

THE SUMERIAN VIEW OF THE WORLD

by Michael Fazio

The Sumerians worshiped multiple gods of diverse rank and character and represented them in their art. This small object (Fig. 1.8) is the head of a ewe or sheep carved by a Sumerian perhaps in Uruk, more than six thousand years ago. Its current home is the Louis Kahn's Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, Texas (see Figs. 1.6 and 1.7). Lovingly made, it renders more personal and more accessible these anonymous Sumerians who created a monumental architecture almost exclusively from mud.

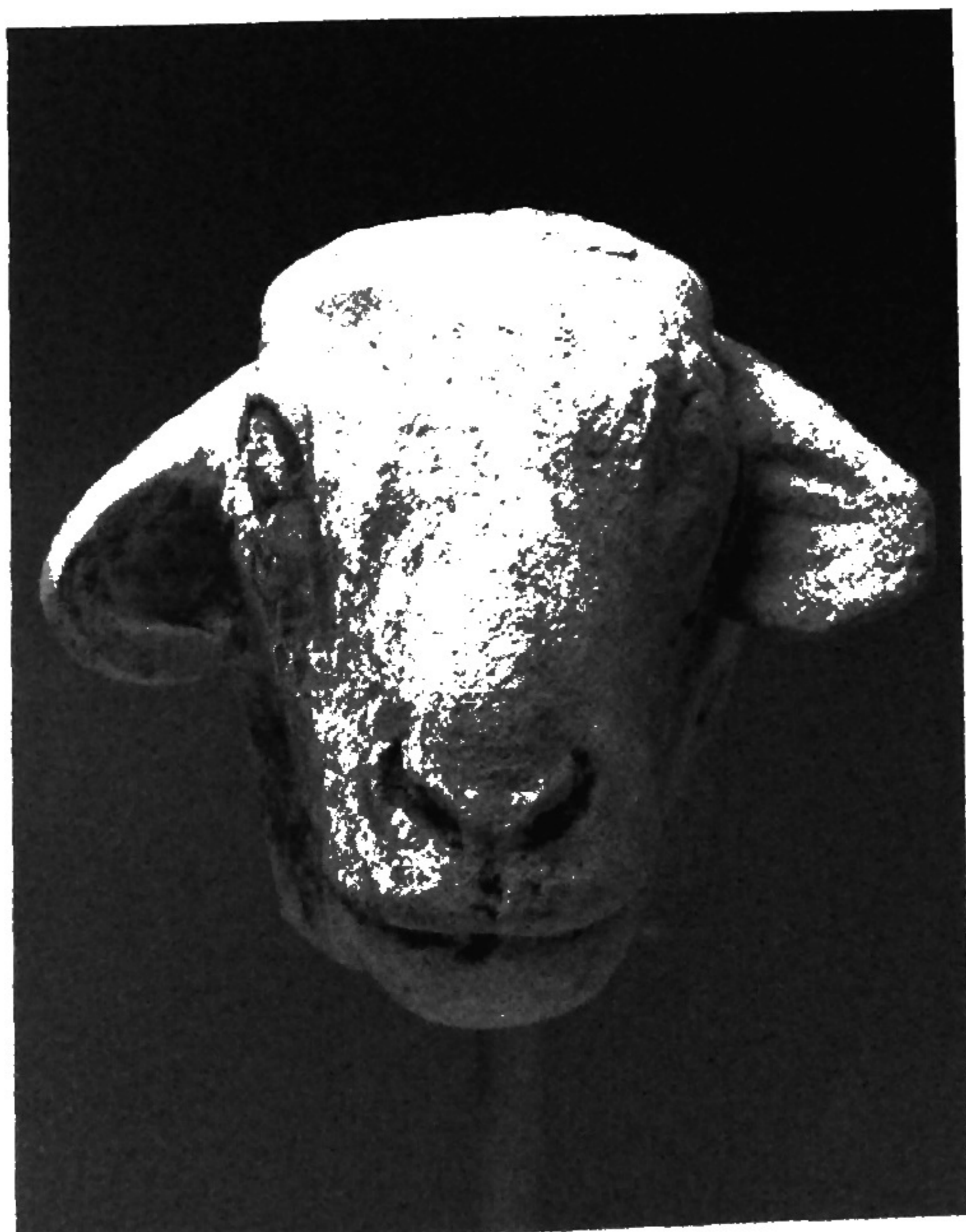
We need to imagine the entire figure, its body intact, and so standing two to three feet high and having about the same length. Curators at the Kimbell interpret it as a symbol of the goddess Dittur, whose son Dumuzi was an important god of shepherding and milk (hence the sheep image), as well as the netherworld.

The ewe's head is worn, so again we need to imagine it as pristine, quite realistic and animate, and appreciate the sympathetic depiction in a society where such animals were essential to

human survival. With its wide mouth, flaring nostrils, and alert ears that seem just to have heard the voice of the shepherd or shepherd god, it invites reverent touching, perhaps patting were it not so sacred. Again we can imagine the coarse warmth of its fleece and its quiet breath. We can imagine the artist working to communicate its "sheepness" and to communicate its meaning by drawing out the nature of the soft stone from which it is made.

Its home would have been a place like the White Temple (see Fig. 1.11). Here it would have been attended by priests and worshiped daily. The National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, which was tragically ransacked during the war in 2003, contained sculpted images of such priests and other worshipful Sumerians (Fig. 1.9). These images are more formally abstract than the ewe, their upper and lower torsos wedge shaped, like the characters of Sumerian cuneiform writing, and their most striking features are extremely prominent eyes and ritually folded, almost wringing

hands, seemingly expressive of a certain anxiety. The Sumerians struggled with a host of insecurities in a land where nature, particularly the weather, vacillated wildly between benevolence and malevolence. They asked the questions we still ask. Where had they come from? How could they exercise some measure of control over their environment? What awaited them after death?



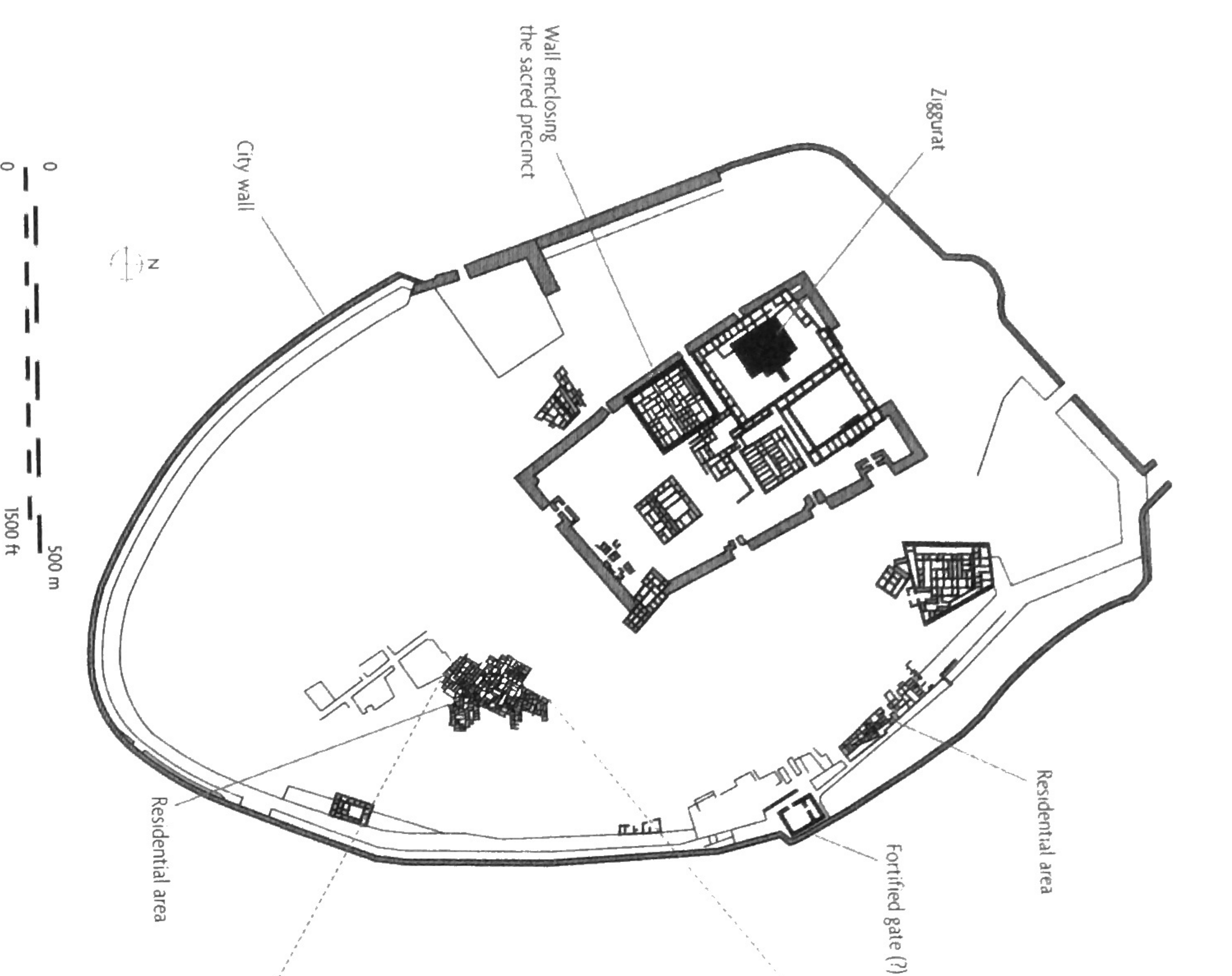
1.8 Head of a ewe in sandstone, ca. 3200 BCE, 5¼ inches by 5½ inches by 6¼ inches.

The creator of this small, stony animal captured both its realistic "sheepness" and that enigmatic sense of the eternal to which great religious art aspires.



1.9 Sumerian statuette, Tell Asmar, ca. 2900–2600 BCE. Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone, approximately 16 inches.

Compare this statuette to the head of the ewe in Fig. 1.8. While the ewe is depicted realistically, the Sumerian worshiper is stylized. The same phenomenon is found in Egyptian art, where lowly subjects were often represented with a high degree of realism, while images of the pharaoh or of a god were abstracted, as if this abstraction might provide some insight into the more imponderable aspects of the human condition.



1.14a City of Ur, Mesopotamia (Iraq), ca. 2100 BCE.

This plan shows the walled precinct with the ziggurat and the enclosing city wall. A portion of the residential section that has been excavated can be seen to the southeast of the city center. Note the maze-like arrangement of the houses, contrasting sharply to the larger open spaces of the administrative and ceremonial center.



1.14b Plan of the residential quarter, Ur, Mesopotamia (Iraq), ca. 2100 BCE.

Surviving foundations indicate houses laid out on right-angled plans with living spaces organized around courtyards (shown hatched), a configuration that promoted urban density while also providing privacy and fresh air to each dwelling. Later versions of this house type can be found in Mohenjo-Daro (in the Indus Valley), Priene (in western Ionia), and in Islamic cities in the Middle East and North and East Africa.

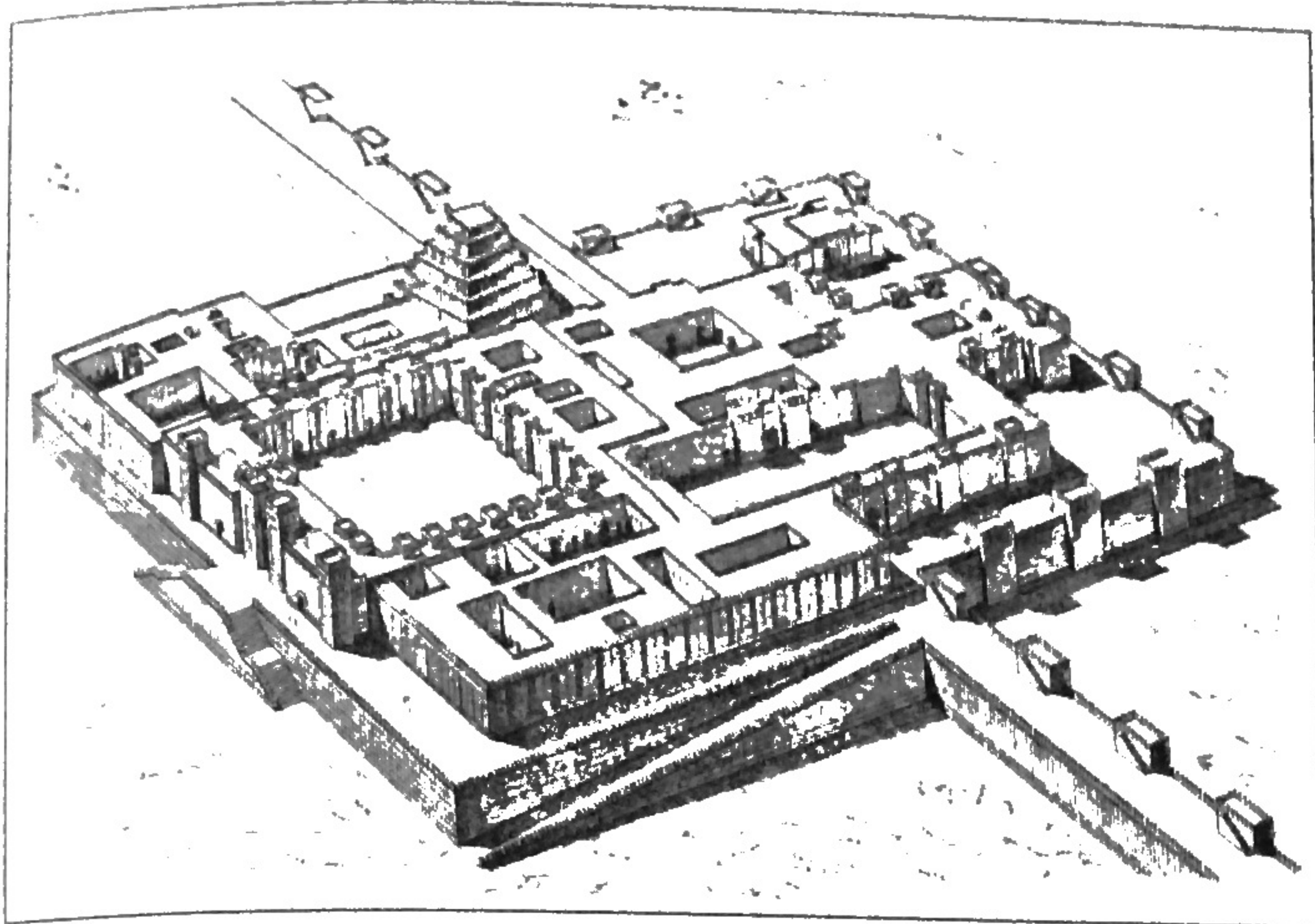
BABYLONIANS, HITTITES, AND ASSYRIANS

Beginning in 1800 BCE, the Amorite dynasty in the city-state of Babylon dominated Mesopotamia, with the most celebrated Babylonian king being Hammurabi (1728–1686). In 1830 BCE, the vigorous Indo-European Hittites overran Babylon and took over northern Mesopotamia. Farther south, the Semitic-speaking Assyrians took control and established capitals sequentially at Calah (present-day Nimrud), Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), and Nineveh (Kuyunjik). Strongly fortified citadels built for each capital reflect the Assyrians' relentless warring as well as the ruthless character of their kings.

Khorsabad, the royal city built by Sargon II in ca. 720 BCE, illustrates the main characteristics of Assyrian architecture and planning (Figs. 1.15a,b). Projecting through one fortified wall of the city, the twenty-five-acre palace occupied a plateau fifty feet above the level of the town. Orthogonal geometry governed buildings in the palace

area, which was organized by means of a series of courts.

Rising on an axis with the ramparts was a seven-stage ziggurat, 143 feet square at the base, representing the cosmic order of the seven planets. The palace's courts were surrounded by rectangular rooms, including the throne room that was reached by a circuitous route, perhaps intended to confuse or frighten visitors and to heighten the sense of power and grandeur. Winged bulls with human heads carved in high relief from thirteen-foot-tall stone blocks guarded the entrances to the palace. Bone and muscle were realistically represented, while feathers, hair, and beard were stylized, forcefully conveying the strength of the monarch: as man, the lord of creation; as eagle, king of the sky; and as bull, fecundator of the herd. Other relief carvings within the palace depicted marching armies burning, killing, and pillaging to emphasize the folly of resisting Assyrian power. Without subtlety, Sargon II had the art and architecture of his palace communicate the overwhelming power residing in his person.

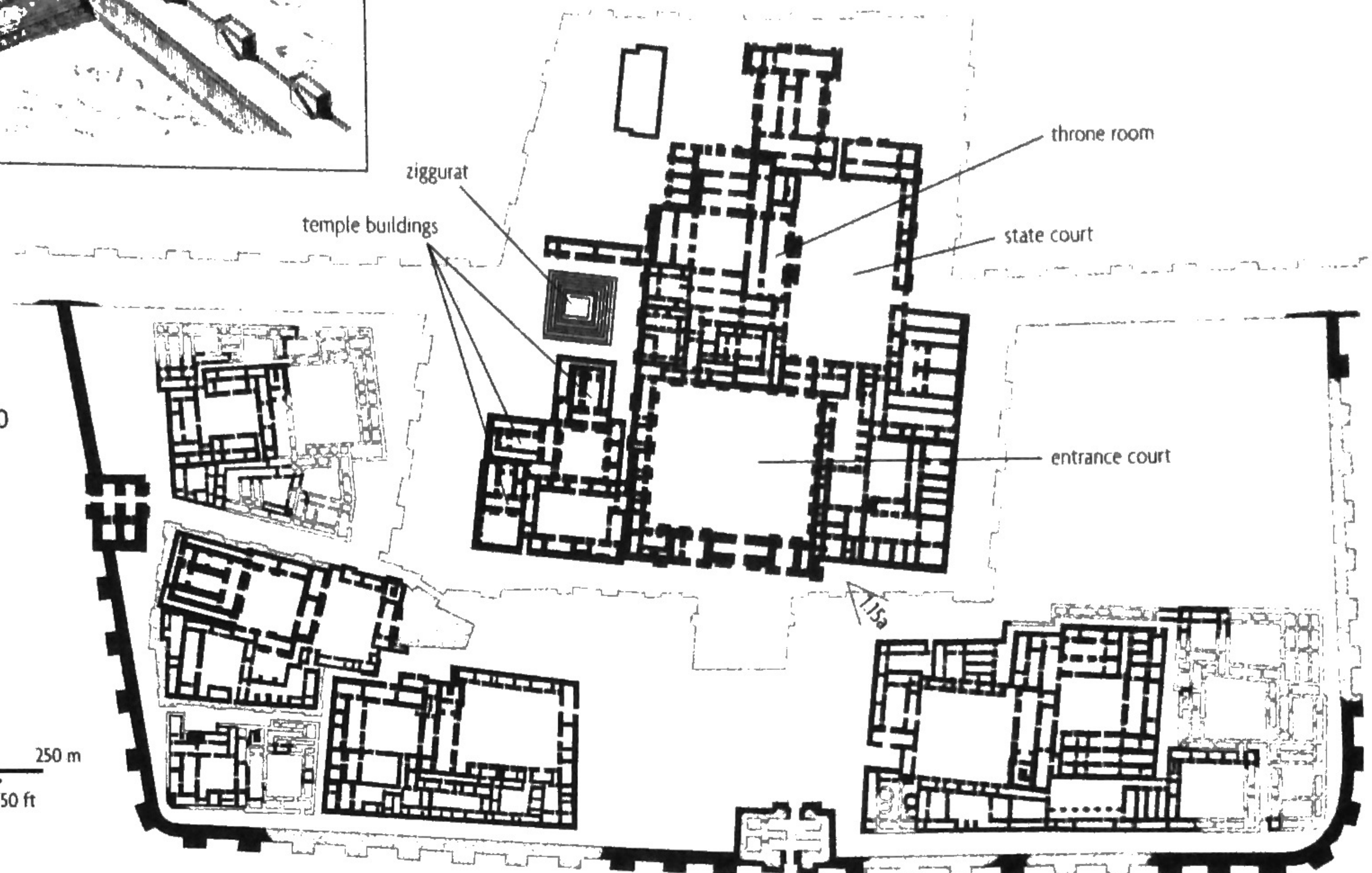


1.15a Reconstruction of the palace, Khorsabad, Assyria (Iraq), ca. 720 BCE.

Fortified walls enclose the palace. The royal audience hall was reached through a sequence of courtyards and smaller chambers. Compare this to the axial layouts typically found in Egyptian architecture.

1.15b Plan of the palace, Khorsabad, Assyria (Iraq), ca. 720 BCE.

The ceremonial route leading from the southeast entry to the throne room is circuitous, involving three changes in direction. The stepped ziggurat is a dwindled version of forms found in earlier cities in Mesopotamia.

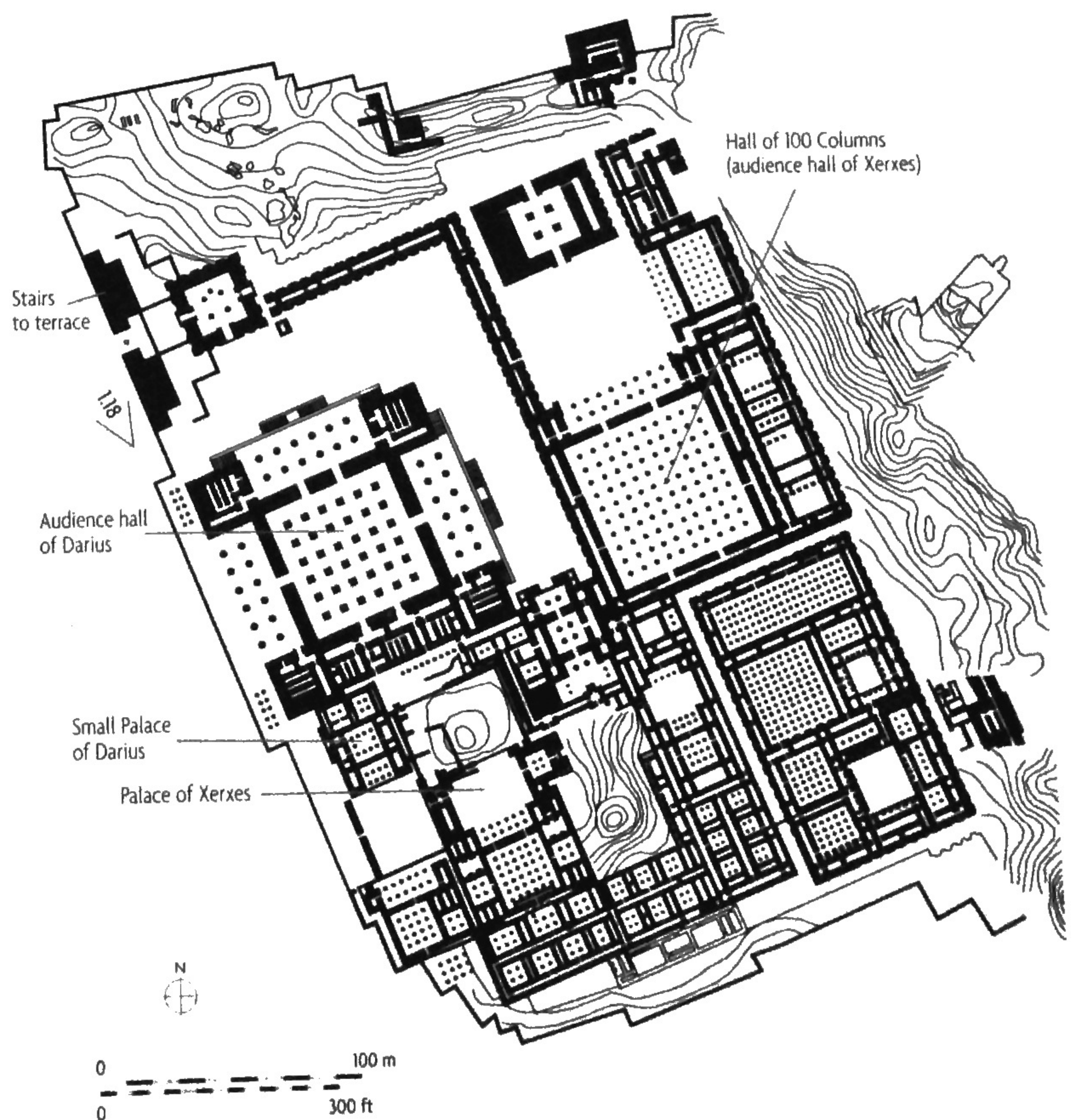


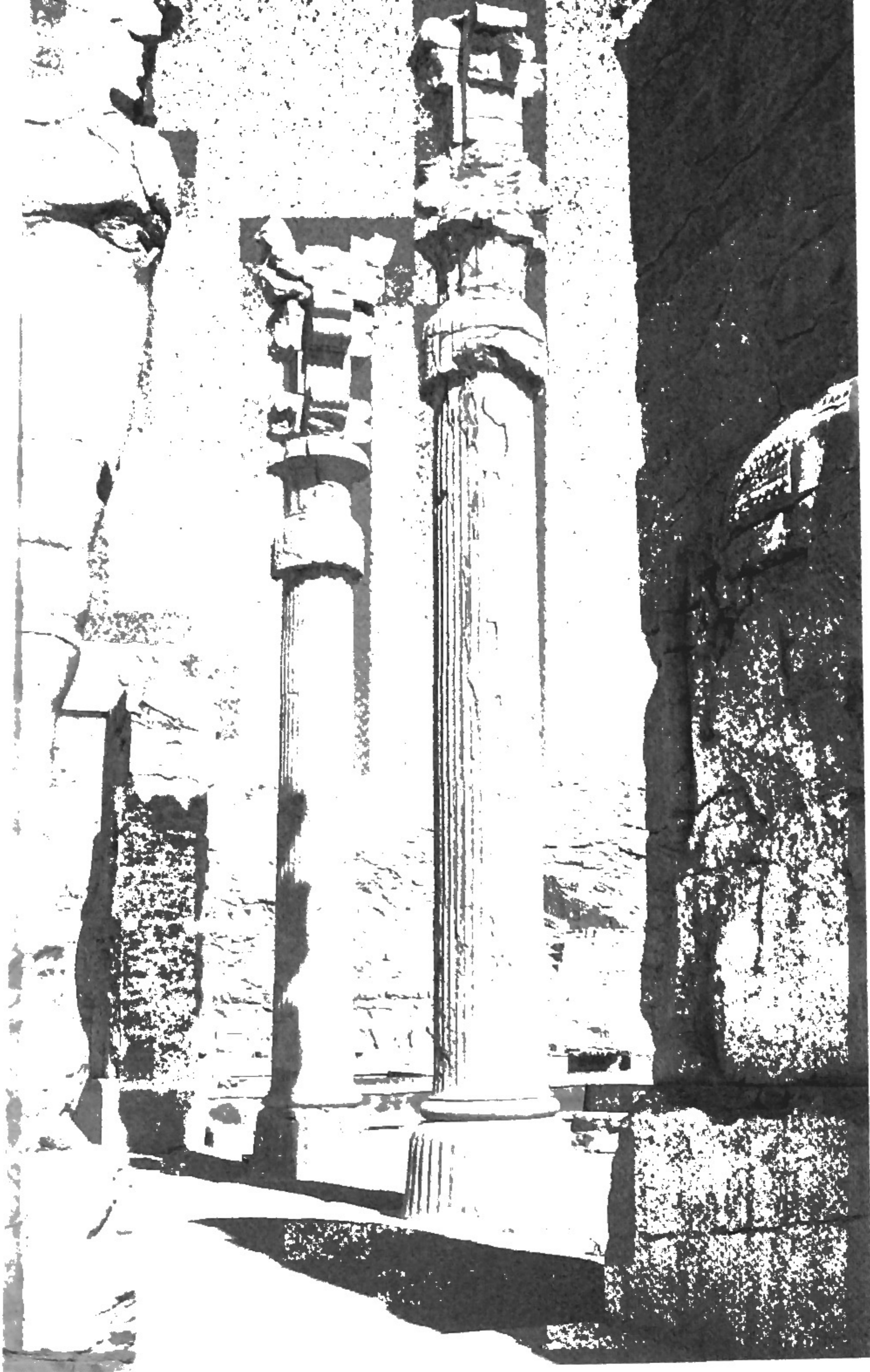
THE PERSIANS

By 539 BCE, the Persian Empire was ruled by Cyrus II. The Persians had previously overthrown the Medes, and they continued to expand outward from their capital at Susa (in present-day Iran) to conquer all of Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and even Egypt by 525 BCE. Within a century they controlled territory from the Danube to the Indus, and from the Jaxartes to the Nile, failing to subjugate only the Greek peninsula. The greatest surviving architectural contribution of the Persians is an impressive ruin at Persepolis (Fig. 1.16), the city founded in 518 BCE by Darius as a ceremonial capital to supplement Susa, the administrative capital, and Pasargadae as centers of court life. Lacking strong artistic traditions of their own, the Persians borrowed freely from the cultures they conquered. At Persepolis, there are echoes of Egyptian temple gates and hypostyle halls, Hittite audience chambers, and Mesopotamian sculpted animal motifs. The great palace, used primarily for ceremonies at the New Year and the

1.16 Plan of the palace, Persepolis, Persia (Iran), ca. 518 BCE.

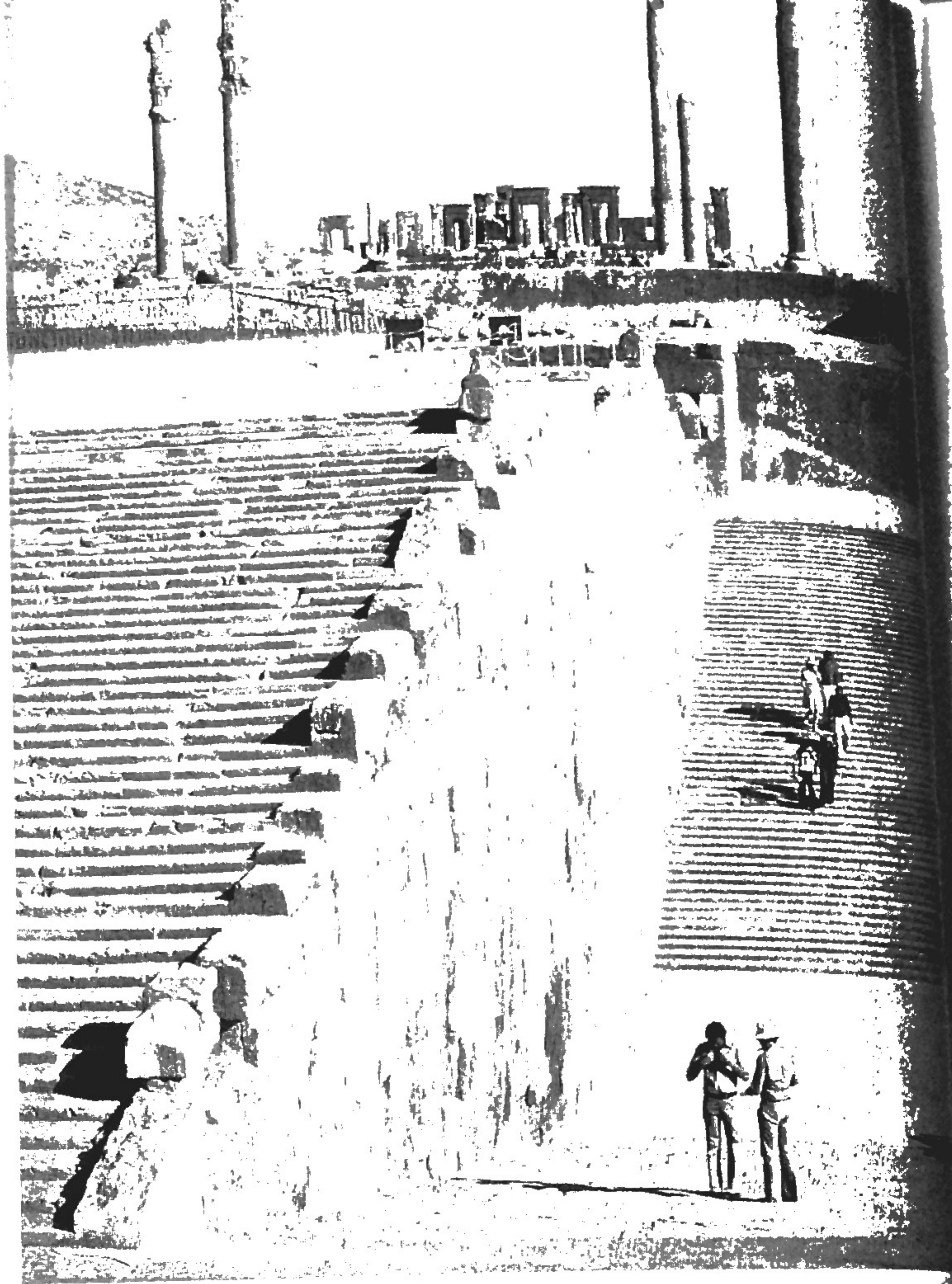
This great complex was created by at least three Persian monarchs as one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. Its ruins reveal architectural influences from other cultures in Mesopotamia, notably the Hittites and Assyrians, as well as the Egyptians.





1.17 View of the ruins of the palace, Persepolis, Persia (Iran), ca. 518 BCE.

Seen here are two columns with intact capitals remaining in the audience hall of Darius. The armies of Alexander the Great sacked and burned Persepolis.



1.18 Staircase to the upper terrace, Persepolis, Persia (Iran), ca. 518 BCE.

Isolated columns from the audience hall of Darius are visible, with doorways from Darius's palace in the background and the palace of Xerxes beyond.

beginning of spring, occupied a terrace 1500 by 900 feet; it contained reception courts, banquet rooms, and audience halls in a loosely organized orthogonal layout. King Xerxes's throne room, known as the Hall of a Hundred Columns and completed by Artaxerxes, was the largest roofed space in the palace, able to contain 10,000 people within its 250-foot square plan. Most of the construction was in stone. Stone **columns** supported wooden roof beams resting on the unique double-headed **capitals** carved in the form of bulls and lions (Fig. 1.17). Access to the terrace was gained via a flight of stairs flanked by relief sculptures representing delegations from twenty-three nations bringing tribute to the sovereign (Fig. 1.18). These stone figures, shown engaged in the same kind of activities as real-life visitors, provided a foretaste of the pageantry and banquets waiting in the palace above.

The conquests of Alexander the Great ended Persian dominance in 331 BCE. Alexander's armies eventually reached India, where Persian craftsmen appear to have accompanied them and then remained. They helped build the capital at Pataliputra (now Patna) for Chandragupta, where the many-columned halls and animal capitals recall

the palace at Persepolis. Persian architecture became one of the major influences for the early stone architecture of India.

ANCIENT EGYPT

Popular culture suffers from no shortage of ancient Egyptian images, be they from epic movies depicting Moses and the pharaohs or classic horror films where Boris Karloff, playing the mummy, wanders around menacingly, doling out ancient justice to naïve archaeologists and greedy tomb raiders. All of this is fun, as is wild speculation about the Egyptian pyramids being built by visitors from outer space using anti-gravity beams, but it threatens to obscure the real accomplishments of everyday men and women in the Nile Valley, albeit those of 5000 years ago. Like the Mesopotamians, the ancient Egyptians produced a great architecture by marshaling the forces of their entire civilization and directing those forces in the service of widely held cultural values. This architecture is much more varied than you may imagine, but it is not only largely under-