

A MESS IN MESOPOTAMIA

You are a young person from the ancient Sumerian city-state of Lagash. It is what people from your time period would call the month of April, 2100 B.C.. You are proud to be a part of a mighty city-state, such as Lagash. After all, there are nearly 20,000 people living within its high walls. It is early morning, and you awaken to the sound of onagers braying. Onagers are animals much like donkeys. You throw your woolen blanket to the floor of your mud brick room. You smell barley cakes baking in a clay oven. Mmmm! Mom must be making breakfast.

Do you want to:

A) Go eat

B) Go for a walk

A) You are too hungry to wait, so you run outside to partake of the morning meal. Your mother is pulling hot barley cakes out of the clay oven. Your mouth is watering. You pick up one of the cakes and cram it into your mouth, nearly burning your fingers. Mmmmm, delicious! Your father strolls in off the narrow street after a long morning of trading. You want to be a merchant like your father some day. It seems like an exciting lifestyle. Traveling to different city-states, trading expensive gems and metals. After all, you would be a member of the second social class. After you finish your second cake, your father unexpectedly asks you if you would be interested in joining him when he travels to the exciting city of Ur on a trading mission from your ensi or priest-ruler. The ensi of Lagash, your city-state, is known as Gudea, a wise and noble ruler. Your father awaits your decision.

Do you:

C) Accept his offer

D) Decline his offer

B) You decide to take a short walk before breakfast. You really slept in late today. You see the merchants setting up their tents along the narrow streets. As you walk, you look at the beautiful objects for sale under each tent. Shiny golden bracelets, baskets dyed in various colors, and brilliant mosaics. You see a wealthy merchant trading with a farmer. The merchant breaks open a clay ball called a bulla. Inside the bulla you see several clay tokens representing the items traded. A group of slaves is led down the street by an overseer. They carry shovels and picks of wood and stone. An old man sits quietly on the side of the street.

Do you:

E) Follow the slaves

F) Look for something to eat

C) You would love to go the fabulous city of Ur! You've heard many stories about this city-state. The enormous ziggurat to the god of the moon, Nanna-sin is supposed to be a spectacular sight. The wealthy, upper social level of the city-state, wears shiny, expensive jewelry. You eagerly accept the offer from your father. Perhaps this would even be a good opportunity to see exactly what a merchant does. You and your father pack a few things into a cart, along with the gems, and precious metals for trade in the city of Ur. You are proud of the fact that your civilization has invented the wheel, after all, it would be difficult to carry all of these goods over land without a wheeled cart. You immediately begin your journey. Your father tells you that you must be on the lookout for bands of thieves that roam the desert wastelands. This makes you a little nervous, but you both press on. The sun grows unbearably hot, so you wrap your woolen garment around your head and face to shield you from the sun's rays. After a while, you see a cool oasis.

Do you?

G) Stop for a drink of water

H) Continue toward the city of Ur

D) You decide to decline his offer. It would be fun, you think to yourself, but not today. Soon after your father leaves, you see a group of slaves carrying shovels and picks. They are obviously returning from a hard morning of digging irrigation canals.

GO TO E

E) You decide to follow the slaves. You walk through narrow streets, passing scribes, merchants, laborers, and many, many goats. You try to keep up with the slaves, but a shepherd is herding his goats through the streets, blocking your path. The smell of manure, and the hot breath of the goats mingle to create a ghastly odor. The shepherd shoves you saying, "Out of my way, little one." Taken off guard, you slip on a pile of manure, and fall to the ground. This is not your day. "AWicked Udu must be following me!", you think out loud to your self. AWicked Udu was believed to be a Sumerian demon responsible for bad luck. Sometime after the sheep pass, a stray dog wanders your way, hoping to get some food. The dog stands boldly in the middle of your path. He snarls ferociously.

Do you?

I) Try to befriend it

J) Try to fight it off

F) You are very hungry, so you decide to look for something to eat. You'll have to follow your nose. After walking for what seems like 30 minutes, you come the edge where the shade meets the white hot desert. You see, off in the distance, another cool oasis, with fruit, fruit even tastier than figs or dates. So you walk into the desert, licking your lips, thinking of that spectacular fruit. The hot sand burns the sides of your sandaled feet, but you press on. The oasis must only be a few hundred cubits away. A cubit is the approximate distance from your wrist to your elbow. You are feeling very light-headed, but you know that the oasis is not far away now. You start to stagger, wondering why the oasis and the delicious fruit is still as far away as it was when you started. Suddenly, fear grabs you as you begin to realize that you have been following a mirage! You spin around to search for your place of origin, your father, the old man, anybody! You fall to the hot sand, dizzy, thirsty, and scared. You see shadows moving in circles around you, or are you seeing spots? Suddenly, you feel a piercing pain in your back! A large vulture has landed on your back, tearing at your woolen clothing. You barely have the strength to fight it off. Another lands near your head, and begins pecking at your eyes. The last sound you hear is the frenzied squawking of vultures, having you for dinner.

THE END

G) You must have fallen asleep. You awaken to the blinding white light of the desert. However, you hear the trickling of water falling lightly into a pool. You sit up and realize that you are entering an oasis, an area in a desert that has plantlife and tree growth due to an underground source of water. Your father is still with you. He says, "I am taking you to the city-state of Ur to learn how to trade. But, we will rest here for a while." You slurp at the refreshing spring water bubbling up from the ground. The trees around you provide shade from the blistering sun of Mesopotamia. Your father plucks some wild figs and dates for lunch. Suddenly, you notice that you are not alone. An old man, obviously a traveler from one of the city-states, sits quietly under a date palm. He turns to you and says, "I have a myth to tell you, young one. An epic of epics!"

Do you?

K) Listen to his tale

F) Look around the oasis

H) You continue your journey. The sun beats down unmercifully upon your back and shoulders. You begin to feel light headed and see stars. "Water.", you think to yourself. "I need water." You fall out of your cart, dizzy from dehydration. The onager brays and staggers as well. You fall to the hot sand, dizzy, thirsty, and scared. You see shadows moving in circles around you, or are you seeing spots? Suddenly, you feel a piercing pain in your back! A large vulture has landed on your back, tearing at your woolen clothing. You barely have the strength to fight it off. Another lands near your head, and begins pecking at your eyes. The last sound you hear is the frenzied squawking of vultures, having you for dinner.

THE END

I) You see a stale bit of bread lying on the side of the street. You decide to slowly pick it up and hand it to the ravenous dog. The dog looks suspicious, and carefully sniffs at the moldy bread in your outstretched hand. He quickly snaps up the bread in one hungry mouthful. You gently pat the top of its head. It seems a little more friendly now, and sits down by your feet, licking its chops. Suddenly, you hear the, "Baaaahhhh!", of sheep, and see the herd coming your way again. "Oh no, not this again!", you cry. The smell, the heat, and . . . the shepherd. "I told you, OUT OF MY WAY!!!". The shepherd reaches out his hands toward your neck, but before he can make his move, the dog leaps up and bites his rear end! "AAAAHHHH!!!" cries the shepherd as he runs for his life. You and the stray dog walk slowly down a narrow street in the Sumerian city of Lagash. As you walk, you think to yourself how fun it will be to have a pet, if your mother lets you keep it.

THE END

J) You decide to fight for your life. If this dog wants you for his lunch, he's going to have to work for it!

(Flip a coin. Have the students pick heads or tails. If they win the coin toss, they win the fight, if not, they lose.)

WIN) You pick up two stones from the street. You try to aim the stone at the snarling dog, but your hands are trembling. You throw the stone, but it lands harmlessly behind the now very angry animal. The second stone is released, flies through the air, and whacks the mangy mutt right on the snout! With a yelp, the dog retreats to a dark alley with its tail between its legs. Wheew! You were fortunate this time.

THE END

LOSE) You pick up a clump of brick lying along the side of the street. You stretch back your hand to fire it at the ferocious stray. Too late! The animal leaps upon you, knocking you to the ground. You try to breath, but your lungs fail you. The dog bites your shoulder, leaving foaming bite marks. The savage beast rears up for its final bite, aimed right at your neck. Whack! "Yeeeeelp!", cries the dog. Just as the dog lowers its head to make the kill, it is struck by a passerby carrying a staff. As you look up, you realize that it is your father. You pass out.

GO TO G

K) You decide to sit and listen to the myth. The old man takes a deep breath and begins. He tells you an epic, a long poem about a hero named Gilgamesh. He explains how Gilgamesh was the strongest king in all of Sumer. He was the king of Uruk. No one challenged him until one day he was told of a powerful wildman living in the forests, named Enkidu. The mighty king wrestled the wildman, but neither man was stronger.

They then became the best of friends and went on many adventures. The old man then pauses and points to a large flat stone. "Lift it.", he says.

Do you?

L) Lift the stone

M) Suspect a trap and leave

L) You walk over to the stone. Slowly, you lift the large rock and peer underneath. You see something wrapped in a felt cloth. As you unravel the cloth you find a bronze dagger and a small bag of roasted wheat kernels. The old man exclaims, "These are for you on your journey to the city-state of Ur. The desert is dangerous. Bands of thieves, and fierce nomads wander through it. May Utu, the sun-god be merciful as you cross his land. " You hear your father calling for you, and thank the old man for his gifts. You and your father harness the onagers and start on your way. It is late in the day, and the sun begins to set. The temperature drops dramatically. You pull your woolen cloak around your shoulders, thankful that you remembered to bring it. Voices? Suddenly, you think you hear voices. Then silence. You feel a little uneasy. Minutes go by like hours. "Yaaaarrraaaahhh" Thieves!! Your heart pounds as you see three men, faces wrapped, running at your cart. They wave their clubs wildly in the air.

Do you?

N) Fight

O) Flee

M) You suspect that the old man might be trying to trick you. "Hah!", you exclaim. "I'm smarter than that." "That old man was probably going to knock me out, and steal my belongings.", you think to yourself. You and your father harness the onagers and start on your way. It is late in the day, and the sun begins to set. The temperature drops dramatically. You pull your woolen cloak around your shoulders, thankful that you remembered to bring it. Voices? Suddenly, you think you hear voices. Then silence. You feel a little uneasy. Minutes go by like hours. "Yaaaarrraaaahhh!" Thieves!! Your heart pounds as you see three men, faces wrapped, running at your cart. They wave their clubs wildly in the air.

Do you?

P) Fight O) Run

N) (Flip a coin and have students call heads or tails. If the call is made correctly, read WIN, if not, then LOSE.)

WIN) The first thief charges you, pulling you out of the cart. The onager brays frantically. You pull out your bronze dagger and plunge it into the stomach of the first thief. Warm blood sprays you as the thief screams in pain. He runs off into the desert night clutching his belly. The second thief swings his club at your father, but your father blocks his blow with his staff. Your father then wrestles the bandit to the ground. As the third thief rushes to aid his grappling comrade, you grab his ankle, tripping him to the ground. He groans in agony, but manages to bring the club down squarely on your fingertips! "Aaahhh!", you yell. The second thief runs into the night with your father following close behind. The third thief turns to face you. Bravely, you pull out your the bronze dagger. He lunges at you, but you jump out of the way just in time. You jab the blade deep into his back. The thief drops to the ground. Suddenly, it is quiet, too quiet. You call out for your father, but don't hear a sound.

GO TO O

LOSE) You decide to fight for your life. You wind up and swing your bronze dagger at the first thief. It cuts his shoulder, but not deep enough. He looks very angry now. He raises his club high in the air, and brings it down with a THUD! You see a blinding white light, feel a sharp pain and collapse. The last sight you see before you descend to the underworld is the group of thieves throwing your belongings from your cart.

THE END

O) You flick the reins of the onager, urging it to pull your cart faster. You flee the scene, terrified by what has just happened. You search for your father, but he is nowhere in sight. You wonder if he is all right. The desert is quiet again, only an occasional howl, but no thieves. You decide that the best course of action is to head for the city-state of Ur yourself, to trade the items in place of your father. You travel on through the night and into the morning. The sun rises hot and brilliant over the desert plain. Soon you come to the bank of the mighty Euphrates River. There you pay a ferryman 10 dried figs in exchange for passage in a reed boat across the river. The boat is covered in a goat hide to keep the water out. The cart is left on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, while the onager is tied to the boat and encouraged to swim behind. Water fowl swoop and soar looking for fish. Finally, you reach the western bank of the river. As the ferryman docks the boat, you see the large man made lakes and dams used to control the unpredictable flooding of the Euphrates. You hop on the back of the now soaking wet onager and secure your packs of goods to the sides. You continue your hot, desert journey toward the mighty city of Ur. Along the way you see miles upon miles of irrigation canals. You decide to follow them, after all, they must lead to the city-state. You pass rows of barley and wheat, their roots nourished by the trickles of water from the smaller canals. Like the rising of the sun in the east appear the mighty walls of Ur. Guards roam the tops of the walls, watching for invading armies from other city-states. You feel a little nervous, but proceed.

Do you?

Q) Enter the main gate

R) Look around the outside of the city first

P) You decide to fight for your life. You wind up and swing your fist at the first thief. It lands on his shoulder. He looks very angry now. He raises his club high in the air, and brings it down with a THUD! You see a blinding white light, feel a sharp pain and collapse. The last sight you see before you descend to the underworld is the group of thieves throwing your belongings from your cart.

THE END

Q) You decide to enter through the main gates, after all, you are not an invader. You tie your onager to a post under the shade of the eastern wall. Carrying your goods, you stride toward the guarded main gate, trying to look confident. The soldiers at the gate are dressed in woolen cloaks dyed red, and carry bronze-tipped spears. Each one also wears a bronze helmet. You step into a long line of people waiting to enter the great city-state. Some carry sacrifices of grain and barley beer for the moon-god of Ur, Nanna-Sin. You have heard about the magnificent ziggurat to this powerful deity of Ur. It is very hot and many people obviously haven't washed in weeks. After several hours, it is your turn to enter the city. A guard says, "Halt! Why do you enter the city-state of our great king Ur-Nammu and our great god Nanna-Sin?" You tremble as you try to explain that you are on a trading mission from the city-state of Lagash. Since there is no war at the moment with Lagash, the guard grants you passage through the gate. You are now in the Court of Nanna. People move back and forth like bees in a beehive. You see people from all three of the social levels, Priests, soldiers, scribes, merchants, farmers, teachers, and of course slaves captured from other city-states during times of war.

Do you?

S) trade your goods

T) Walk toward the great ziggurat of Ur

R) You are a little wary of entering the city-state through the main gate. Maybe there is another entrance somewhere else. You see camels and onagers being led by their owners. People and animals alike carry loads of food, wool, wood, copper and tin. You see what look like mounds jutting from the dry ground. It is late afternoon and the sun-god Utu is making the shadows long. An old traveler notices your staring, and says, "Those are the ancient Royal Tombs. Stay far away from them, there is a queen's curse upon those graves if the bones are disturbed."

Do you?

U) Enter the tombs

V) Look for a secret entrance into the city

S) You see a friendly looking merchant stacking bullae in the shelves of his store. Modern people would think that a bulla looks like a football made out of clay. A bulla was hollow and used to store tokens used in trade. When you approach the merchant to trade your goods, he gives you an odd look. "Aren't you a little young to be a merchant?", he asks. You try to explain, but you can't seem to get the words out. "No matter, ", he says, "If you have the goods, I will conduct our trade.". His scribe picks up a bulla from the back shelves and reads the cuneiform writing, informing him of your father's previous deal. Only scribes could read in ancient Sumer, because the writing system was so complicated. You hand him the package of goods, which he opens, revealing a quantity of copper ore. He hands you a beautiful necklace of the water-god Enki. "I would hide that necklace if I were you.", he suggests with a grin.

Do you?

W) Hide the necklace

X) Wear the necklace

T) The narrow streets are becoming noisy with the New Year's festivities. The Sumerians celebrate the new year in what people in your time would call the month of April. Statues of Inanna, the goddess of love and fertility are paraded throughout the streets. You remember your father telling you that the New Year belongs to Inanna. "Wow," , you say out loud, "there must be hundreds of different gods and goddesses.". "Over three thousand, actually.", someone behind you says. It's the old traveler! "Young one, I have not told you my identity. I am Ori, a priest of this great city-state of Ur. I have wandered through many lands, but have now returned." As the two of you walk through the busy streets, Ori tells you stories of his travels, as well as many myths. He tells you tales of an ancient paradise known as Dilmun, and a legendary hero called Utnapishtim, who survived a great flood. As night begins to fall, Ori leads you through the great Court of Nanna to the mighty Ziggurat of Ur. Colorful mosaics adorn the enormous mud brick structure. Ori leads you up the endless stairway to the top of the ziggurat. You are a little nervous, because you have never been up so high. As the moon rises high in the night sky, and the sound of new year's celebrations echo below, you feel a great sense of peace. Ori, sensing your peace, declares, "This is why our shrine to the moon god Nanna-Sin is up high. You can think and pray without disturbance from below." Even though Ori is a member of the top social level, and you only belong to the second, you feel that the two of you could become friends.

THE END

U) The old man's comments only prick your curiosity. You walk toward the quiet tombs. As you approach, you can hear your heart pounding, and you feel the hair stand up on the back of your neck. You enter the dark passageway leading down to the graves

below. Just enough light shines through the opening to guide your footsteps. Each footstep echoes through the vast tombs. You see a chamber up ahead to the left.

Do you?

Y) Enter the chamber on the left

Z) Continue down the dark passageway

V) You walk around the city walls, searching for another way into the mighty city of Ur. The evening shadows stretch far across the dry, flat land. There are ways into the city, but they are all guarded, and those guards don't look too friendly. You see a cluster of mounds. You are on the opposite side of the Royal Tombs. Suddenly, the sand beneath your feet seems strange and unstable. Before you can react, the ground gives way, and you are sucked down into the sand below! You gasp for air, but only find sand. The weight is unbearable, and you feel the life being crushed out of your body. The coarse grains scratch your skin as you continue to sink further down. Thud! With a crash you land in a dark room. "I am one of the dead!", you cry aloud. "This is the dark underworld, where the dead eat dust and clay!" You look around the room, still coughing up sand.

GO TO Y

W) You decide to take the advice of the merchant and you quickly tuck the necklace into your woolen garment. The narrow streets are becoming noisy with the New Year's festivities. The Sumerians celebrate the new year in what people in your time would call the month of April. Statues of the Inanna, the goddess of love and fertility are paraded throughout the streets. You remember your father telling you that the New Year belongs to Inanna. "Wow,", you say out loud, "there must be hundreds of different gods and goddesses.". "Over three thousand, actually.", someone behind you says. It's the old traveler! "Young one, I have not told you my identity. I am Ori, a priest of this great city-state of Ur. I have wandered through many lands, but have now returned." As the two of you walk through the busy streets, Ori tells you stories of his travels, as well as many myths. He tells you tales of an ancient paradise known as Dilmun, and a legendary hero called Utnapishtim, who survived a great flood. As night begins to fall, Ori leads you through the great Court of Nanna to the mighty Ziggurat of Ur. Colorful mosaics adorn the enormous mud brick structure. Ori leads you up the endless stairway to the top of the ziggurat. You are a little nervous, because you have never been up so high. As the moon rises high in the night sky, and the sound of new year's celebrations echo below, you feel a great sense of peace. Ori, sensing your peace, declares, "This is why our shrine to the moon god Nanna-Sin is up high. You can think and pray without disturbance from below." Even though Ori is a member of the top social level, and you only belong to the second, you feel that the two of you could become friends.

THE END

X) You decide to wear the necklace. After all, it is so beautiful, and it has a picture of the water-god Enki on it, it must be a good luck charm. You make your way through the crowded streets into the court of Nanna. Two men wearing woolen headdresses and kilts, come strolling toward you. "Nice necklace.", says the shorter one, "May I see it.". You try to ignore his comments. "I'm curious, ", says the taller one, "How could you afford a necklace like that. It should be worn by a lugal (Sumerian king)?". "Maybe he stole it.", says the short scruffy one. "Let's steal it back!" They run after you.

Do you?

AA) Run

BB) Fight

If the students pick BB, flip a coin. If the students pick the right side, then read WIN. If not then LOSE.

Y) The room is very dark. As your eyes adjust to the lack of light, you begin to see several objects in the corners of the room. You walk carefully toward a long flat object. As your eyes begin to focus you realize that what you are looking at is a skeleton. Judging by the jewelry, it is probably a female skeleton, maybe even a queen. Lying near to her are many other skeletons, male and female. By the way they are dressed, you guess that they were probably her servants. "How did they die?", you wonder aloud. "It was suicide.", a voice answers you from the shadows. You spin around. It's your father! He's alive! "These servants were required to die along with their queen, so each one drank poison." "How did you survive?!", you ask, "I thought you were dead or lost." "An old traveler brought me to the city of Ur, and I knew that you would be here.", he answers. "Let's leave the dead alone, and carry on the activities of the living. We have goods to trade." The two of you climb through a narrow passageway leading up into the fresh air. Ur awaits!

THE END

Z) You decide to investigate the tunnel up ahead of you. Your steps echo through the dusty air. Suddenly, you hear voices! You wonder if you are not alone down here. You see the glimmer of torch light on the tomb walls. As you round the corner, you see two men wearing woolen kilts and head coverings. One man is carrying a valuable game board made out of ivory and lapis lazuli. The other carries a golden dagger and many necklaces, bracelets, and other items made of gold. These men must be grave robbers! Your heart pounds in terror as the thought enters your mind. You stay completely still, trying not to breath too loud. The men argue over who will carry a priceless mosaic standard. The mosaic depicts the three main social levels in the city of Ur. Accidentally, you knock a bit of stone free and it bounces down the tunnel to where the men are. They look up! One draws the golden dagger, and the other picks up a large rock. The man with the dagger lunges at you, but misses and stabs the wall. You grab a torch from the wall and wallop the grave robber over the head. He drops to the ground with a

"Yelp!". You stumble and slip. As you look up you see the second grave robber standing above you. "You really shouldn't be in here he says. They say that there is a curse on this place. Well, that doesn't matter to you now does it?", he exclaims. With that he brings the rock down on the top of your head with full force. Over four thousand years later, in 1927, a British archaeologist named Sir Leonard Woolley discovers your bones along with many priceless artifacts in the ruins of the Royal Tombs of Ur in southern Iraq.

THE END

AA) You run as fast as you can toward the enormous ziggurat. The two thieves are close behind. You are starting to tire. You trip and fall. Just as the thieves close in, you hear a familiar voice cry, "There they are!!". Three armed guards rush in and apprehend the two men. The familiar voice was your father's! "You're alive!", you shout. Your father tells you how an old traveler found him in the desert and brought him here. Apparently, these two men have been searching for that necklace for years and were the same thieves that attacked you in the desert. "Let's go back home to Lagash!", you both say.

THE END

(A MESS IN MESOPOTAMIA CONTINUED)

BB) You decide to fight these two bandits.

WIN) You duck as the taller one tries to tackle you. He flies full speed into a mud brick wall and drops to the ground unconscious. The smaller one slowly steps toward you with a club in hand. You yell for help, but no one can hear you because of the noise of new year's celebrations. Quickly, you notice that the taller one was carrying a sword. You roll across the alley and grab the sword. Just as you do, the smaller thief lunges at you. You raise the sword just in time. The blade disappears in the bandit's stomach. With a blood curdling yell, the man drops to the ground, dead. Shaken, you collect yourself, and walk back down the narrow streets. A group of armed guards passes by, you wave and grab their attention. As they listen, you relate your story. They return with you to the site of the attack. As you find out later you are a hero, because the two men were wanted for robbing the Royal Tombs. It's time for you to head back to Lagash.

THE END

LOSE) As the taller one rushes to tackle you, you duck down. He stops, and laughs at your feeble attempt. He picks you up by the neck and throws you against the brick wall. You pick up a solid rock and throw it with all your might at the two thieves. It hits the smaller one on the shoulder. "Ahhh!", he cries, "Now you're done for!" The taller one unsheathes his sword and you become history. Over four thousand years later, in 1927, an British archaeologist named Sir Leonard Woolley discovers the ruins of the lost city of Ur, along with your skeletal remains.

THE END

copyright Jay D'Ambrosio 1998

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Directions: After reading the adventure, discuss the questions below with the listeners.

1. Describe the streets in a typical Sumerian city-state.
2. Which city-state in ancient Sumer was probably one of the most important? Why do you think this was this so?
3. What was the climate of ancient Mesopotamia like? How did that affect the way people lived?
4. Name two major rivers of Mesopotamia. Why did the people of this land depend on these rivers for survival?
5. What was the purpose of the ziggurat? Why do you think it was so high above the city-state?

copyright Jay D'Ambrosio 1998