pedestal standing out in the main room
 - with signs of burning on top
- later temples (at Eridu and other sites, as well) had
 - more subsidiary rooms
 - increasing complexity of buttresses
 - built on raised platforms
 - typically fronted by a flight of stairs
 - always dominated by a larger, elongated central room (“cella”) with an altar at one end
 - with multiple smaller rooms surrounding it
- final temple (long after the 'Ubaid period) was on a high platform, 10 X 20 meters on top, with a stairway leading up the front of the platform to the temple entrance
- lots of fishbones in fill between temples suggests that the temple was for Enki, the god of water, who was the city god of Eridu in early written records
 - but these records are from much later than the 'Ubaid period, so projecting this god back into prehistoric times is only a reasonable hypothesis
- around the temple, buildings were arranged roughly in concentric zones:
 - elite houses closest to temple
 - craft workshops further away
 - farmers around the edges
 - suggests complex social organization with higher-status people somehow associated with temple
- this was a new kind of settlement and society
 - with one or a few large religious structures
 - that is, a shared institution, as opposed to household-level ritual as at Çatal Hüyük
 - such shared institutions may have already been appearing in Samarran and Halafian sites, with their central structures
 - these structures presumably served not only the inhabitants of the large town, but also the inhabitants of smaller towns nearby who didn't have their own
 - the temples must have been places where labor and goods were concentrated
 - simply to build and maintain the architecture
 - also to carry out whatever rituals or other activities were done there
 - higher-status people were associated with the religious institution (the temple)
 - we infer this because the largest, fanciest houses were generally near the temple buildings
 - they would have had some control over sources of wealth not available to others, thus economic power
 - this is evidently so from the size and quality of their residences
 - maybe also some power due to connection with the supernatural

- the beginning of a new kind of stratified society
 - built around the elaboration of religion
 - was religion a cause, or a means? Or both?
- But oddly enough, there is little evidence of social ranking or differences in wealth in 'Ubaid cemeteries
 - Over 200 'Ubaid graves known from Eridu
 - They contain up to a few pottery or stone vessels, occasionally a figurine or some beads
- by the late 'Ubaid period: the 'Ubaid expansion
 - the regional population had increased dramatically
 - 'Ubaid people lived all along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, even up into modern Turkey
 - and to the south down the Persian Gulf shore of Saudi Arabia
 - goods were procured from as far away as India (amazonite, a semi-precious stone) and Anatolia (obsidian)
 - presumably by people who made long journeys to trade for it
 - outposts like Tepe Gawra were established in the north, presumably for trade
 - Tepe Gawra had three temples facing a central plaza
 - in very much the same style as the temples at Eridu
 - interestingly, much of this 'Ubaid expansion did not “take”
 - for example, the 'Ubaid sites in Saudi Arabia were occupied for long periods, but the region was eventually abandoned
 - and rather than leading to other forms of settled society or cities, the local people went back to foraging
 - this suggests that the 'Ubaid expansion really was an intrusion of people from the alluvium moving into new areas, not just a gradual spread of ideas
 - due to simple population growth and need for land?
 - trade?
 - political or military positioning?
 - note: there is no reason to think that the 'Ubaid people who comprised this expansion were politically unified; they just shared a common culture
 - so these sites might be outposts of many different independent chiefdoms centered on the larger towns
 - or they might just be other settlements of 'Ubaid people that “budded off” into available areas, without maintaining any political connection to people in the 'Ubaid heartland at all
 - the next step, to really big, complex Sumerian cities and states, happened first in the core of the southern Mesopotamian alluvium
 - not in these outlying areas
- the Mesopotamian alluvium was not developing in isolation
 - neighboring areas were also developing complex societies
 - apparently along similar lines
 - they interacted a lot with each other
 - example: the city of Susa, on the Susiana plain
 - a major center of the Elamite culture, now known to extend over a large area east of southern Mesopotamia

- limiting our attention to just southern Mesopotamia is a bit arbitrary
- Towards the end of the 'Ubaid period, many towns erected enclosing walls
- Overall, the changes were not a broad, uniform trend towards “civilization”, but rather a series of fits and starts, larger towns growing and shrinking, very patchy and irregular, but averaging out to a gradual increase in larger, more complex settlements
 - there was plenty of time for this; the 'Ubaid period was 1,700 years long!
- Uruk period: lots of changes (Early 3900-3600; Middle 3600-3400; Late 3400-3100 BC) (some just use Early and Late; dates vary a bit)
 - Uruk style pottery was made by the Sumerians
 - the style is named after the largest early Sumerian site, Uruk
 - people of the time would not have thought of themselves as being part of a single culture or group, but rather probably identified with the large town they lived in or near
 - even much later written sources show that people thought of their world as a patchwork of rival groups, not the larger category of “Sumerian” or “Mesopotamian” society that we talk about today
 - Note the difference between the Uruk PERIOD and the SITE of Uruk, which continued to be occupied in later periods
 - Uruk period is also called “protoliterate” period in some sources
 - other sources use “protoliterate” to refer to the transition from the Uruk period to the Early Dynastic period
 - this corresponds roughly to the time when Jemdet Nasr style pottery was used
- Preview and generalizations: Uruk period innovations (mostly in the Middle and Late Uruk periods)
 - plow
 - wheeled cart
 - fast potter's wheel (vs. the slow wheel or tournette)
 - may have been invented a bit earlier, like the late 'Ubaid
 - allowed the mass production of ceramics
 - but apparently also the simplification and decline in craftsmanship of it
 - maybe invented in the late 'Ubaid, but came into wide use in the Uruk period
 - sophisticated copper casting (open molds, lost wax)
 - early writing by 3400 BC (beginning of Late Uruk period)
 - initially “pre-cuneiform”
 - initially for accounting for stored or exchanged goods
 - we'll look at the origin of writing in more detail later
 - dramatic rise in regional population and number of settlements
 - increasing total population
 - increasingly concentrated in large towns or cities
 - especially at the very end of the Uruk period: more on that later
 - development of city states
 - escalation of conflict between these city states
 - indicated by city walls
 - development of even more complex economy and exchange networks

- goods they imported:
 - copper for high-status goods by 3500 BC (middle of Uruk period)
 - gold, silver
 - jewelry stones: carnelian, turquoise, amethyst, lapis, quartz, many others
 - stone for architectural carvings, bowls, sculpture
 - presumably wood, although it is not usually preserved
 - presumably many other perishable goods (textiles, oils, spices, other foods, etc.)
- organization of long-distance exchange
 - transport by ship along the Euphrates river, and also on the network of canals and canalized streams
 - (the Tigris, especially the upper parts, is steeper and less navigable)
 - centralized storage and control of trade goods in each city's central ceremonial or public precinct
 - this presumably developed from an elaboration of institutions originally set up for redistribution...
 - colonies in foreign territories
 - Tepe Gawra continued
 - plus additional, new colony-like sites
 - whether trade was the principal function of these sites is debated, but at least some did handle goods from distant regions
- Early Uruk (3900 – 3600 BC; 300 years long)
 - apparently continued same patterns as late 'Ubaid
 - a gradual local development from 'Ubaidian to Sumerian culture
 - concentration of ceramic production at large centers
 - that is, specialization at a larger scale
 - example Early Uruk artifact from Eridu: a ceramic male figurine ~ 3700 BC, 43 cm tall (17")
- Middle Uruk (3600 – 3400 BC; 200 years long)
 - they continued building and using temples
 - which got bigger and more elaborate over time
 - beveled-rim bowls appeared
 - enormous quantities of broken beveled-rim bowls were found in excavations
 - the pieces filled rooms and were banked up against walls of temple buildings
 - so many, and so ugly, that in many early projects they were not even counted or weighed
 - mass-produced
 - chaff-tempered
 - apparently made by pressing into a crude mold, maybe a hole in the ground
 - rim cut at an angle
 - so crude that they may have been intended to be disposable
 - suggested that they came in several more-or-less standardized sizes
 - for standardized ration distribution?

- by the Late Uruk period, precuneiform writing used a picture of a bowl and a head to indicate the concept of a ration of food
- what might the temple or other central institution have “paid” (or provided rations to) people for?
 - maybe labor to build, maintain, renovate the monumental buildings
 - make goods for trade by the temple, etc.
- if so, suggests a managed economy
 - fits in nicely with a redistributive system, centered on temple or perhaps other communal or public institutions
- lots of cylinder seals and stamp seals
 - stamp seals were already around; cylinder seals seem to have been invented in the Middle Uruk period
 - like a large cylindrical bead, as thick as a pencil or a fat magic marker, one to three inches long
 - carved on the exterior, used in a rolling motion
 - also may suggest commerce, accounting, etc.
 - may suggest administered labor: pay in rations, etc.
 - Note the illustration of a temple on a seal, part of the basis for reconstructions of the upper portions that no longer exist
 - notice the “serpo-felines”
 - also notice a boat
- Long distance trade: spread of Uruk style goods
 - Uruk pottery was widely exchanged, often by ship
 - to Susa (Elam), Zagros mountains, up the Euphrates river...
 - Uruk goods exported to Egypt
 - Uruk pottery, seals, silver, obsidian, lapis found in Egypt
 - Goods from Anatolia imported into Sumer
 - timber, olive oil, silver
 - Goods from Afghanistan (far east, over the Zagros mountains) imported into Sumer
 - lapis, gold
- The Uruk expansion: spread of Uruk people
 - roughly, a repeat of the 'Ubaid expansion
 - but some argue that it was more sudden, short-lived
 - Nissen sees an early, broad spread of Uruk culture, followed by the establishment of additional sites like Habuba Kabira abruptly in the last century or two of the expansion
 - and in slightly different areas
 - north and east as in the 'Ubaid expansion
 - plus Egypt, where 'Ubaid influence did not reach
 - but not south into Saudi Arabia, where there had been 'Ubaid settlements
 - Uruk people moved to distant places and established settlements
 - this was a rather sudden process, over just a few generations
 - thousands of people were involved

- most moved into the mountains north and east of Mesopotamia
 - the upper Euphrates river and parts of modern Syria and southern Turkey
- possibly as “merchant colonies” with Uruk pottery
 - far east into Zagros mountains of Iran
 - and in northern Levant (Tell Habuba Kabira)
- some went to the Nile delta of Egypt, as we will see later
- the locations of many of these settlements made sense for controlling key points along trade routes or access to certain natural resources
 - but some did not...
- another possible interpretation is that these are groups that fled the southern Mesopotamian alluvium because of problems there
 - possibly warfare, political oppression, excessive taxation or tribute demands, etc.
- Example of a distant Uruk settlement: Tell Habuba Kabira, in the northern Levant, on the Euphrates river
 - got to be 8 ha in size (about 4 times the area of the central quad)
 - perhaps up to 5000 people lived there
 - using exactly the same styles of goods as people at Uruk
 - occupied for perhaps a few generations without fortifications
 - then a massive wall 6 m thick with many towers was built around the three sides not facing the river
 - indicates increasing fear of attack
 - possibly increasing concentration of wealth in the site?
 - increasing organization and power of “foreign” trading partners as a result of this “business”?
 - cone wall mosaics found at this provincial site
 - indicate a high-status individual or institution controlling considerable wealth
 - some Egyptian pottery suggests long-distance trade with the mouth of the Nile
 - bullae (clay envelopes containing accounting tokens) with cylinder seal imprints
 - indicate that goods being kept track of, probably “contracts” or “bills of lading”: i.e. trade
 - but no actual precuneiform writing, according to Nissen
- other sites
 - some were medium sized; others just a few buildings
 - some walled, some not
- all apparently direct transplants of people from Sumer
- also Uruk enclaves within towns of other cultures, especially on the northern margin of Mesopotamia
 - these are thought to be residences and facilities of specialized traders from Sumer
 - like a more formalized version of San Francisco’s Chinatown
 - but there is some debate about this interpretation of why they were there, since virtually no potential trade goods have been found at these sites
 - one would expect traders to have caches of exotic goods

- or is it just that they did, in fact, trade them all away, leaving none in the ground for us to find?
- many of these remote settlements and enclaves were apparently in tense relations or conflict with the local people, or at least feared conflict
 - because they tend to be walled off from the local people
- unlike the 'Ubaid expansion, this did not last very long
 - few of these settlements seems to have lasted more than maybe 150 or 200 years
 - although recent interpretations are tending towards a longer period again
 - all seem to have been abandoned at roughly the same time, just before precuneiform writing came into use
 - Nissen finds it hard to believe that precuneiform would not have been used if the knowledge was available
 - in this view, the Uruk expansion ended abruptly around perhaps 3400 or 3300 BC
- currently debated whether the expansion was mostly a commercial phenomenon, or a military/political one, or maybe something else