

A stylized illustration of a Sumerian deity, likely Inanna, with a bird's head and large wings. The deity is shown from the chest up, wearing a beaded necklace and a long, pleated skirt. The deity's right hand is raised, and the left hand holds a small, woven basket. The background is a solid yellow color.

# Ancient Sumer

## 5000 - 2000 BC

# Introduction to the Ancient Sumer

## Where in the world was Sumer?

The ancient civilisation of Sumer was located in what is now known as southern Iraq in Asia. The heart of Sumer lay between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Greeks later renamed the area Mesopotamia, meaning 'The land between two rivers'. The skilful irrigation of this area, by the Sumerian people, ensured

a rich, fertile land on which they could raise animals and grow crops.

Mesopotamia is often referred to as 'The cradle of civilisation', because the people who lived in Ancient Sumer, from around 4000BC, were some of the first ever people to build major cities, invent a writing system and develop a system of government.

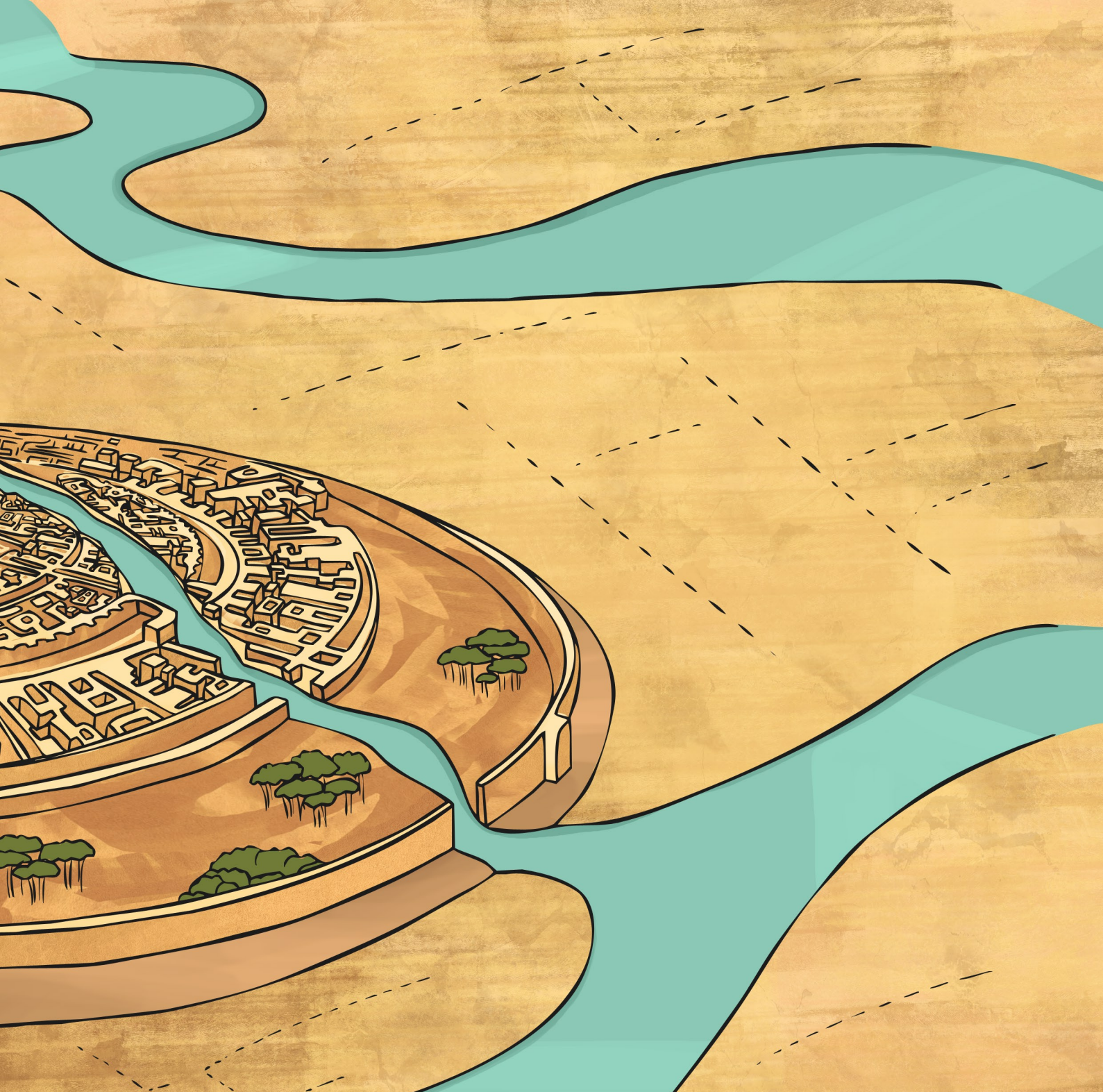




Ancient Sumer  
(now part of Iraq)

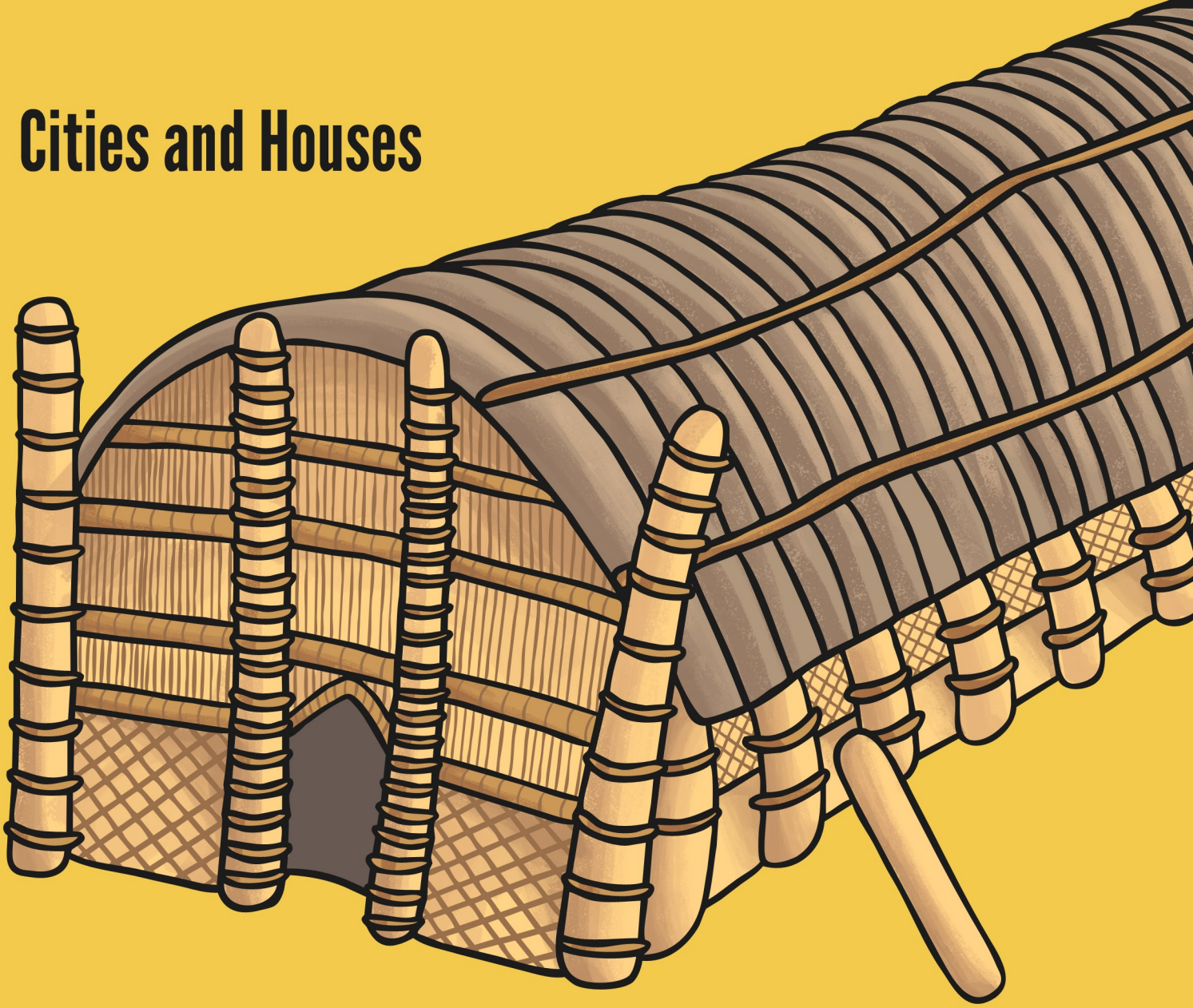
# A Sumerian City





Ancient Sumer consisted of city states which were built between the two rivers of Tigris and Euphrates. Some of these cities, which were led by a king or priest, were vast, busy places with a large number of inhabitants. The city of Uruk was the biggest in the world at the time, with a population of well over 50,000 people. Large cities such as this had roads, houses, a temple, sewers - to get rid of waste, a legal system and a social hierarchy.

# Cities and Houses



As stone was scarce, buildings were mostly made out of sun-baked mud bricks. Over time the Sumerians developed wooden moulds to ensure these bricks were of a uniform shape and size and eventually they developed the process of firing them in a kiln to make them harder and stronger. They also used a substance called bitumen - a semi-solid, black, petrol based material, to waterproof the bricks and to fill in any gaps.

Houses in the cities were built very close together and most had no windows. They

usually had an enclosed downstairs area and an upstairs room without a roof, which provided a cooler place to sleep and prepare food.

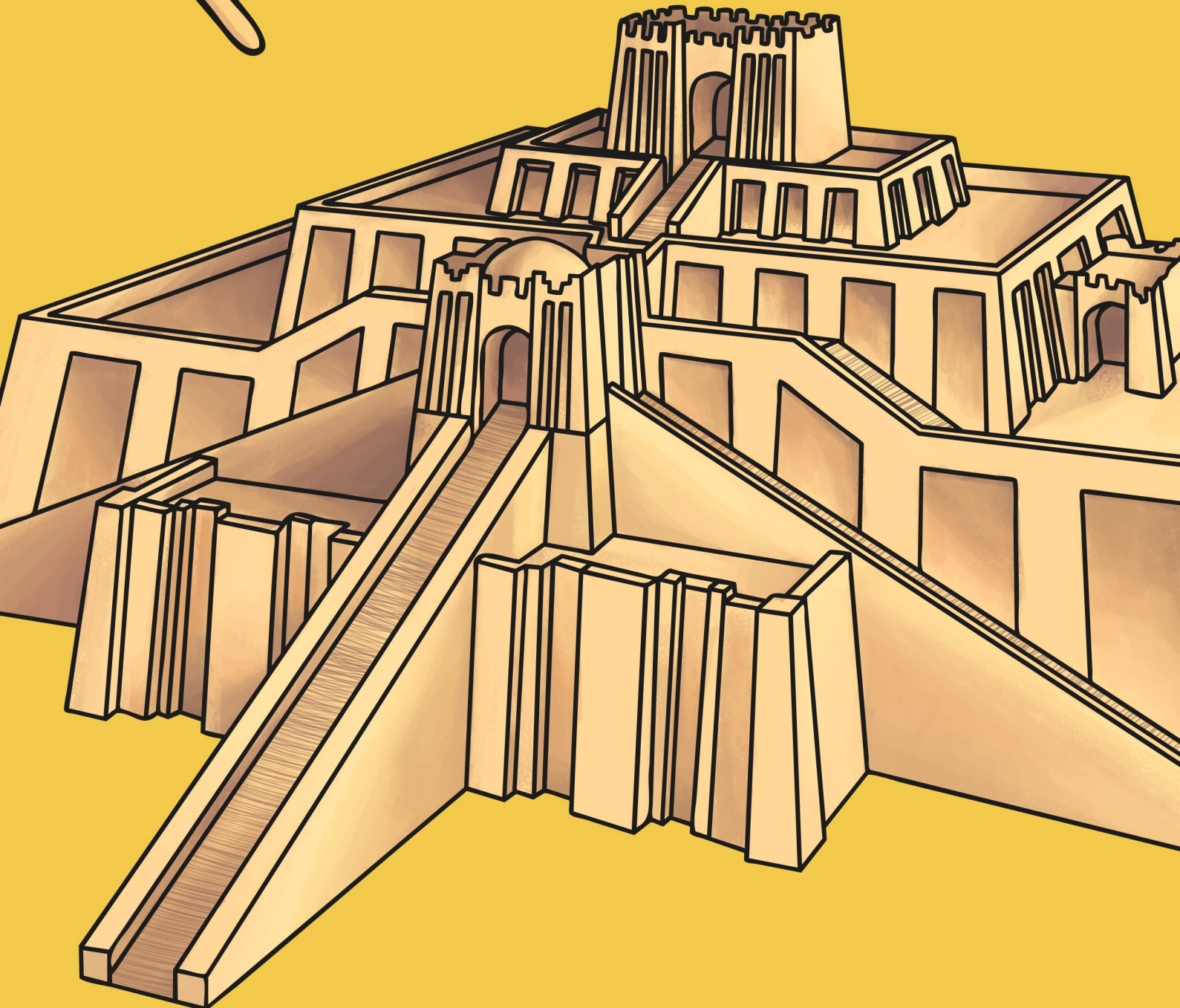
Richer people had more rooms in their houses, sometimes including servant quarters or a chapel. Some of these houses were also built in a U-shape which created a garden area in the middle.

Fishermen and farmers who lived outside the cities, often built houses out of reeds, which were tightly bound together then covered in clay.



## Ziggurats (below)

Different cities believed in different gods and built temples dedicated to them. By 2100BC temples had become huge buildings known as Ziggurats. A Ziggurat had three platforms, steep steps up the front and a temple at the top. They were built from mud bricks and were intended to provide a home for the gods.



# Gods and Goddesses

The Sumerians believed in many different gods and goddesses who had responsibility for different things. Although each city worshipped their own gods, sometimes these gods were acknowledged by other cities too. Some of the most popular gods and goddesses include:



Enki



Ninhursag



Enlil



Utu



Nanna



## Enki

Worshipped by the people from Eridu, Enki was the god of water who was thought to be responsible for bringing the arts and sciences to humans.

## Ninhursag

Otherwise known as 'the lady of the mountain side', Ninhursag was the goddess of the earth.



Photo of sculpture shows standing male worshipper placed at the Square Temple in Tell Asmar.

## Enlil

Enlil was the god of air. The people of Nippur believed he was Lord of the Ghost Land and responsible for giving humans spells to use on spirits.

## Utu and Nanna

The people of Larsa and Sippar worshipped Utu, the god of the sun. He was believed to be the son of Nanna, the god of the moon, worshipped by people from Ur.

The Sumerians also believed in mortal gods called Anunnaki (below), whom they believed created humans out of clay. It was thought that these gods later become judges in the underworld.



## The Underworld

The underworld or Land of the Dead was known as Irkalla. The Sumerians believed it was controlled by a goddess called Ereshkigal which meant 'great lady under the earth'. Ereshkigal could decide who was allowed to go in and out of Irkalla and employed monsters to guard the gateways. The people would bury their dead outside the city walls with food and other offerings for the monsters, in the hope that their loved ones would be granted access into the underworld in return.

# Animals and Agriculture

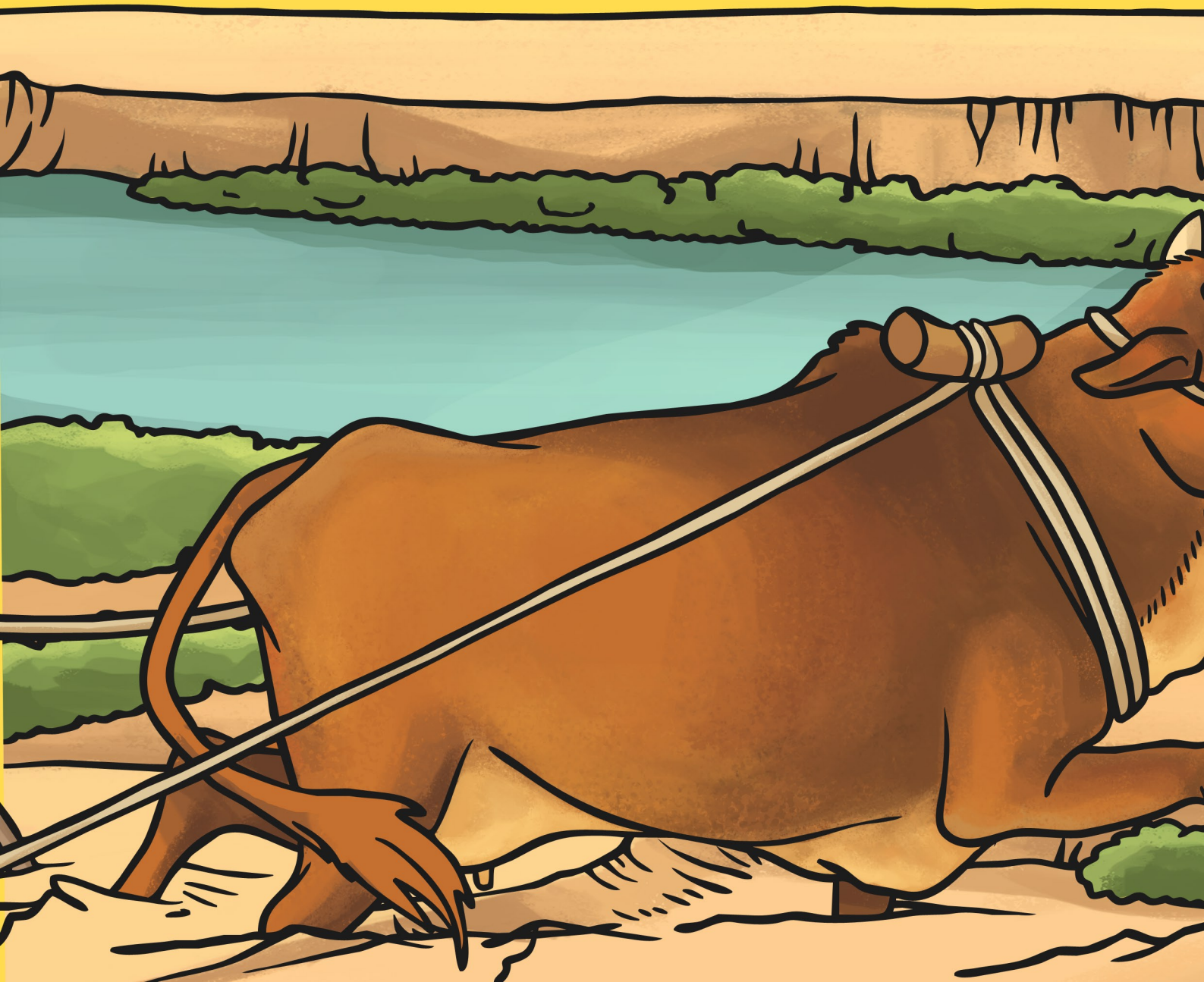
## Animals

The Ancient Sumerians were some of the first people to domesticate animals. They used them to provide food and clothing, for transport and to assist in agricultural work.

Early writing seems to provide evidence that sheep, goats, cows and pigs were kept to provide food. Oxen were used to

drag ploughs and trample down weeds in the fields and donkeys or early horses were used as a mode of transportation. The Sumerians used the hair and wool from the animals they kept to make items of clothing and furnishings, such as rugs and blankets.

Fish, birds and gazelles were also hunted for food.



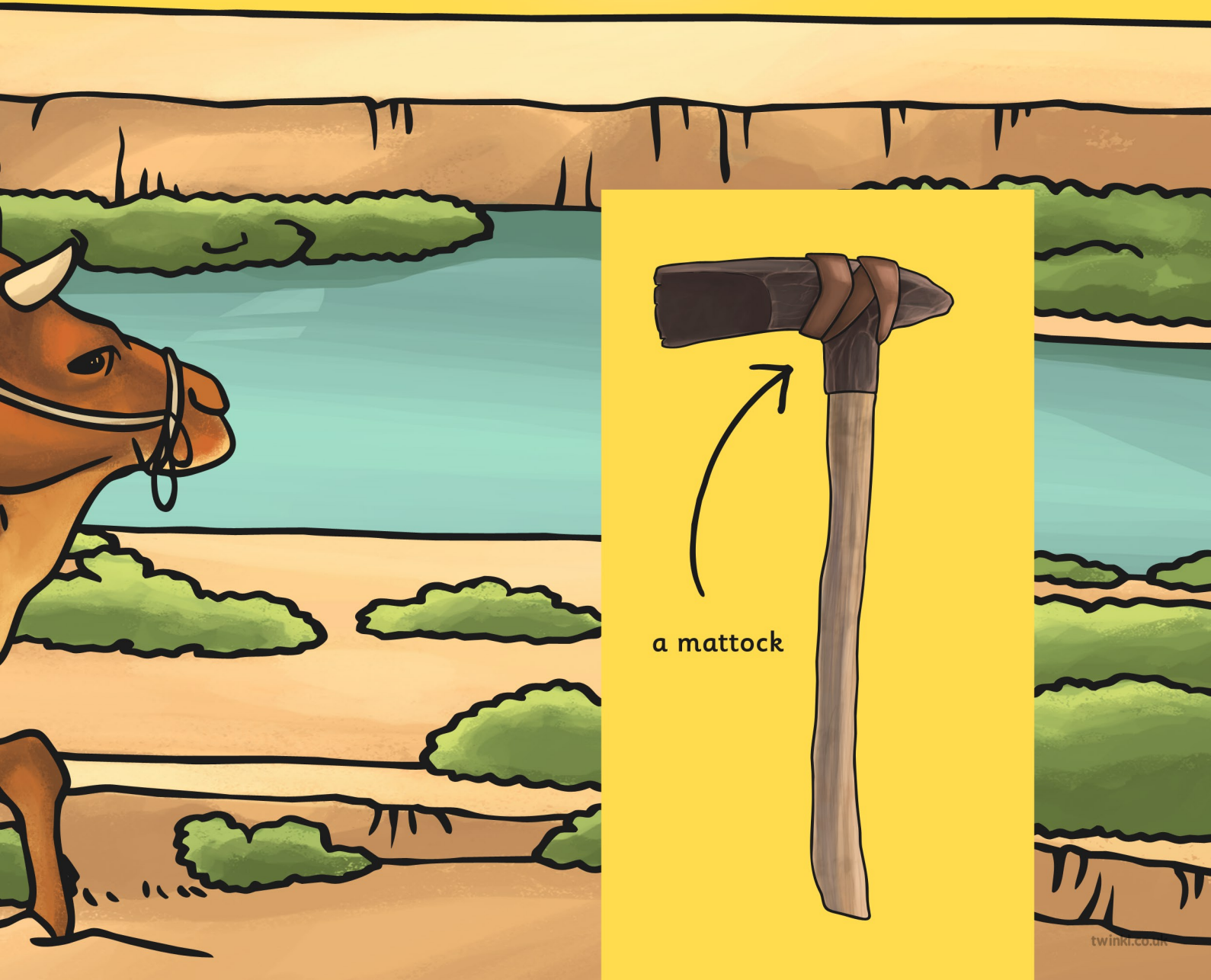
## Agriculture

The Sumerians developed important agricultural techniques which allowed them to use their land most effectively. Even though the Tigris regularly flooded, because men were specially employed to maintain the canals and channels and control the water in the area, they were able to continue to use the land all year round.

To prepare the ground for use pickaxes were dragged over the earth to help it

dry out and when dry the land was ploughed (turned over), harrowed (broken up) and then raked (smoothed over) three times to prepare it for planting. Before seeds were sown the ground was pounded with a tool called a mattock to make the soil very fine. The crops would then be harvested in the springtime.

The Sumerians grew a wide range of crops including barley, wheat, chickpeas, dates, onions, garlic, lettuce, turnips, millet, lentils and mustard.



# Writing and Artefacts

## Writing

The people of Ancient Sumer were the first in the world to develop a writing system that used symbols to represent spoken syllables. It took a few hundred years to fully develop the system, starting around 3500BC. Their earliest form of writing consisted of hieroglyphs (pictures), similar to those used in Ancient Egypt.

Over time the Sumerians developed a type of script known as cuneiform, which simply means 'wedge shaped'. It was called this because the blunt reeds, used as styluses, created wedge shaped marks in the moist clay tablets that they used to write on.

Lots of different examples of Ancient Sumerian writing have been discovered, including letters, prayers and lists.





## The Royal Standard of Ur (above)

Ur was a large, important city in Ancient Sumer. This artefact was discovered inside one of the largest graves in the Royal cemetery of Ur by a man called Sir Leonard Woolley. He believed that it could have been fastened on the top of a pole and carried like a standard, which is why it is named The Royal Standard of Ur. Other historians, however, suggest it could have been a sound box for a musical instrument.

The object is a slim wooden box, shaped like a wedge, with elaborate mosaics of

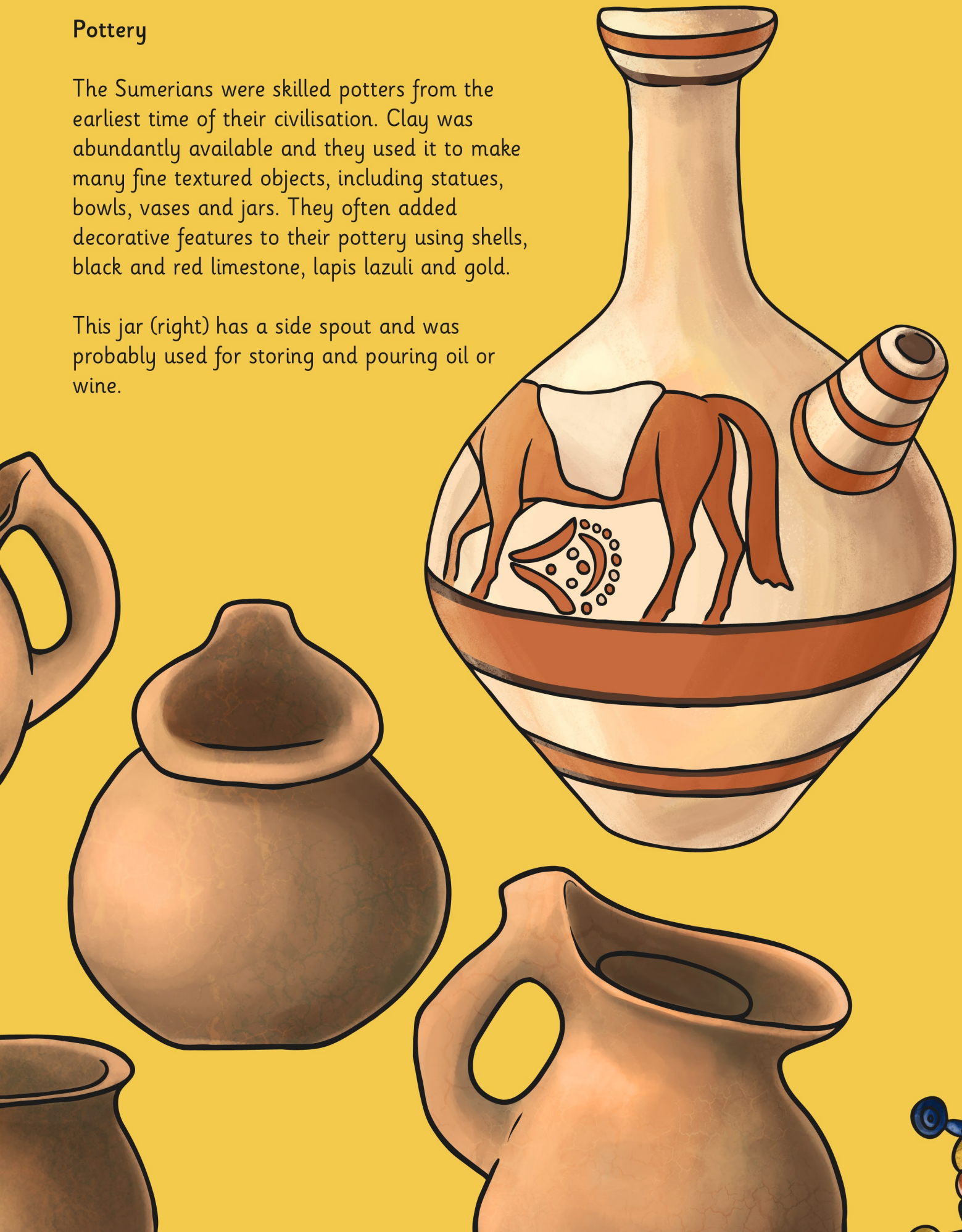
shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli (a blue gemstone) and are very intricate in design. When the object was first discovered it was in a fragile condition. The wooden box surrounding the mosaics had decayed, the weight of the soil had crushed the pieces of mosaic and the bitumen, which was acting as glue to hold it all together, was also disintegrating. Sir Woolley's excavation team had to work very carefully to lift out the tiny pieces one by one and reconstruct it as accurately as possible.

# More Artefacts

## Pottery

The Sumerians were skilled potters from the earliest time of their civilisation. Clay was abundantly available and they used it to make many fine textured objects, including statues, bowls, vases and jars. They often added decorative features to their pottery using shells, black and red limestone, lapis lazuli and gold.

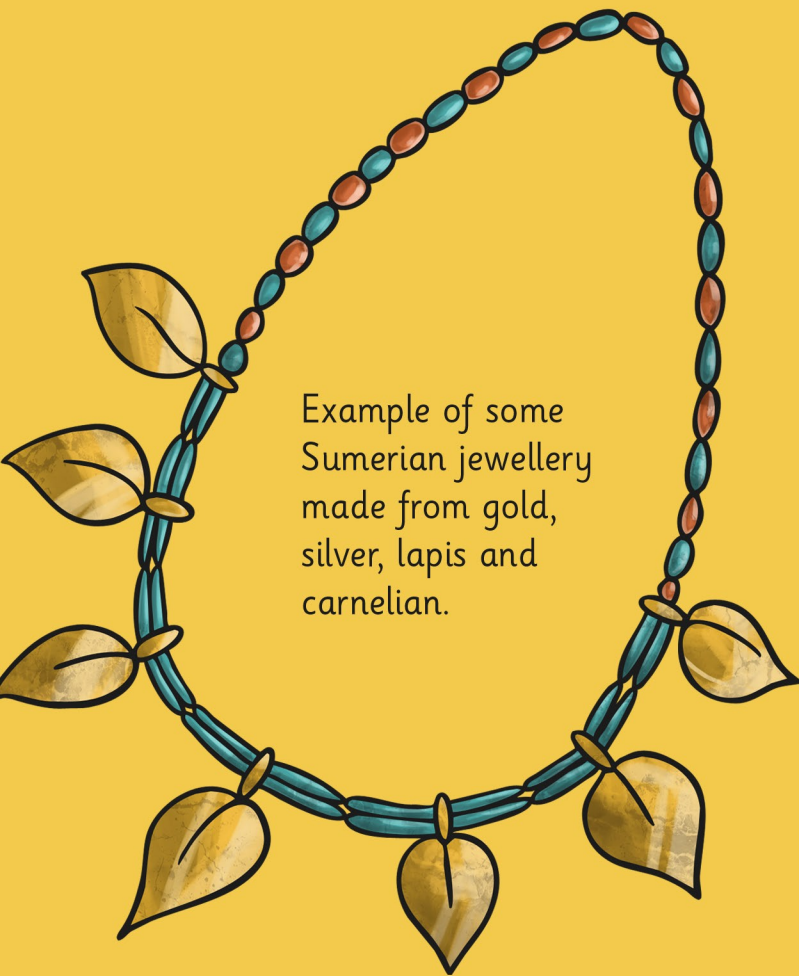
This jar (right) has a side spout and was probably used for storing and pouring oil or wine.



## Musical Instruments

Many sources of evidence suggest that the Sumerians were fond of music and were skilled musicians. They played a variety of instruments including reed pipes, drums, lyres, flutes and harps.

This lyre box (right) was decorated with gold and lapis lazuli and featured a carved bulls head. It was probably played around 2700BC



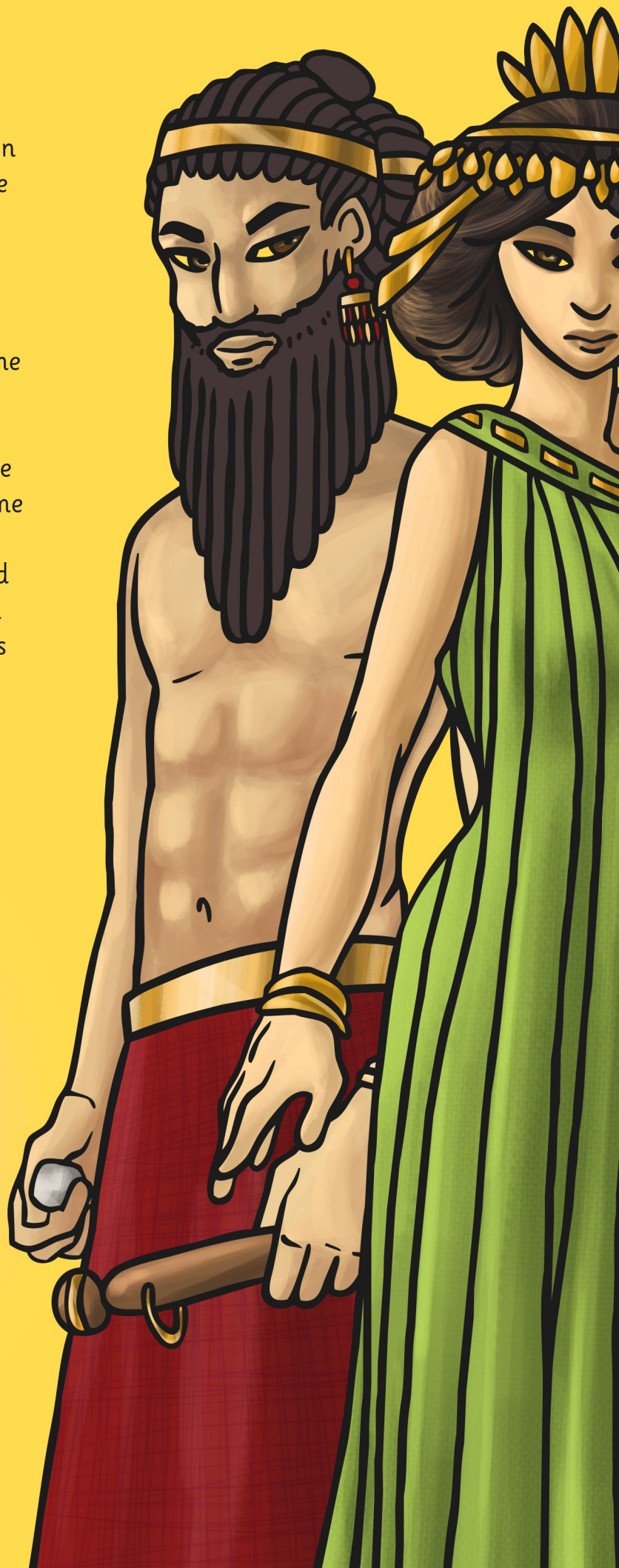
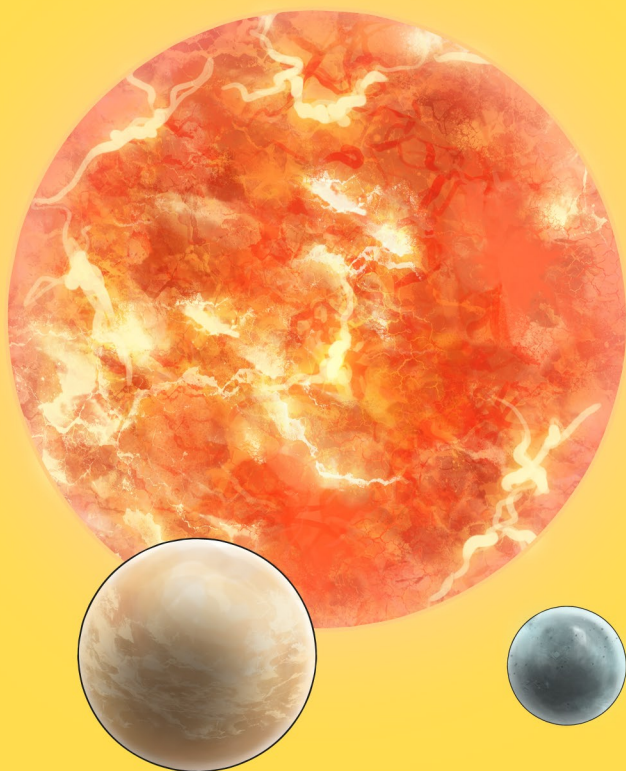
Example of some Sumerian jewellery made from gold, silver, lapis and carnelian.



# A Lasting Legacy

The Sumerians had a significant effect on the world as it is today. They were some of the earliest inventors, writers, mathematicians, and astronomers who created and developed new techniques, tools and ideas. The Sumerians are credited with the invention and use of the wheel, developing a writing system, identifying the five planets that you can see without a telescope and mapping the stars into constellations. We measure time based on the Sumerian observations of the movement of the sun and moon, and we have a government and legal system that reflects the principles and structures developed by them too.

Without the influence of the people of Ancient Sumer the world today might have been a very different place.





**The Sumerians were the first, or among the first to:**

1. Invent and use the wheel
2. Have a writing system (only Egyptian hieroglyphs were earlier)
3. Map the stars into constellations
4. Identify the five planets that you can see without a telescope
5. Measure time in 60 second minutes and 60 minute hours
6. Invent and develop mathematics
7. Split the military into infantry (foot soldiers), cavalry (on horses) and archers (using bows and arrows.)
8. Create a government and legal system
9. Domesticate animals



**5000 BC**

First 'Sumer' people  
move into the land  
Mesopotamia and form  
towns



**4000 BC**

The Sumer build temples  
(ziggurats) to their gods



**3300 BC**

Sumer writing starts



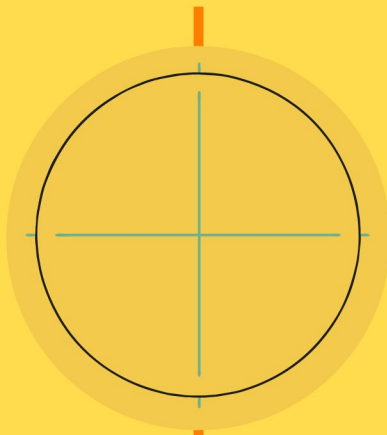
## Ancient Sumerian Timeline



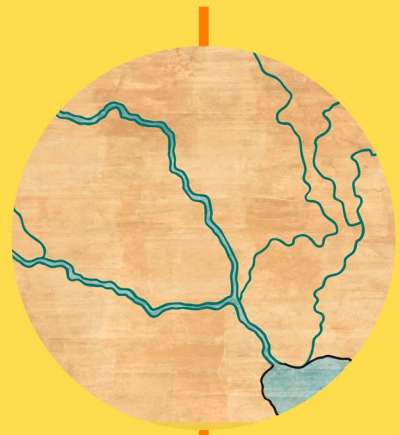
**4000 BC**

Pottery is mass-produced

**3000 BC**  
The Sumerians start to use mathematics



**2330 BC**  
Sumerians are conquered by the Akkadians for the Akkadian Empire



**3200 BC**  
The wheel is invented and used on vehicles



**2700 BC**  
Sumerian king Gilgamesh is said to rule for 126 years!



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