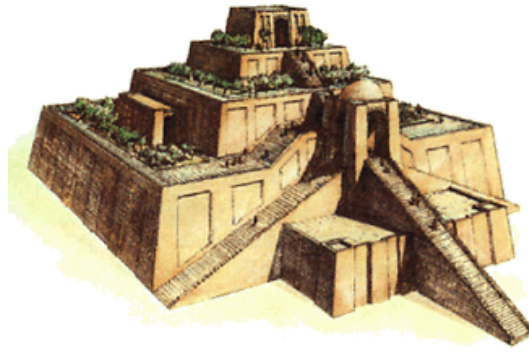


Ziggurat



A ziggurat "to build on a raised area" is a temple tower of the ancient Mesopotamian valley and Iran, having the form of a terraced pyramid of successively receding stories.

Ziggurats were a form of temple common to the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians of ancient Mesopotamia. The earliest examples of the ziggurat date from about 3000 BCE and the latest from around 600 BCE.

Built in receding tiers upon a rectangular, oval, or square platform, the ziggurat was a pyramidal structure. Sun-baked bricks made up the core of the ziggurat with facings of fired bricks on the outside. The facings were often glazed in different colors and may have had astrological significance.

The number of tiers ranged from two to seven, with a shrine or temple at the summit. Access to the shrine was provided by a series of ramps on one side of the ziggurat or by a spiral ramp from base to summit.

Notable examples of this structure include the Great Ziggurat of Ur and Khorsabad in Mesopotamia.

The Mesopotamian ziggurats were not places for public worship or ceremonies. They were believed to be dwelling places for the gods. Through the ziggurat the gods could be close to mankind and each city had its own patron god.

Only priests were permitted inside the ziggurat and it was their responsibility to care for the gods and attend to their needs. As a result the priests were very powerful members of Sumerian society.

There are 32 known ziggurats near Mesopotamia. Four of them are in Iran, and the rest are mostly in Iraq. The most recent to be discovered was Sialk in Kashan, a region in central Iran. It is the oldest known ziggurat, dating back about 5000 years.

One of the best preserved ziggurats is Choqa Zanbil in western Iran, which has survived despite the devastating eight year Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's in which many archeological sites were destroyed.

Ziggurat designs ranged from simple bases upon which a temple sat, to marvels of mathematics and construction which spanned several terraced stories and were topped with a temple.

An example of a simple ziggurat is the White Temple of Uruk, in ancient Sumer. The ziggurat itself is the base on which the White Temple is set. Its purpose is to get the temple closer to the heavens, and provide access from the ground to it via steps.



Sialk (most recently discovered)



Choqa Zanbil (best preserved)



White Temple of Uruk (simple structure)

An example of an extensive and massive ziggurat is the Marduk ziggurat, or Etemenanki, of ancient Babylon. Unfortunately, not much of even the base is left of this massive structure, yet archeological findings and historical accounts put this tower at seven multicolored tiers, topped with a temple of exquisite proportions. The temple is thought to have been painted and maintained an indigo color, matching the tops of the tiers. It is known that there were three staircases leading to the temple, two on the side that were thought to have only ascended half the ziggurat's height.



Artist's Rendering of Etemenanki

Etemenanki, the name for the structure, is Sumerian and means "The Foundation of Heaven and Earth." Most likely being built by Hammurabi, the ziggurat's core was found to have contained the remains of earlier ziggurats and structures. The final stage consisted of about 50 feet of hardened brick encasement constructed by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The ziggurat may have been built as a bridge between heaven and earth. The temples of the Sumerians were believed to be a cosmic axis, a vertical bond between heaven and earth, and the earth and the underworld, and a horizontal bond between the lands. Built on seven levels the ziggurat represented seven heavens and planes of existence, the seven planets and the seven metals associated with them and their corresponding colors.

Joseph Campbell in his *Masks of God* books says that there is archeological evidence supporting a direct link between Mesopotamian ziggurats and the pyramids of Egypt. Campbell also states that from Egypt, the Mesopotamian culture was passed on almost simultaneously on two separate fronts to Crete and India. From India it reached China and from there it crossed the ocean to the pre-Columbian societies of Central and South America, which could explain the similarities between ziggurats and Mayan pyramids.



Egyptian Pyramids



Mayan Pyramids in Yucatan Region of Mexico

Campbell further explores the geometry of the ziggurat and its philosophical and spiritual repercussions. According to Campbell, ziggurats first appeared during a sudden scientific and philosophical golden age where such other discoveries were made such as the invention of the wheel, the discovery of the calendar and astronomy, as well as the invention of the written word. For Campbell these are all related.

The Earth needs 365 days to make a single revolution around the Sun, which is also an approximation of the number of degrees in a circle. Ziggurats, like all pyramidal structures, have a square base which could be encompassed within a circular area. The square base theoretically represents the additional five days. The five days can be seen in the four points of the square as well as the fifth point in the middle, which is the point of the square's equilibrium as well as the point of equilibrium of whatever circle that encompasses it.

The fifth point represents the bridge to heaven represented by the circle, a universally considered symbol for infinity and perfection. The highest point of a pyramid is a projection of the square's center point. This can be interpreted as the earth's highest point being heaven's lowest.

The ziggurat style of architecture continues to be used and copied today in many places of the world. One example would be the University of Tennessee central library in Knoxville, Tennessee.



University of Tennessee Central Library