

Mesopotamia

Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamia



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Mesopotamian City-States and Empires

Ancient Mesopotamian Culture

Ancient Mesopotamian Beliefs

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Government

Icons



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.





Timeline of Ancient Mesopotamia





Where is Mesopotamia?





The Fertile Crescent

Much of the Middle East is an **arid** desert. However, many kinds of crops can be grown in the crescent-shaped area that stretches from the Mediterranean coast in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east.

Archaeologists call this region the **Fertile Crescent**. Many of the earliest human civilizations developed here. For this reason, it is also known as the Cradle of Civilization.





The Geography of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is the name given to the land between the **Euphrates** and **Tigris** rivers in modern-day Iraq. In Ancient Greek, the name means “land between the rivers”.

While the climate is hot and dry, the rivers provide rich, fertile soil for farmers.

The people of Ancient Mesopotamia relied on the two rivers for their food.





The Euphrates and Tigris rivers



The Euphrates and Tigris rivers both begin in the mountains of eastern Turkey. The water that flows through them comes from rainfall and melting snow in these upland areas.

This made the flow of water very unreliable.

Sometimes there were enormous **floods** and sometimes there were long **droughts**.

People believed that these floods and droughts were caused by the gods.



How might this have influenced people's opinions about the gods?





The amount of water flowing through the Euphrates and Tigris could vary a great deal. The climate could turn the land into a swamp or a desert.

By 5000 BC, farmers had learned how to build **canals** that diverted river waters onto their land. This is called **irrigation**.

Over time, this became a complex system of canals, **ditches** and **levees**, which allowed farmers to grow crops regularly.





The fertile soil meant that farmers could grow many crops for their communities.

The main **cereal** crops were barley and wheat. Seeds were planted in May and June, and harvest took place the following April. Farmers left the fields **fallow** every other year.

In the hot and humid south, **dates** were also grown.





Surplus and specialization

Farmers in Ancient Mesopotamia could grow much more food than they needed to survive. This is called a **surplus**.

Many people were free to specialize in new trades and crafts such as pottery, cloth-making or making better tools. Settlements became larger and life within them became more complex.



**Do you live in a city or on a farm?
Who grows the food you eat?**





Building with mud

The Sumerians lived on a flat plain with no natural defenses and little wood or stone to build with.

To build houses and defend themselves against invaders, Sumerians fashioned mud into bricks and left them to dry in the hot sun.



Structures built from mud bricks were very strong and provided good protection from the wind and rain.

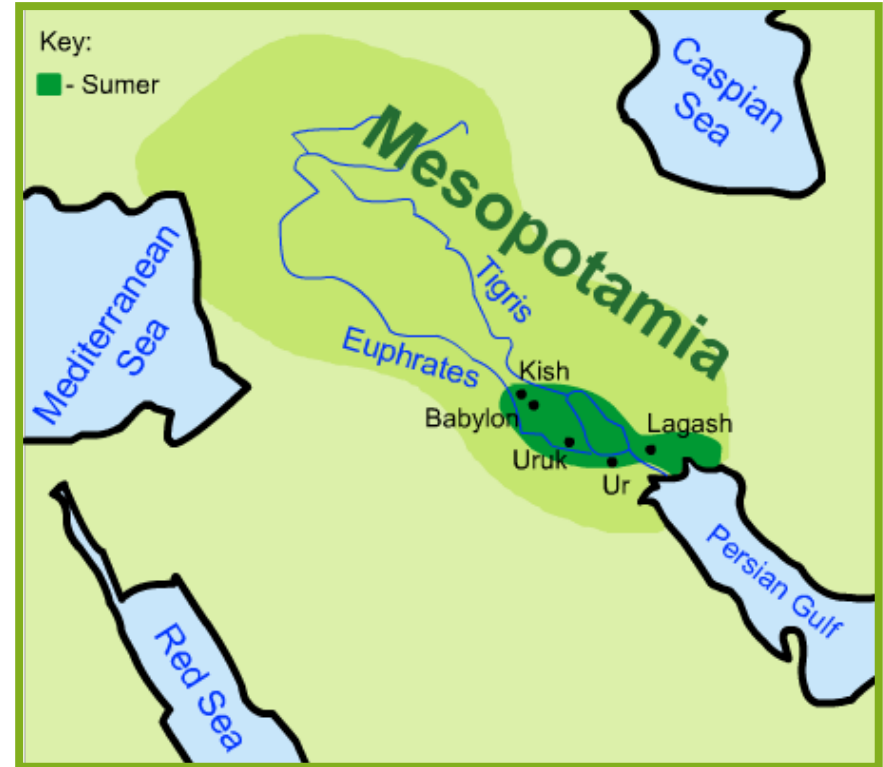




The Sumerian city-states

As settlements became larger and more complex, they developed into **city-states**.

This first happened in a region of southern Mesopotamia called **Sumer**. The city states included Ur, Uruk, Kish and Lagash.



In early Sumer, the ruler of a city-state was often its **high priest**. City-states could defend themselves against invaders and contained many thousands of people.





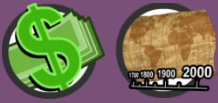
Sumerian city-states produced a variety of goods, from wool and barley to decorative pots and jewellery.

These could be traded for raw materials like stone, wood and metals. Sumerian workers used these materials to produce even more goods.



The innovations of the wheel and the sail allowed merchants to transport goods long distances. Merchants traded with nearby settlements and faraway places like Greece and India.





Sumerian writing

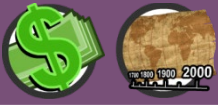
By around 3500 BC, the Sumerians had developed a set of symbols which could be used to record goods they had received or wished to buy.

This early form of writing is called **cuneiform**, which is Ancient Greek for “wedge-shaped”. It is named for the wedge-shaped tool that **scribes** used to record information on clay tablets.



Over time, cuneiform developed into a system of writing that could express a huge variety of thoughts and activities.

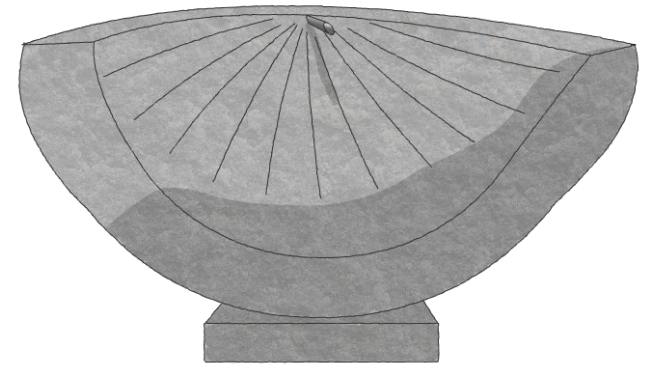




The Sumerians developed many innovations to help them become more productive.

Aside from writing and the wheel, the Sumerians:

- made plows to sow crops more effectively
- used sundials to tell time
- developed **geometry** to help with building and irrigation works.



Sumerians were also among the first cultures to make **bronze**, a hard metal made of copper and tin which could be used for tools, weapons and decoration.





The people of Ancient Mesopotamia were **polytheistic**: they believed that the heavens and the underworld contained many gods, who acted like humans did on earth.

Sumerians believed that each city-state was “owned” by one of the gods.

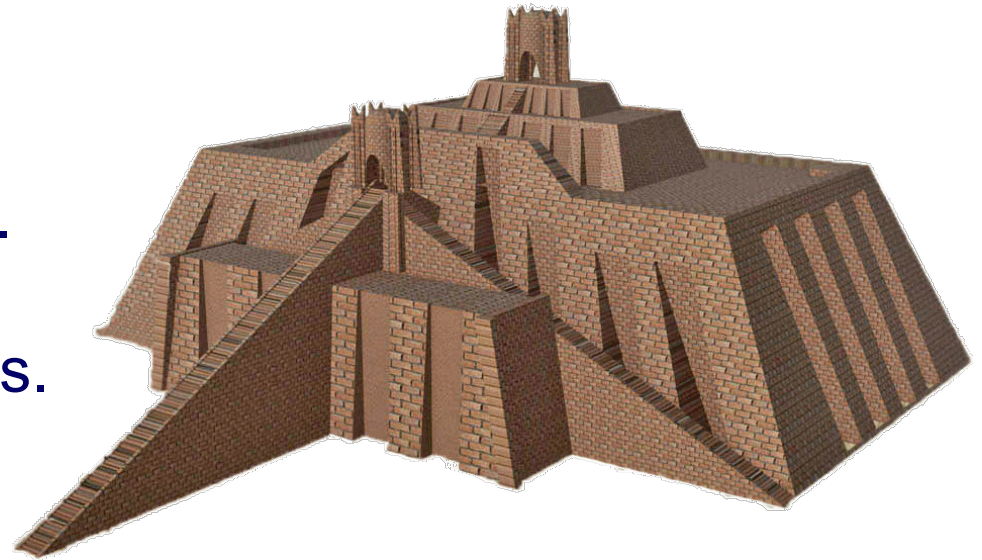
The city of Uruk was dedicated to **Inanna** (also known as Ishtar), the goddess of love and war. The people of Uruk built temples and took part in elaborate rituals to encourage her to protect them.





The gods of Mesopotamia were served by priests. Priests supervised all activities of the **temple**, which included storing food and managing farms, as well as worshipping the gods.

The focus of worship in the city-state was the **ziggurat**. This was a tall, stepped building made of mud bricks. Religious ceremonies took place on the top platform.



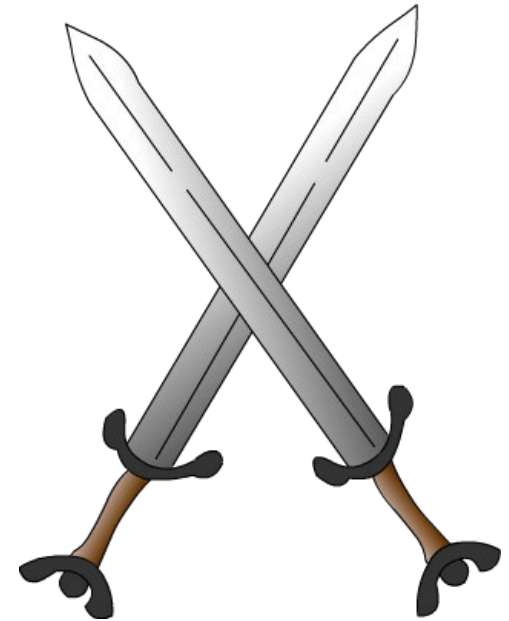
Why do you think ziggurats were so important to the Mesopotamians?





Around 2900 BC, the Sumerian city-states came to be ruled by kings. They passed down power from father to son in a ruling family called a **dynasty**.

Sumerians believed that the gods had chosen the ruler to govern the city. The king led the city's army into battle, made sure the laws were followed and supervised building work in the temples.



Cities in Sumer were often at war with each other or with foreigners. Kings often ruled several city-states at once.





The people of the city-states were split into three groups:

Slaves could be owned by temples, rich landowners or the royal family. They were usually foreigners who had been captured during a war and were not very numerous.

Most **commoners** worked on farms, although some were merchants or craftspeople. They made a living from the wages they earned from the temple or other landowners.

Freemen were people who owned land, and spanned from wealthier craftspeople to rich landowners and royals.



What do you think life was like for each group?





Rulers collected laws and judgements together to gain control over how justice was done.

One collection was the **Code of Hammurabi**, which was made in **Babylon** in 1754 BC. It included the principle of **retaliation**: if someone received an injury, they could cause a similar injury to that person.



“If a builder has built a house for a man and has not made strong his work, and the house he built has fallen, and he has caused the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.”



Does this sound like any other ancient law codes?





The Epic of Gilgamesh



The invention of writing allowed poets to re-tell and write down Mesopotamia's ancient myths and legends.

The most famous example is the **Epic of Gilgamesh**, a long poem about the adventures of a legendary Sumerian king.

Gilgamesh fights with a giant, tries to rescue his friend from the underworld and searches for the secret of eternal life.



Can you think of any similar stories?





The Epic of Gilgamesh





The city-states were often at war. Some of them became so powerful that historians consider them to have been **empires**.

The **Akkadian Empire** was formed by **Sargon** at around 2334 BC. Sargon was the first king to rule all of Mesopotamia.

The **Babylonian Empire** was ruled by the city-state of Babylon. With **Hammurabi** as its king, Babylon became an important center of religion and learning.

The **Assyrian Empire** is named for its ancient capital, Assur. The empire was very well-organized, and extended to Egypt and parts of modern-day Turkey.





Over centuries, the cities of Ancient Mesopotamia were abandoned. Many were either buried by sand and dirt or built over by new settlers.

In the last 200 years, **archaeologists** have discovered countless **artifacts** revealing the history of Mesopotamia.



Ancient ruins have recently been threatened by war and totalitarian governments. Many sites were looted after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 2015, ISIL demolished the ruins of the **Assyrian** cities of Nimrud and Dur-Sharrukin.



