Books

A Human History of Ancient Mesopotamia

In *Between Two Rivers*, Oxford historian Moudhy Al-Rashid ’05CC finds relatable slices of life in five-thousand-year-old clay tablets.

By
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|
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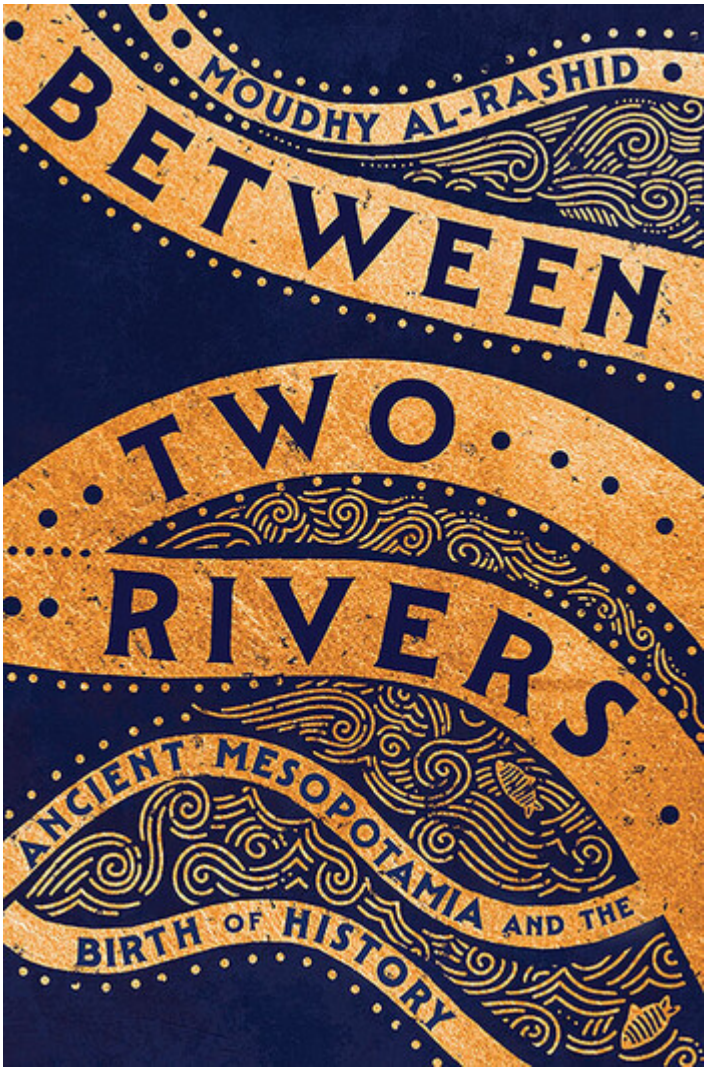
Moudhy Al-Rashid (David Lancaster)

For those who associate Mesopotamia with slogging through two weeks' worth of dry-as-dust chapters from a sixth-grade history textbook, *Between Two Rivers: Ancient Mesopotamia and the Birth of History*, by Oxford historian Moudhy Al-Rashid '05CC, will come as not merely a pleasant surprise but a rare treat. This is due in no small part to the personal warmth and enthusiasm that infuse Al-Rashid's writing as she relates the history of ancient Mesopotamia (from the Greek for "between the rivers" — in this case the Tigris and Euphrates) by examining the masses of what today we would call "data" that appear on cuneiform tablets discovered at excavation sites through-out what is now mostly southern Iraq.

Al-Rashid's love affair with Mesopotamia began two decades ago when she impulsively signed up for a weeklong seminar on ancient books led by a curator at the British Museum. She had been applying to law schools, but from her first glimpse of cuneiform — the intricate system of wedge-shaped symbols carved into clay that ancient Mesopotamians used to record every aspect of their lives — she was mesmerized.

Cuneiform, originating around 3350 BC, is recognized as the world's earliest writing system, and it adapted and endured to represent the different languages of the different empires that ruled Mesopotamia for nearly four millennia, including Sumerians (the first to use the script), Akkadians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. Because writing granted people for the first time the miraculous means to record their thoughts and activities, the birth of cuneiform is widely considered the birth of history. With these clay documents as her primary lens, Al-Rashid guides us through the life and times of generations of Mesopotamians, from the lowliest have-nots to the loftiest gods and royals.



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We learn about the calculations of brilliant proto-mathematicians who intuited pi and the Pythagorean theorem a thousand years before Pythagoras drew breath. We get a fresh take on Gilgamesh, the Sumerian-king-turned-epic-hero whose legendary quest for immortality imparts some pertinent lessons about leadership to modern readers. We see, too, that this extraordinary civilization, renowned for its firsts — writing, math, urbanization, irrigation, the wheel — also fought the first known war (a border conflict five thousand years ago). An early archaeological find, the mace — essentially, a piece of granite mounted on a stick and used to club the enemy — is a fixture in the iconography of every period of ancient Mesopotamia, inspiring poetry of grief, glory, and, often, shockingly brutal imagery.

Ultimately, however, the most resonant cuneiform objects in Al-Rashid's compendium are the voluminous records kept by the ordinary citizens who formed the backbone of Mesopotamian society. The ins and outs of their daily lives include

tabulations of the amount of beer a merchant bought and sold, loan repayment plans detailing principal and interest, documents showing taxes owed and sometimes (ingeniously) evaded, even the occasional errant paw print of a local dog. Rising out of these quotidian details are indelible portraits of resourceful men, women, and children whose stories reverberate down the millennia. The schoolboys hunched over tablets of wet clay with bamboo styluses in hand, smudging the surface to erase and then correct a homework mistake. Their teacher, picking up on the students' anxiety, who urges them, "Do not constantly be afraid." The desperate new mother, crooning a beautiful lullaby that has been etched into a clay tablet. The overburdened working mom struggling to do it all. (Women were always a vital part of the workforce, Al-Rashid tells us, performing nearly every task that men did, though rarely for equal pay.) Ancient folks: they're just like us!

And that, in a nutshell, is the theme Al-Rashid returns to repeatedly in this eye-opening book. These "little wedges pressed into clay," she writes, "let the people of ancient Mesopotamia speak." And when we hear them, the seemingly intractable barriers that divide us — time, nationality, wealth, poverty, religion, race, gender — fall like dominoes, reminding us (and, alas, we seem always to *need* reminding) of "all the big and little things that go into our shared humanity."

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