

# EMPIRES IN THE DUST

**UNEARTHING**  
Tell Leilan, a  
northern city in  
Mesopotamia's  
Akkadian  
Empire. The  
200-acre city  
was abandoned  
around 2200 B.C.

Some 4,000 years ago, a number of mighty Bronze Age cultures crumbled. Were they done in by political strife and societal unrest? Or by a change in the climate? **By Karen Wright**

**m**ESOPOTAMIA: CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION, the fertile breadbasket of western Asia, a little slice of paradise between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Today the swath of land north of the Persian Gulf is still prime real estate. But several millennia ago Mesopotamia was absolutely The Place to Be. There the visionary king Hammurabi ruled, and Babylon's hanging gardens hung. There the written word, metalworking, and bureaucracy were born. From the stately, rational organization of Mesopotamia's urban centers, humanity began its inexorable march toward strip malls and shrink-wrap and video poker bars and standing in line at the DMV. What's more, the emergence of the city-state meant that we no longer had to bow to the whims of nature. We rose above our abject dependence on weather, tide, and tith; we were safe in the arms of empire. Isn't that what being civilized is all about?

