

# Mesopotamia

## *Ancient Mesopotamian Culture*



**Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamia**

**Mesopotamian City States and Empires**

**Ancient Mesopotamian Culture**

**Ancient Mesopotamian Beliefs**

## Thematic Icons



**Economics**



**Geography**



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## Icons



**Flash activity** (these activities are not editable)



**Teacher notes** included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.



Modern scholars believe that the Mesopotamian people were an incredibly innovative and inventive civilization.

Many of humanity's greatest **inventions** were created by the Mesopotamians. These inventions include:

- the wheel and the sail
- the seeder plow
- **astronomy**
- writing.





From the earliest years of written history the Mesopotamians were experimenting with ways to measure, count and solve **mathematical** problems to improve daily life.

Mesopotamian mathematicians were the first to give numbers a universal value.



Mesopotamian society did not have a money-based economy. Instead, trade was accomplished by a standardized system of weights and scales to place value on different goods.



Ancient **astronomy** began in the first Mesopotamian agricultural societies. The earliest record of a study of the stars was found in Sumer.

Mesopotamians studied astrology, and believed the movement of the stars and other astronomical events, such as eclipses or meteor showers, had deeper religious meaning.



Under Babylonian rule, the constellations had a practical use. The positions of stars helped mark seasons for planting and harvesting crops.

Modern astronomers still use many Babylonian constellations.



One of Mesopotamia's greatest achievements was the creation of the city.

Throughout the civilization's existence, the people of Mesopotamia built cities that could house up to fifty thousand people. Around these cities large **stone walls** were also built.



Archaeologists believe that the arch and column were first invented in these cities.

**What purpose do you think the stone walls had?**





# The ziggurat



Mesopotamian cities contained many different types of buildings. However, none were as significant in Mesopotamian city life as the grand temple, or **ziggurat**.

Religion played a central and unifying role in Mesopotamian culture. It was believed that the gods and goddesses controlled every aspect of life. They were worshiped within the ziggurat.



Priests and priestesses would pray to shrines dedicated to certain **deities** and often practiced rituals, such as sacrifices, to please and bring fortune from the gods.





The Mesopotamians used various metals to create a wide range of objects and tools.



Early Mesopotamians developed the **smelting** of **bronze**, an alloy of copper and tin. They used this for farming tools, such as plow blades, as well as weapons. Gold and silver were also used in the creation of jewelry.

The Assyrian Empire (1392–605 BC) was one of the first to successfully replace bronze with the stronger and more durable **iron**.







One of the most recognizable feats of Mesopotamian society is the grand and elaborate artwork.

Archaeologists have discovered that Mesopotamian artwork often uniquely differed depending on the period of time and city of its creation.

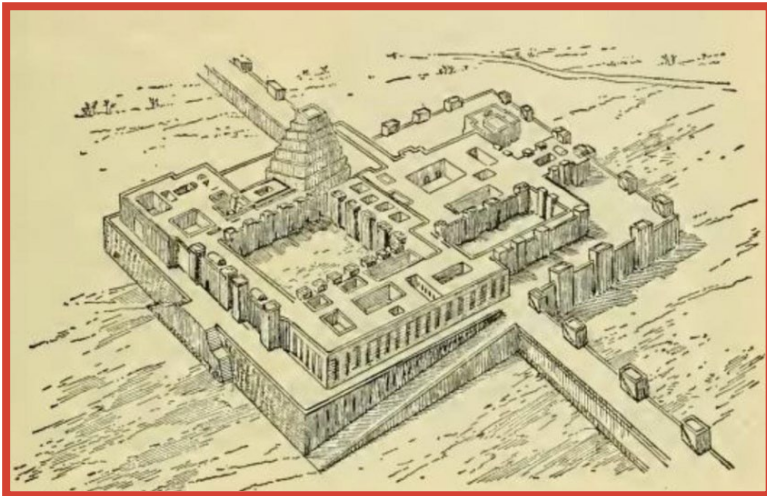


Sumer is known for its sculptures, such as the “**Ram in a Thicket**”, from around 2500 BC. The empires of Babylon and Assyria are known for producing famous architecture, such as the **Ishtar Gate** of Babylon, built around 575 BC.





After the first Sumerian ruler, **King Eannutum**, became Mesopotamia's first king in 2500 BC, Mesopotamian cities featured another type of building: the **grand palace**.



Palaces were large, highly decorated housing complexes where Mesopotamian kings or **nobles** lived with their families.

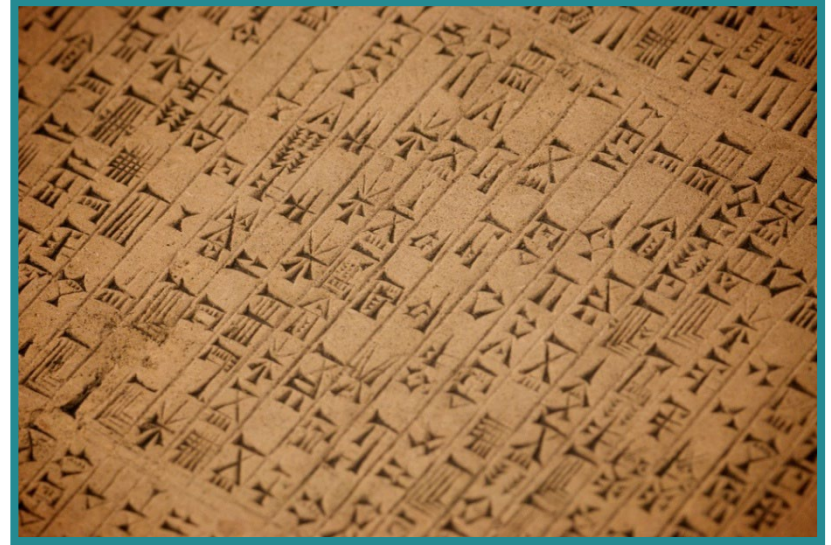
Food warehouses, craft workshops and shrines to the gods were also built within palaces.

How important do you think palaces were to city life?



The earliest form of writing in human history is attributed to Mesopotamia.

This writing originated within the southernmost kingdom of Sumer in 3500 BC and is called **cuneiform**.



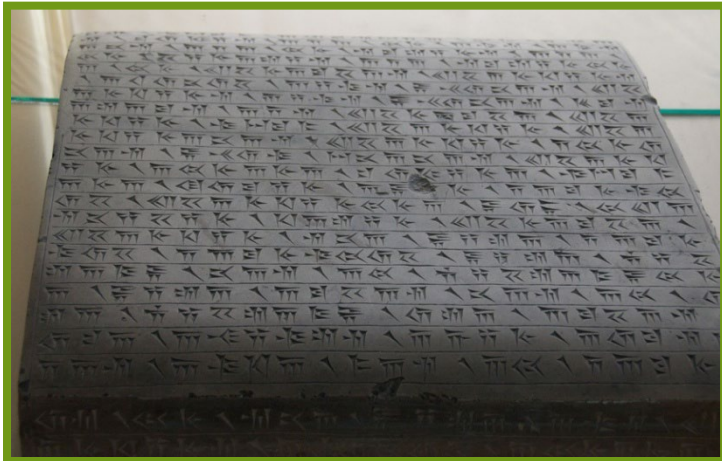
The invention of writing allowed Mesopotamians to carve information into permanence, instead of having to rely on memory.

Mesopotamians only recorded information they found important, such as trade logs and religious stories.



Cuneiform is mostly found on **clay** tablets and cylinder seals. The use of clay shaped the way the writing developed. Pictures were quickly replaced by **wedge-shaped** symbols, which were easier to carve.

Paper had not yet been invented, but the clay that cuneiform was written on was very strong and long-lasting. Accidental or intentional fire, for example, baked cuneiform tablets and made them almost **indestructible**.



Education was very important within Mesopotamian culture and society.

However, only boys were allowed to undertake education in Mesopotamian cities. Some rich families were able to send girls to school, although this was less common.

Mesopotamian schools were part of the ziggurat complex in the cities. They were run by a teacher called an **ummi**a, which means “expert”.

Students were taught mathematics and how to read and write cuneiform. Each student had to memorize the 600 cuneiform characters.



To solve mathematical problems, the Mesopotamians created their own number system. The numbers ranged from 1–60. However, there was no **symbol** for 0.

This can be confusing for archaeologists, as both the symbols for 1 and 60 are the same.

Here are some examples of Mesopotamian numbers:



Can you figure out the third Mesopotamian value?



Cuneiform artifacts show that the Mesopotamians created and recorded a lot of their own literature.

The most famous piece of ancient Mesopotamian literature discovered is the epic poem, the **Epic of Gilgamesh**.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a literary history of the mythical King Gilgamesh, who ruled the city of Uruk in 2100 BC.

The poem is a combination of five Sumerian poems about “Bilgamesh”, which is Sumerian for Gilgamesh.



Archaeologists and literary historians have discovered distinct similarities between the Epic of Gilgamesh and future works of literature.

- The Epic of Gilgamesh was an oral epic similar to the Odyssey and Iliad in Ancient Greece.
- The gods created Enkidu from soil, which is similar to how God created man from dust in Genesis of the **Bible** and how Allah created man from clay in the **Qur'an**.
- The boat that Utnapishtim makes to survive the great flood sent by the gods is similar to the story of Noah's Ark.

Can you think of any reasons for why they are similar?







# Mesopotamian law codes

The first code of law that has been recorded was the law of the Sumerian king of Ur called **Ur-Nammu**, who ruled from 2047 to 2030 BC.



The Code of Ur-Nammu was believed to have been given directly from the gods.

The Code was forty paragraphs long and was inscribed on clay tablets. Harsh **penalties** were only given to major crimes, such as murder.





# King Hammurabi's law



The Code of Ur-Nammu is believed to have been successful as his reign was peaceful.

Due to their earlier success, these laws were taken and expanded upon by the famous king of **Babylon**, Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792 to 1749 BC.



The **Code of Hammurabi** is a wide-ranging set of laws and is considered one of the earliest examples of a system that promotes the idea of innocence until proven guilty.

The Code covered various subjects such as trade, slavery and divorce. Wealthy or free women were given the same opportunity to accuse or defend themselves within the law.





# King Hammurabi's criminal law



Have a look at Laws 196–199:

196. If a man has caused the loss of gentleman's eye, his eye one shall cause to be lost.

197. If he has shattered a gentleman's limb, one shall shatter his limb.

198. If he has caused a poor man to lose his eye or shattered a poor man's limb, he shall pay one mina of silver.

199. If he has caused the loss of the eye of a gentleman's servant or has shattered the limb of a gentleman's servant, he shall pay half his price.

**What do you think of these laws?  
What ideas do they suggest?  
Is the law equal for every social class?**



# Keywords

