

Chapter 5

Ancient Sumer

Why do historians classify ancient Sumer as a civilization?

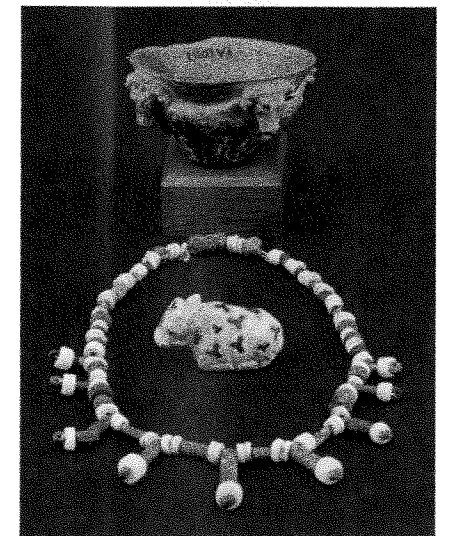
5.1 Introduction

The rise of Sumerian city-states began around 3500 B.C.E. In this chapter, you'll take a closer look at life in Sumer. Like an archaeologist, you'll consider evidence to try to answer this question about the distant past: Why do historians classify ancient Sumer as a civilization? A civilization is a society that has developed arts and sciences and organization.

Until about 150 years ago, archaeologists had no idea that the Sumerian people had lived at all. Then, in the mid-19th century, archaeologists began finding artifacts in the area of the Fertile Crescent that we call Mesopotamia. They uncovered tablets, pottery, and the ruins of cities. They were surprised to find writing in a language they had never seen before.

By studying artifacts, archaeologists have been able to learn a lot about Sumer. One artifact is the Standard of Ur (uhr). It was found where the ancient city of Ur once stood. You can see the standard on the opposite page. It is made of wood and decorated with pieces of shell and lapis lazuli, a semiprecious blue stone. The standard shows the Sumerians in times of peace and war. Artifacts like this one can tell us a great deal about daily life in ancient Sumer.

We now know that the Sumerians had a complex society. Some of the things they invented, like the plow and writing, are still in use today. But which characteristics of Sumer society cause historians to classify it as a civilization? Let's take a closer look at ancient Sumer.



The Sumerian artifacts above include a necklace of lapis lazuli and marble pearls, a limestone figure of a cow, and a stone bowl with a bull carved in relief.

◀ The Standard of Ur depicts scenes of war and peace in ancient Sumer.