

Ancient Near East

Mesopotamia

Important Vocabulary → Iconography = symbols of a culture



▶ People honor and protect their own symbols but often destroy the symbols of adversaries as a token of dominance, or they adapt them for their own use.

The Ancient Near East



Key Point #1

- **Religion**

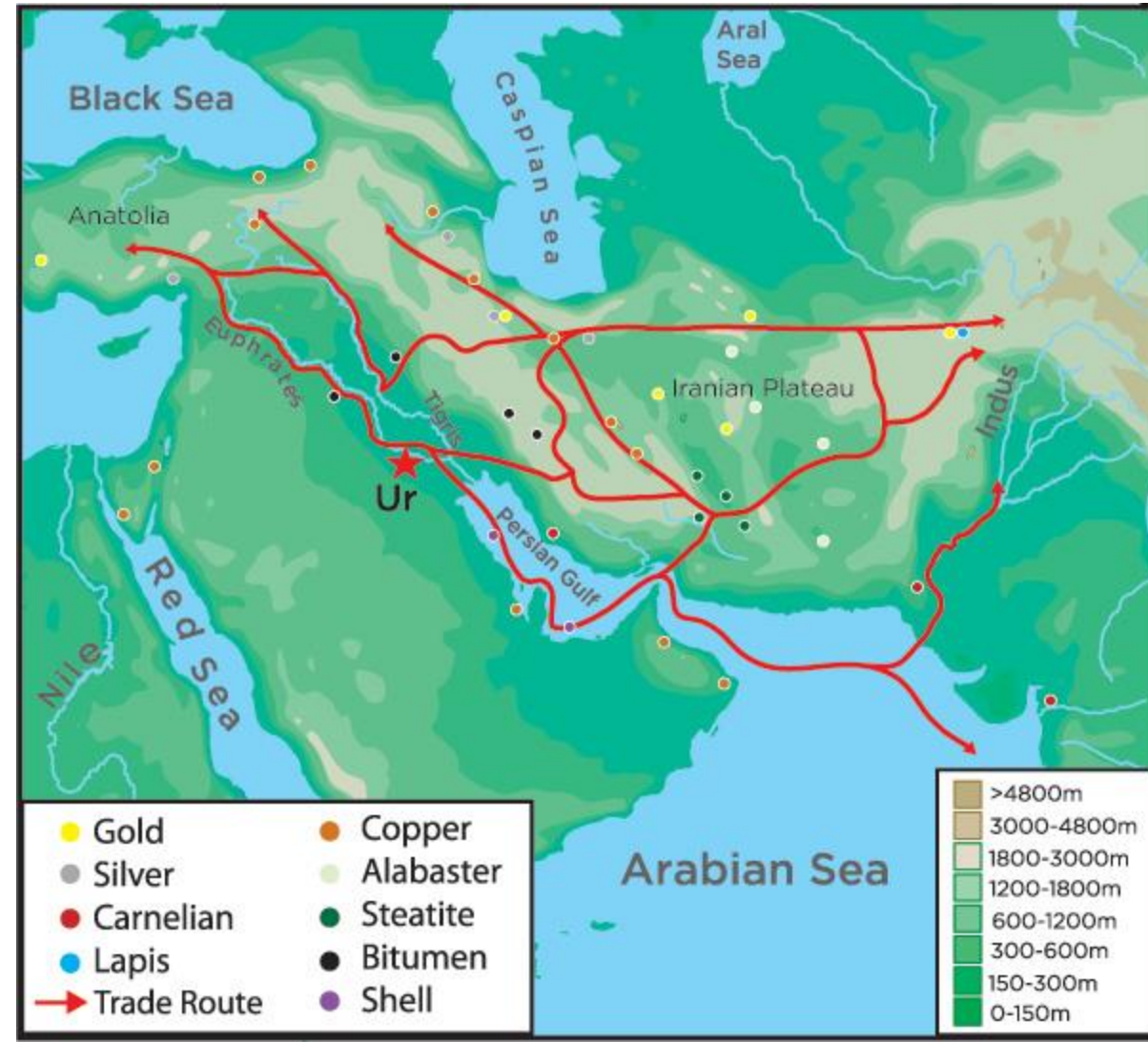
- Focus was on the representation of royal figures and divinities.
- Kings depict themselves with divine attributes.



Key Point #2

- **Cultural Exchange**

- Works demonstrate an active exchange of ideas and styles within the Mediterranean cultures.
- Cultures are influencing each other.



Key Point #3

- **Monumental Architecture**

- To facilitate worship.
- Fortified palaces.
- To demonstrate power and authority.

[MESOPOTAMIA & EGYPT VIDEO](#)



Dawn of Civilization

Below is a list of all the concepts that were created in Mesopotamia:

- Schools.
- Democracy and Law (organized government).
- Formal Religion.
- Architecture with artistic intent.
- Formalization of Art.
- Cuneiform Writing.
- Not to mention, the wheeled vehicle.

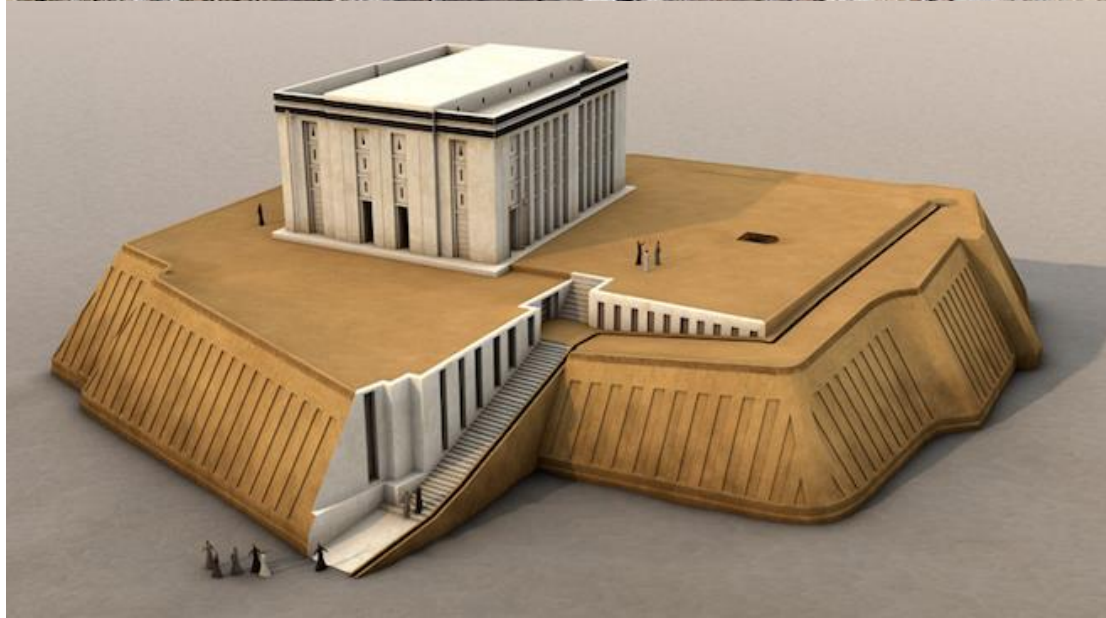
Sumerian Architecture – ZIGGURATS

- Religious effect:
 - Sumerians felt the gods resided in the heavens above.
 - They used the ziggurat, a rectangular stepped tower, to reach up to them, creating artificial mountains to commune with the gods.
- The Sumerians also used architecture as manifestations of power.



White Temple and its ziggurat

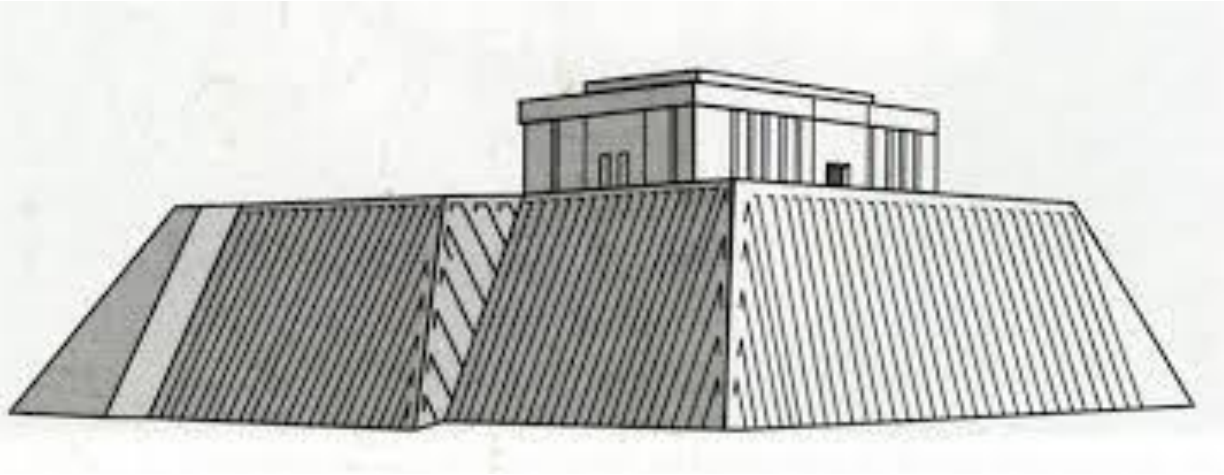
Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud brick



- Sumerian cities had the temple as the center of town because the gods were the most important.
- Many ziggurats, such as the White Temple, held a temple, the **cella**, 40 feet off the ground.
- The cella functioned as a waiting room for worshipers to meet the gods.
- Sloped sides made it easier to build, repair, and for support.
- Small temple on top to accommodate only a few (priests and community leaders).
- Worship for the average person took place outside.

White Temple and its ziggurat

Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud brick



Reconstructed view of the White Temple

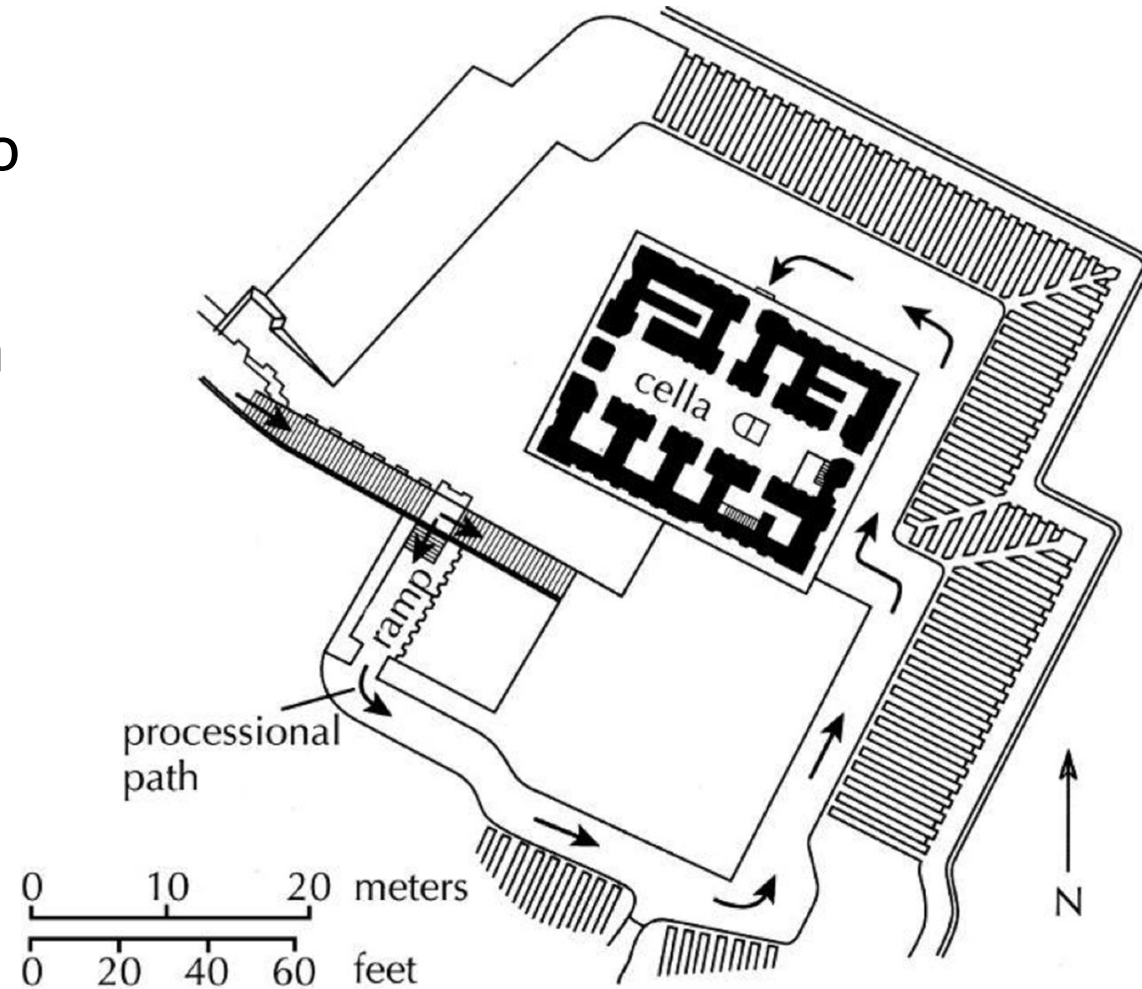
- As with many buildings to come, the corners face the cardinal points of the compass (North, South, East, and West).
- Here these points symbolize the four rivers, which flow from the central mountain to the four world regions (as they understood it, geographically).
- It also serves a more practical purpose of using the temple roof as an observatory for Sumerian timekeeping.

White Temple and its ziggurat

Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud brick

- The building featured a **bent axis plan**, meaning you couldn't approach the **cella** in a direct line (i.e. the stairway on one side leads to top, but changes direction with angular turns).
- A bent axis plan was a standard arrangement for Sumerian temples; in contrast, Egypt used a more linear approach (**straight axis**) for temples and tombs where the statue of the deity is directly approached (albeit through multiple thresholds).
- The function of this bent axis plan was to separate the outer, non-sacred world from the realm of the deity.

IMPORTANT TIP: ALWAYS LOOK FOR THE SEPARATION BETWEEN THE SACRED AND NON-SACRED ON RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS



White Temple and its ziggurat

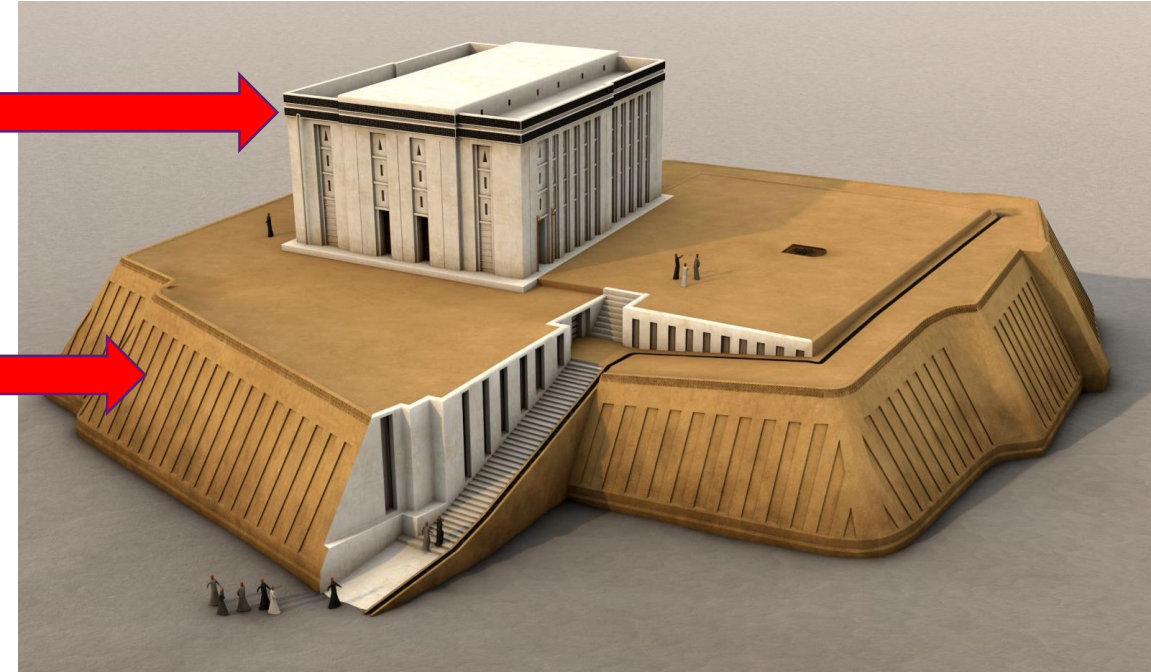
Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud brick



WHITE
TEMPLE



ZIGGURAT



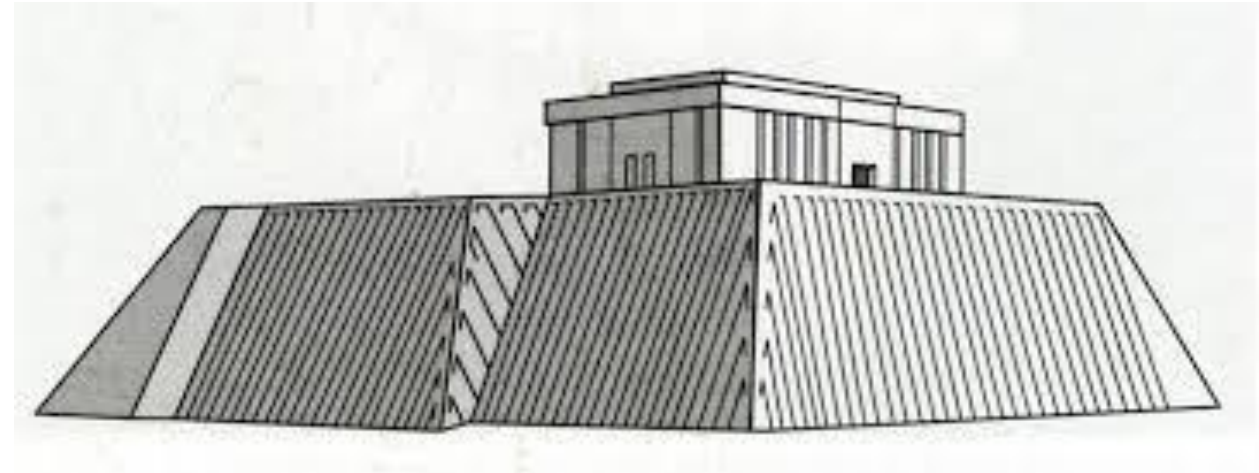
The effort involved to build structures without stone reflects the degree of worship and reverence for their deities.

- This temple was probably dedicated to **Anu**, the sky god (and most important Sumerian deity)

White Temple and its ziggurat

Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud brick

- **Buttresses**, projecting reinforcement, were spaced across the surface to create a visually appealing and impressive light and shadow pattern.
- **Whitewash** on surface to hide mud brick.
- Only the base of the temple remains.

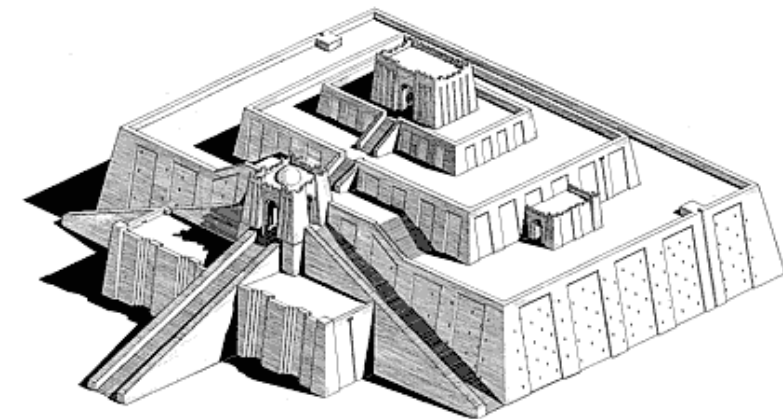


White Temple And Its Ziggurat

Uruk (Modern Warka, Iraq). Sumerian. C. 3500-3000 B.C.E. Mud Brick



Above is another, more intact example of a ziggurat and a temple.



Sumerian Art

- **Realistic** figures and clear **narratives** separate it from prehistoric art.
- The focus of the work is on the worshipping of the gods.
- Figural representation:
 - Men were depicted as bare-chested with kilts.
 - Women would have their left shoulder covered.
 - Only slaves and prisoners are shown as nude, as nudity is a **debasement**.
 - All would be emotionless.
 - **Hierarchical scale**, showing importance by the size of the figure, was used to demonstrate relative importance.
 - Hands in prayer to indicate piety.
 - Large eyes looking to the gods, waiting for them to descend.



Statues of votive figures

from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE. Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone

- These were the tallest found, the male is 2'6".
 - They are the most important figures.
- All the figures were placed in the **cella** of the temple and shown as praying.
- Served as stand-ins for the actual person (remember, very few people were allowed inside cellas).
 - They were considered to perform the act of prayer on behalf of the patron.
- These statues are rare examples of non-royal sculptures.
- Overly large eyes were believed to be the windows to the soul and eternal wakefulness to their gods waiting for them to descend into the cella.
- Some held libation vessels
 - Cups used in the ritual of pouring out precious liquids or oils as a form of sacrifice to the gods.



Statues of votive figures

from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE. Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone



- These statues established **conventions**, or rules, for the depiction of the human figure.
 - Another way of putting it is that art becomes **formalized**.
- Discovered deliberately buried beneath the floor of the temple
 - Originally thought they were gods.

Standard of Ur

From the Royal Tombs at Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone

- A box with a trapezoidal form.
- It's function was possibly a soundbox of a musical instrument or a military standard.
- It is a **narrative**, with each side telling a story:
 - One side shows **peace**.
 - One side shows **war**.
 - Both sides illustrate the roles of a Sumerian king.

[Beth and Steve](#)



Standard of Ur

From the Royal Tombs at Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone

- Found in a royal cemetery.
- Misnamed/identified as a standard.

Visual Characteristic

- It is a **mosaic**.
 - Pieces of stone cut to create the image.
 - Limestone for the figures
 - Lapis Lazuli for background
- Registers
- Hierarchy of scale



Standard of Ur

From the Royal Tombs at Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone



PEACE SIDE

Standard Of Ur

From The Royal Tombs At Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood Inlaid With Shell, Lapis Lazuli, And Red Limestone



- **Registers**—horizontal level in a work of multiple levels (like a comic book.)
- **Historical Narrative**—Tells the historical story of how the Sumerians won and celebrated a great military victory.
- **Hierarchy of scale**—most important figures are the largest (largest is the priest-king).

Standard Of Ur

From The Royal Tombs At Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood Inlaid With Shell, Lapis Lazuli, And Red Limestone



- **Lapis Lazuli:** precious blue stone imported from what is present-day Afghanistan, suggests wealth and power
- **FLASH FORWARD:** lapis lazuli will be used to make blue paint. It is extremely expensive and the color blue in paintings will show the wealth of the patron

Standard Of Ur

From the Royal Tombs At Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone



- PEACE side depicts Ur at peace, with a vibrant economy, celebrating with a royal banquet
- The registers also act as a division of classes with the wealthy seated above the lower class figures carrying heavy loads on the bottom.
- Top: a banquet with seated dignitaries and a **priest-king** (bigger) attend a feast. Harp player entertains/
- Middle: attendants transport animals (spoils of war) for a banquet
- Bottom: men carry provisions on their backs.

Standard of Ur

From the Royal Tombs at Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone



WAR SIDE

Standard of Ur

From the Royal Tombs at Ur, Sumerian. 2600-2400 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone

WAR SIDE:

- Top: soldiers bring captives to king (who is larger and central).
- Middle: foot soldiers (composite view) lead captured enemies away.
 - power of the king is reinforced by the uniformity of the soldiers as they are lined up in an orderly fashion to suggest order and discipline.
- Bottom: three mule drawn war chariots crush enemies (notice how they pick up speed across) and tells us of the invention of the wheel.

• **REMINDER: This reads from bottom to top, left to right**

Cuneiform Writing



Modern pictographs

- A series of written communication, using pictographs.
- Done on clay tablets.
- Recorded earliest known epic story, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.
- The writing system on the Code of Hammurabi.



The Code of Hammurabi

Babylon (Susa, Iran). c 1780 BCE. Basalt approx. 7' 4" high

- The figures are shown in **composite view**.
- Used **Bas relief**, a shallow carving.
- Vertical format.



Fun Fact: Pennies are carved using bas relief



The Code of Hammurabi

Babylon (Susa, Iran). c 1780 BCE. Basalt approx. 7' 4" high

- Meant for public display.
- Written in cuneiform.
- One of the earliest **law codes** ever written (282 laws).
- Laws prescribed penalties for everything from adultery to cutting down neighbor's trees.

Function: display the law codes, give Hammurabi Divine Right to Rule.



Detail: Top of the Stele of Hammurabi



Detail: Sun god/God of Justice, Shamash

[Beth and Steve 3 min](#)



- Shamash is on the right.
- He is depicted with flames at his shoulders.
- Shamash is **composite** but his horned headdress is in **true profile**, the mix of which demonstrates a more sophisticated form of depiction.
- There is also some **foreshortening**, **creating the illusion of depth by making some parts seem closer than others**.
- Here foreshortening is achieved because his beard is diagonal and the throne is at a slight angle, making them appear closer to the viewer.



Detail: Shamash, hands Hammurabi a rod and a ring



- Hammurabi raises hand in respect.
- Their heads line up (**implied line**) but Shamash would tower over Hammurabi if standing (**hierarchy of scale**).

Detail: Shamash hands Hammurabi a rod and a ring



- Rod and ring establish Hammurabi's authority to build social order and to measure people's lives.
- Rod and ring are measuring rod and coiled rope—builder's tools.
 - Symbolizes Hammurabi will build a just and orderly society.

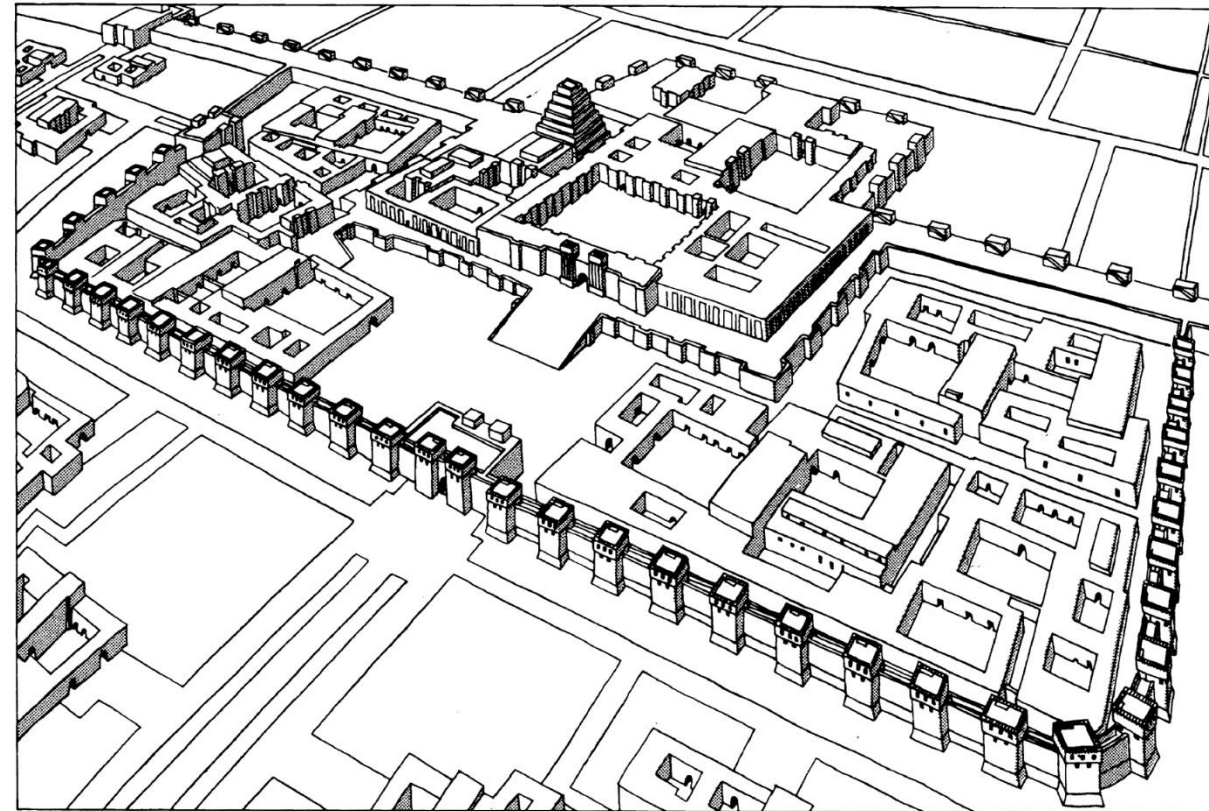
Assyrian Art

- Relief sculptures that **glorified the king**.
- Animals are expressive, people are not.
- Domination over wild beasts shows authority of king over his people and nature.

Citadel of Sargon II

Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad), Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE

- Assyrians built huge palaces to show their superiority
- This city was on a 50' high platform across 1 square mile, a massive manifestation of Sargon II's **power and authority**.
- It contains a ziggurat, palace complex, and a citadel.
- The palace dominates complex, intimidating potential enemies.
- The throne room was covered in relief sculptures of the king triumphing over man and beast.
- As with the White Temple, the **cella** is at the highest point.
- The Lamassu was located at the entryway to the palace.



Lamassu

from the citadel of Sargon II, Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad, Iraq).
Neo-Assyrian. c.720-705 BCE Alabaster

- **Lamassu** were human-headed guardian figures with the face of the king.
- They were meant to ward off enemies, seen and unseen.
- They were 13' 10" high.
- Winged.
- 5 legs
 - Front – at attention
 - Side – walking
- Located at entrance to the Citadel of Sargon II and the throne room.
- Stylized elements and patterns in the hair, beard, and wings.
- Naturalistic features in the muscles and facial features.



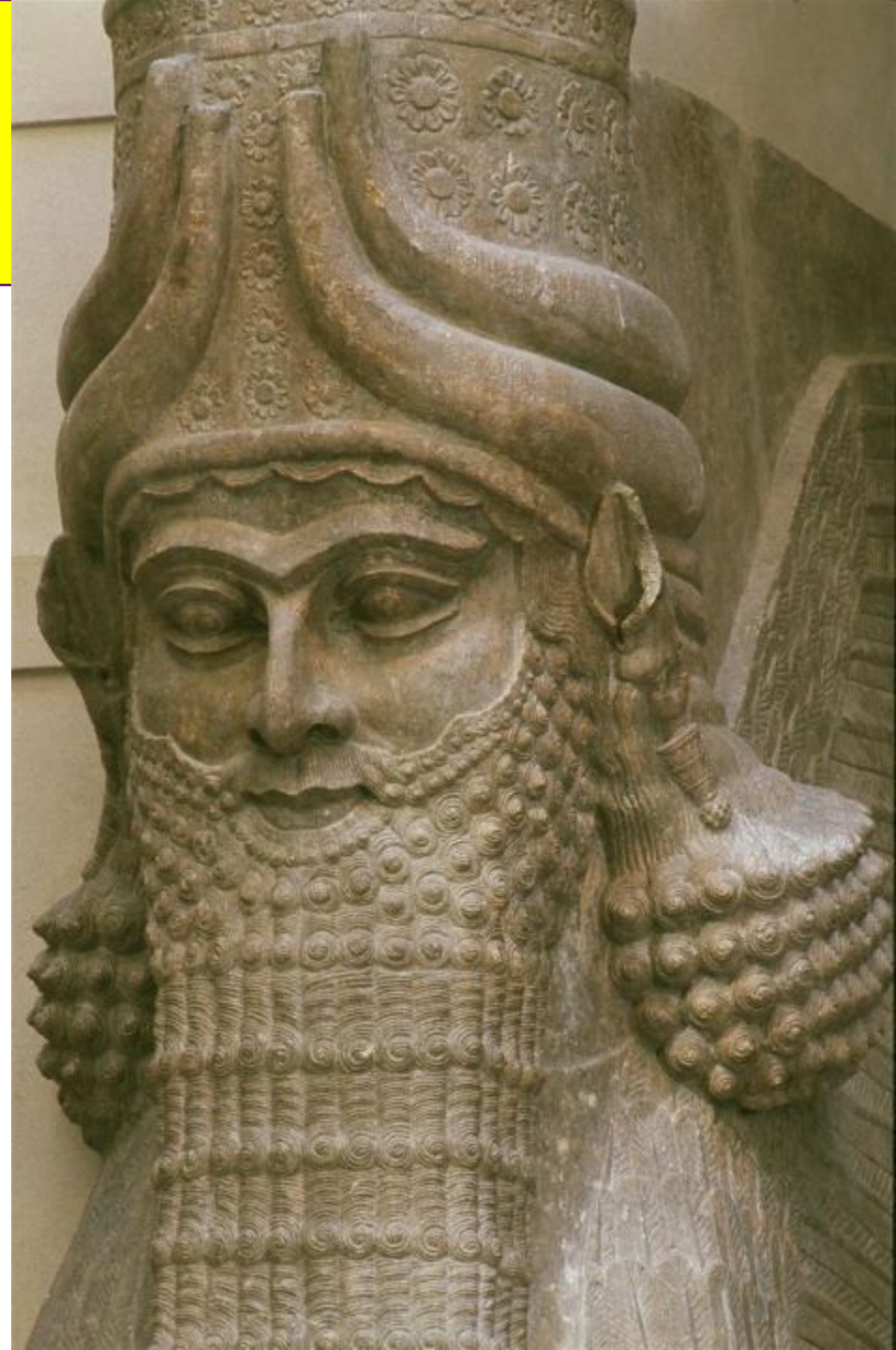
Lamassu

from the citadel of Sargon II, Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad, Iraq).
Neo-Assyrian. c.720-705 BCE Alabaster

- These influenced other cultures, like the Persians, who utilized them as well.
- The artists incorporated cuneiform writing around his legs, which:
 - Reinforces the King's power.
 - Damns those who threaten him or the city.

Flashforward: Guardian figures will be found around the world to protect temples, tombs, and palaces.





[Smart History](#)

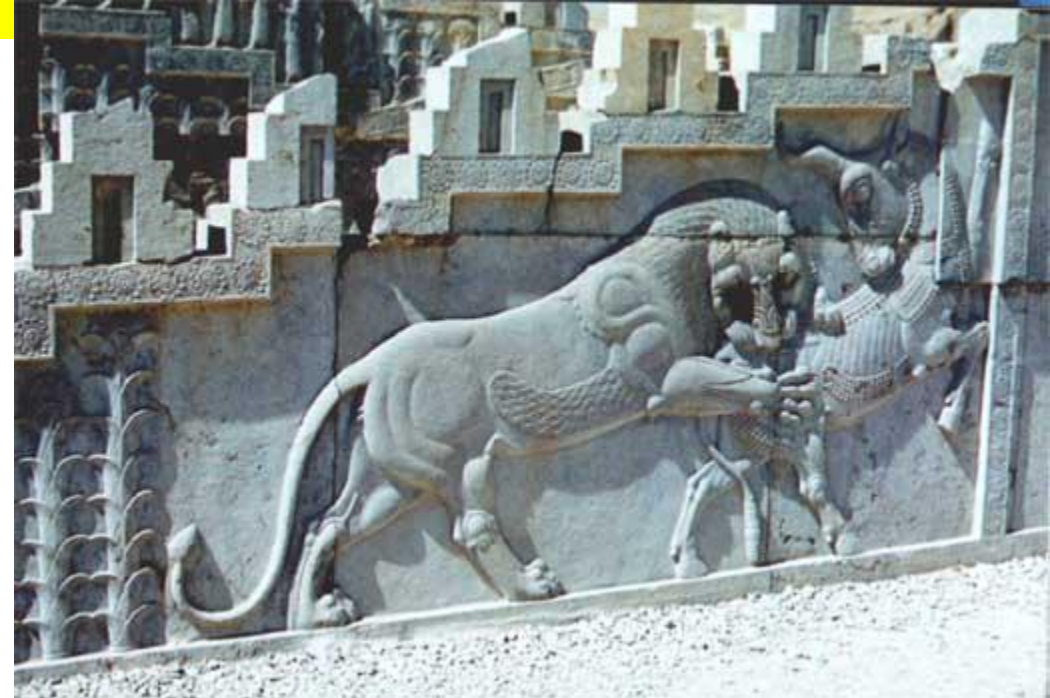
Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone

CONTEXT

- Patrons – Darius I and Xerxes I, great Persian rulers
- The **apadana** (the royal audience/reception hall) was part of the **citadel**.
- The complex was less a palace than a site of multiple party rooms, all of which held 10,000 people.
- The complex was spread over the equivalent to 17.5 football fields.
- **Function: Royal Audience hall** to hold ceremonies and celebrations, hosting peoples from all over the extensive Persian Empire and demonstrate power and wealth.
 - An annual celebration of the New Year took place here
- The king doesn't stay here throughout the year.
- The Persians did not use slave labor, so this was very expensive to build.

[3 min video](#)



Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone



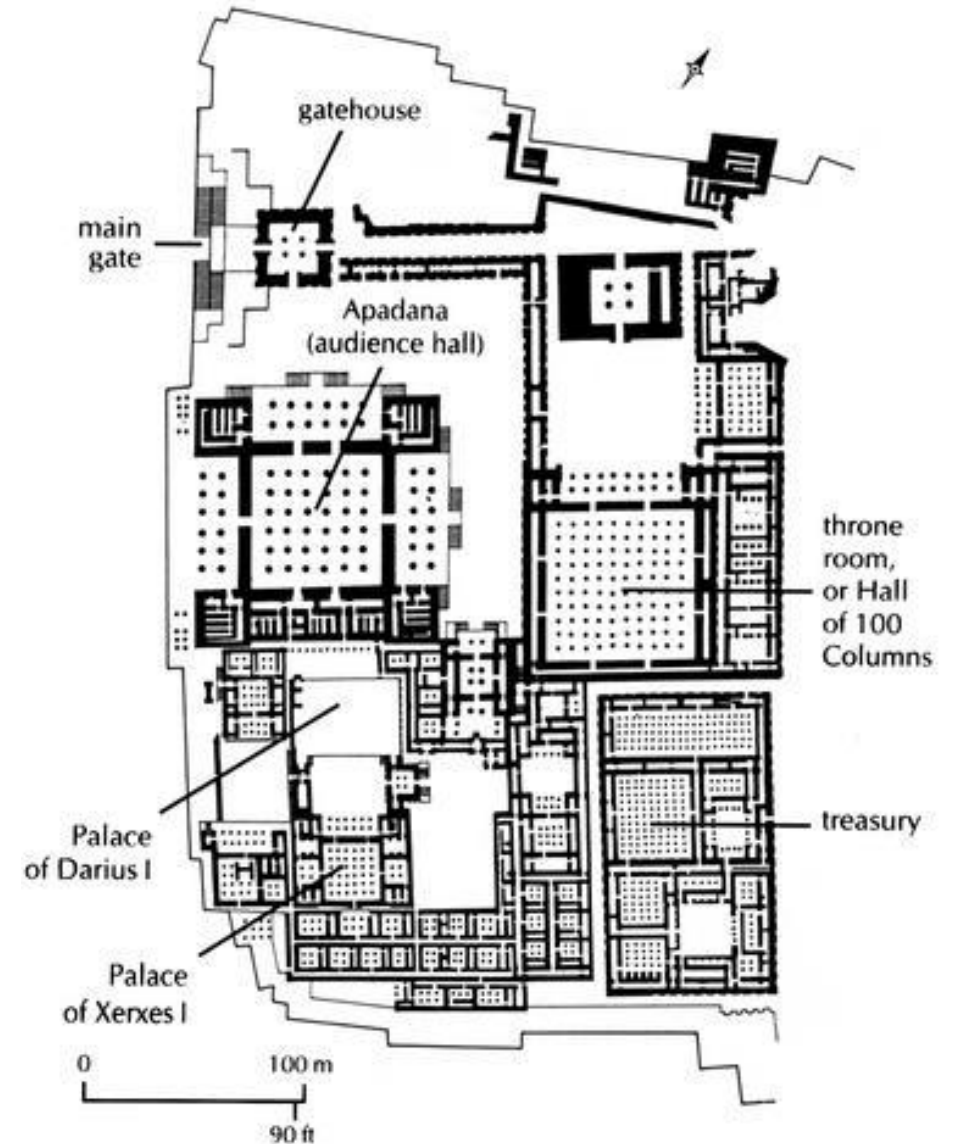
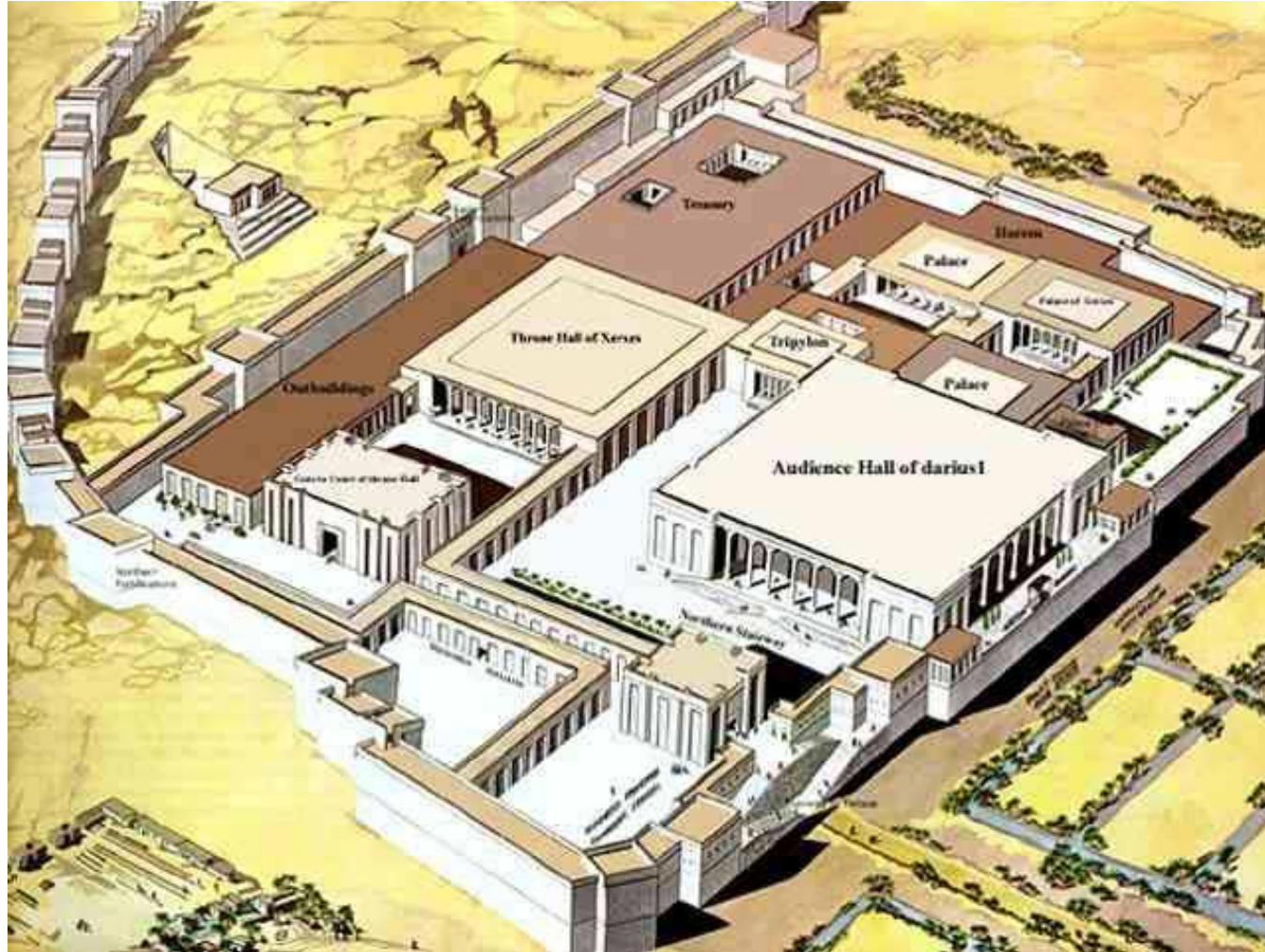
- The bull attacking the lion reliefs are astrological symbols referring to this shift from one season of the year to another.

CONTENT/VISUAL

- Stairs lead to the **apadana**.
 - The apadana was a massive **hypostyle** hall (a room with a roof supported by post and lintel construction).
 - Could hold 10,000 people.
- The columns in the apadana were 64 feet tall.
- The stairs were:
 - 111 stairs on each side
 - 4 inches tall
 - 22 feet wide
- This was built on a man-made embankment, 40 ft high, 100 ft wide, and a third of a mile long.
- The small rise on the steps made people walk slower so the processions would be more regal.

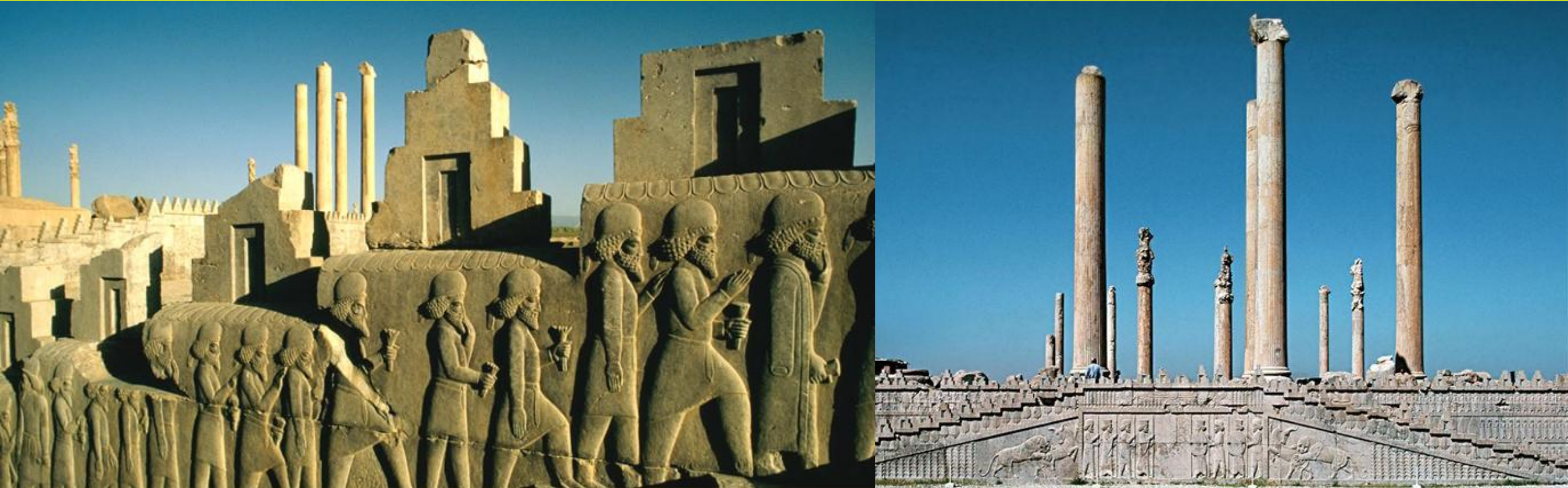
Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone



Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone



- [RECONSTRUCTION VIDEO](#)
- The stairs featured **processional reliefs** representing 23 nations in typical regional costume bringing offerings, referring to the harmonious living of the huge Persian Empire

Processional frieze (detail) on the terrace of the royal audience hall (apadana), Persepolis, Iran, ca. 521–465 BCE.



- These figures are all stylized and in composite view.
- All figures are connected to each other in some way, again reinforcing the interconnectedness of the Persian Empire.
- Reliefs depict peoples of different ethnicities and cultures bringing gifts or tribute that help us to identify where they are from.
- No one is shown disrespectfully (as slaves are in the Standard of Ur). There is an unusual display of unity (symbolized by the lotus held by one of the figures) that is rare in the ancient world.

Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone



• FORMAL

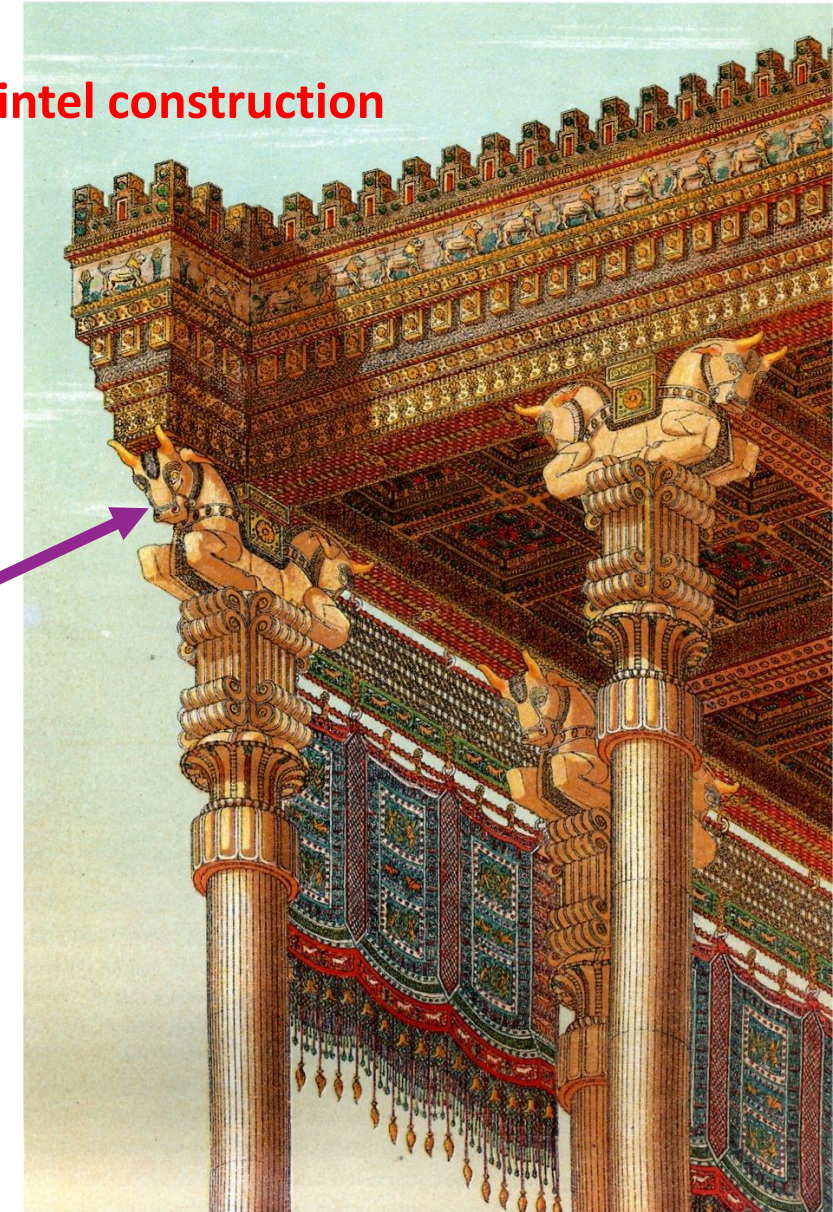
- Form – reliefs have amazing **modeling** (look 3 dimensional).
- Color – reliefs, columns, capitals were brightly painted.
- Repetition – of images and columns.
- Mostly made of mudbrick.
- Floors paved, columns in audience hall were stone, the reliefs were in limestone.
- Materials from all over Persian Empire – shows domination.

Audience Hall (apadana) of Darius and Xerxes

Persepolis (Iran today). Persian. C. 520-465 BCE. Limestone

- **Capitals** - Decorative tops to columns.
- Capitals holding a wooden roof.
- Columns were topped with two **protomes**, **capitals** which featured the front part of the fiercest animals (lions, bulls, griffins, lamassu); they were meant to intimidate, impress, and show the kings power.

Flashback: Post and lintel construction



Meanwhile, over in Egypt . . .

