

Take One...Stone door pivot and step back in time to Ancient Sumer

ASHMOLEAN

These guidance notes are designed to help you use this object from our collection as a focus for cross-curricular teaching and learning. A visit to the Ashmolean Museum to see your chosen object offers your class the perfect 'learning outside the classroom' opportunity.



This stone door pivot was given to the Ashmolean in 2011 but has only recently been put on display. The cuneiform inscription records the building of a temple for the god Enki by King Ur-Namma of Ur, around 2100 BC. Enki's main temple was at Eridu in southern Iraq. It is possible that the stone was discovered there. After WW1 many British soldiers and officials remained in Iraq. Some people were given or purchased ancient objects and then brought things back to the UK (this is not allowed to happen today). The pivot stone was taken to Jersey in the 1930s and, because it is so heavy, was left in a garden. The owners knew that the stone was important and lent it to the Ashmolean in 1979 when the inscription was read for the first time.

This object is on display in Gallery 19, Ancient Near East on the ground floor. A zoomable image of the object is available on our website. Visit www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources

Discussion points to kick start your investigation of the stone.

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for developing speaking and listening skills with your class.

- Look at the shape of the stone. What do you think the dent in the stone might be for?
- There are markings on the stone. Can you see that some of them are repeated? This is an inscription in Sumerian written in the Cuneiform script. Does it remind you of any other ancient writing you have seen?
- The writing on the stone tells us about the building of a temple, probably at Eridu, in ancient Sumer. A pole would have sat in the dent acting as hinge. If you could step back in time what do you think you might see, hear and smell if you entered the temple?
- The pivot stone is made of basalt. This hard, dark stone probably came from south-west Iran and the Oman Peninsula. Can you work out how far the stone would have travelled to reach the temple site?

During a Take One visit to the Ashmolean children will explore a wide range of objects from our collections that will help them to build knowledge and understanding of Ancient Sumerian life, architecture, technology and beliefs. After your visit, the aim is for your project to be cross-curricular and skills based back at school.

TAKE
ONE...

Inspired by the National Gallery's
Take One Picture programme

The object

The door pivot was probably one of a pair which would have supported the main temple gate. Temple gateways were holy places. When the doors opened, the light of Shamash, god of the sun and justice shone into the temple. The two wooden doors would have been sheathed in precious metal, and because they were holy, they would have been annointed with wine and oils. This might also have lubricated the pivot-stone allowing the gates to open and close smoothly. The inscription records the building of a temple to Enki, god of fresh water and wisdom. It is possible that this object comes from Enki's main temple at Eridu. This idea is supported by the discovery of another stone block with a parallel inscription at Eridu in the late 1940s.



This is a modern impression from a Sumerian cylinder seal. It shows the sun god, Shamash, passing through the gates of heaven at dawn. Rays of light stream from his shoulders as he steps, sword in hand, between two mountains.

Background Information

Sometime around 3000BC, on the flood plain of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Ancient Sumerian culture began to thrive. The area, also known as Mesopotamia (meaning 'between two rivers in Greek) made it a good place to settle. Farming the land with fertile, silt-laden water from the rivers made it possible for cities to flourish. There were several city-states by the third millennium BC; Eridu, Ur, Nippur, Lagash and Kish, but one of the oldest and biggest was Uruk. Around 2800BC it was, perhaps, the largest city in the world, home to as many as 80,000 people. Most cities were walled with a tall ziggurat - a series of high platforms topped by a temple.



The ziggurat at Ur built around 2100BC. The ziggurat is the most distinctive architectural invention of the Ancient Near East. Photo Paul Collins.

Although the land was fertile, there were very few natural resources so the Sumerians had to build trade links to acquire timber, stone and metal by land and by sea. Merchants made links with Anatolia and Lebanon for cedar wood to Iran, Afghanistan and the Indus Valley for gold and gemstones such as carnelian and lapis lazuli.

The gold and Lapis jewellery on the right was found in the Royal Graves at Ur. The jewellery dates from around 2500BC and was worn by one of 73 sacrificial victims buried in the Great Death Pit there.



Around 5000 years ago, the Ancient Sumerians created a writing system - the first in the world. Initially the script was pictographic but it gradually evolved into a set of abstract signs which represented syllables. The script is known as cuneiform and was used for over 3,000 years. The Ashmolean has one of the largest collections of cuneiform inscriptions. The script was later adopted by other cultures to write their languages. In the floodplain, reeds were abundant, as was clay. Scribes used damp clay tablets and reed styli to inscribe texts. The first written records were accounting documents but over time the Sumerians began to write stories, poems, history and legal codes. One of the most famous Ancient Sumerian objects on display in the Ashmolean is the "King List." This large four-sided clay tablet records the names of the ancient rulers of Sumer and the length of their reigns. The King List also mentions a Great Flood. Flooding was common in Southern Mesopotamia. It also includes the name of King Gilgamesh who is known from other tablets as a hero who tried to find out why people die. One female ruler is also recorded. Ku-bau, a former innkeeper who ruled in Kish. She is however something of a mysterious, legendary individual.



The king list is on display in Gallery 19, Ancient Near East.

As well as inventing schools, sailing boats, the wheel and writing, another Ancient Sumerian invention is still in use today. They were skilled mathematicians and used base sixty. The sixty-second minute and sixty-minute hour was invented in Ancient Sumer. In geometry they divided a circle into 360 degrees. So, although we use a decimal system in the main, we have kept some aspects of Ancient Sumerian mathematics.

Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 and KS2 curriculum

You can use this object as the starting point for developing pupils' critical and creative thinking as well as their learning across the curriculum. You may want to consider possible 'lines of enquiry' as a first step in your cross-curricular planning. Choosing a line of enquiry area may help you to build strong links between curriculum areas. After using strategies to help children engage with the object and using questions to facilitate dialogue about the object, you can work with the children to develop lines of enquiry that will interest them.

Here are a few suggestions of possible 'lines of enquiry' using these objects:

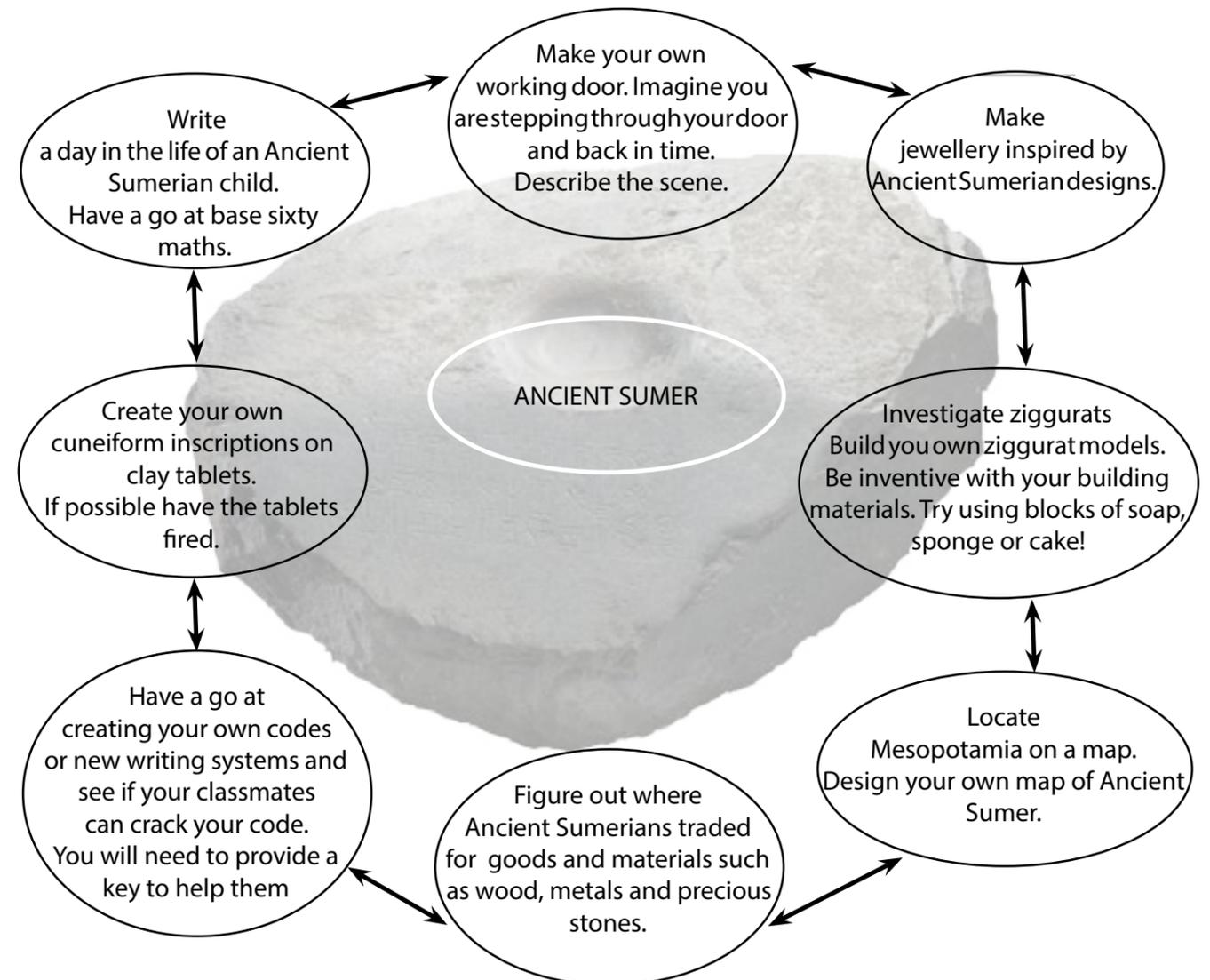
- Ancient Sumer
- Architecture
- Maths, geometry, time and measurement
- Cracking codes and writing around the world

Using one or more line of enquiry as your starting point, consider how you can work in a number of curriculum areas to build strong and effective cross-curricular links.

Using Ancient Sumer as a line of enquiry

Here are a few ideas of how you can develop a range of learning opportunities to engage pupils with this line of enquiry. Each activity can link with the others to build on pupils' learning across the chosen theme.

Using the door pivot as your starting point





This limestone votive plaque shows a temple doorway flanked by posts with rings and, below, a procession of a sheep and a man holding a large cup, 2600-2500 BC, possibly Cutha, Iraq

Take One...Inspires

Take One... encourages teachers to use an object, painting or other resource, imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Work in many curriculum areas can be inspired by using a single object as a starting point. The challenge is for teachers to use objects to develop culturally enriching, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.

Tips for introducing objects to a class

- Display an image of the object in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the object. Once the pupils' comments and questions have been gathered a class discussion can follow on.
- Cover an object and allow the children to feel it. Can they work out what it is without seeing it?
- Show the object to the class for a minute or two. Remove the object and see what they can remember.
- Introduce the object to the whole class in a question and answer session designed to develop the pupils' speaking and listening skills as outlined on page one.
- Work in pairs sitting back to back. One child describes the object and the other draws.



This Ancient Sumerian votive figure was found by soldiers digging trenches in WW1. The man is wearing a fleece skirt. His left eye retains an inlay of mother-of-pearl, while a headdress was originally fitted into the holes in the top of his head. 2500-2400 BC, Istabalat, Iraq.

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"Thank you for a wonderful and stimulating day at the Ashmolean. I came away buzzing, full of ideas." Feedback after a recent Take One...INSET



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