

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE INQUIRY

1. Which is greater: The impact of the environment on people or people on the environment?
2. How does where you live affect how you live?
3. How does what you eat affect how you live?
4. What does it mean to be civilized?

TERMS, PLACES, PEOPLE

Mesopotamia
 Ziggurat
 city-states
 Theocracy
 aqueduct

As cities developed, what had a greater impact: the environment on the people or the people on the environment? How did the region impact the way people lived? In this section we will discover how civilization developed in Mesopotamia, what effect that development had on the people, and how the geography of the region impacted the people living there.

As early people began farming the Fertile Crescent, small villages began to form. With the further development of farming, many of these small communities began to grow into large, complex cities.

Located in present day Iraq, the Fertile Crescent is a "half moon" shaped area that lies between two rivers. Also called **Mesopotamia**, a Greek word meaning the "land between two rivers," the Fertile Crescent surrounds the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Cities first began appearing in the southern part of this land, eventually developing in areas all around Mesopotamia.

Settlements began developing in the Fertile Crescent around 3500 BCE. These were smaller cities and, for the sake of comparison, would be much more like

Interactive 3.1 Ancient Mesopotamia Song Overview

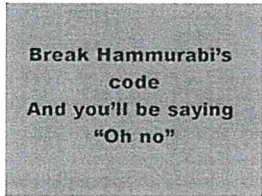


Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Dynastic_Period_\(Mesopotamia\)#/media/File:Karte_Mesopotamien.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Dynastic_Period_(Mesopotamia)#/media/File:Karte_Mesopotamien.png)

independent countries today. Each had a ruler to lead and farmland to provide food. Taking a tour of the area, you would see a walled inner city surrounded by vast farmland. The city walls would be built from bricks that were baked in the sun. People living in these early villages lived very different lives from the hunter-gatherers that came before them.

Because they had a stable food supply and permanent shelters, they were able to form larger communities. This led to the development of better tools, clothing, farming methods, and systems of government. Living in a community allowed for goods and ideas to be bartered or traded back and forth and people could get the items they lacked.

Cradle of Civilization

Ancient Mesopotamia is considered by many to be the cradle of civilization. This is due to the development of many things that still impact our lives today. Agriculture, cities, religion, government, and written language are just a few of the things that were first developed in Mesopotamia. Unlike the many civilizations that would follow, Mesopotamia was unique in that the people who were in these various cities were bound together through culture. The social laws, written language, and religion are what historians use to classify the people of Mesopotamia. As a result, Mesopotamia is more of a region occupied by various civilizations rather than a single civilization. However, the people of the region are grouped together due to two developments: (1) the rise of cities and (2) the invention of written language.

City-States

When studying the ancient world, a city refers to an area of large population. These cities are also the center of commerce and government. In Ancient Mesopotamia, the cities were not only large urban centers but also had a very distinct pattern to their setup. Each was usually surrounded by a massive wall. In the center of the city would be a large temple or ziggurat. Due to their size and the way they were governed, many are often referred to as city-states. A **city-state** is a city that is like a small independent country, due to having its own laws and government.

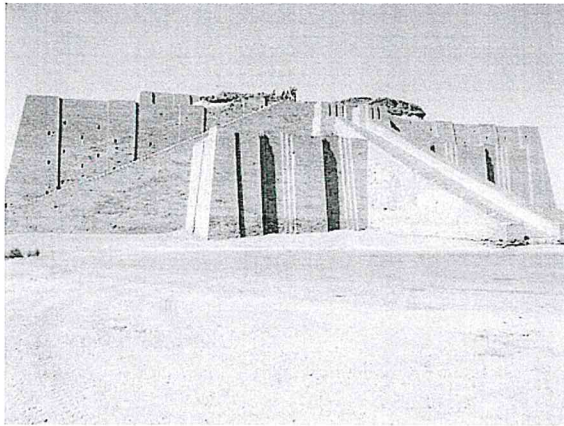


Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziggurat#/media/File:Ancient_ziggurat_at_Ali_Air_Base_Iraq_2005.jpg

The Sumerian people were the first to begin building cities along the rivers of lower Mesopotamia. They specialized, cooperated, and made many advancements in technology, all prompted by the needs that were presented by living together. The wheel, plow, and system of writing are some examples of their achievements. Among the many Sumerian cities were Ur, Uruk, Nippur, and Kish. These cities established economic and political control over the surrounding countryside. These became the foundation for the development of civilization.

Challenge: Build a Ziggurat

The land of Mesopotamia was fertile near the two rivers. Outside of that, however, the land was much too dry to grow many crops. As a result this area became home to many herders. Since agriculture is only possible near the rivers, due to the dry climate of Mesopotamia, people had to develop a system of irrigation to keep their farmland productive. This need had a major impact on the locations of the city-states of Ancient Mesopotamia.

Another result of the dry climate was the region had very few trees. As a result, wood couldn't be used as a building material.

There was, however, plenty of mud. The Sumerians used this for building purposes including the building of **ziggurats**. Bricks made out of mud were easy to shape and could be left out in the sun to bake or become hard. Nearly every building and the walls that protected the city was made from these bricks.

Interactive 3.2 The Wonders of Ancient Mesopotamia



This animation, created for the Melbourne Museum captures the look and feel of the ancient city of Ur. Many weeks of research with expert archaeologists meant that the accuracy of this video is based on the available knowledge of the area at the time.

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Government and Law

The Sumerian people believed that their cities were the possessions of the gods and goddesses. This belief had a large impact on the setup of the city-states and on the governments that ruled over them. Politically, each city was independent from one another. Warfare between them was frequent. The ziggurat, found at the center of every city, was a symbol of how important the patron god or goddess was. The god or goddess of the city was thought to be present in all stages of life, from the planning and building of the city to the functioning of the government.

This belief that the gods ruled the cities brought about the concept of **theocracy**, a government by divine authority. In the early history of the city-states, the temple was the center of life, both political and religious. Priests were in charge of the matters for both the belief system and the government. As part of the system, people brought what they grew to the temple and these resources would be redistributed by the priests. The government and religious systems operated hand in hand.

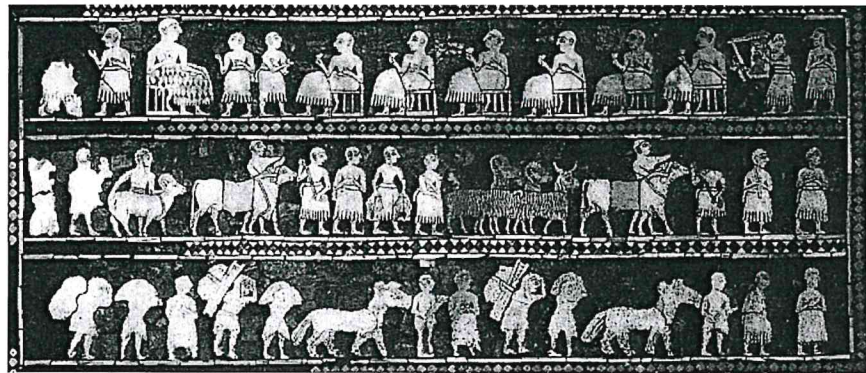


Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumer#/media/File:Ur_mosaic.jpg

As cities grew and developed, this system changed and often become more complex. There was too much work for a single person as priest and king. The work might be divided between religious and political responsibilities. Priests-rulers gave way to kings. The change established a slight division between the two systems. How this change came about is unknown, but one can hypothesize that the constant war that was gripping the city-states during this time might have forced the change. In any event, the need for someone to handle the political needs of a city-state separate from the religious needs took control. The belief system was still deeply rooted in the political system; the Sumerians believed that the king was chosen by the gods. The king was seen as the earthly representative of the god of the city-

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Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_of_Hammurabi#/media/File:Code-de-Hammurabi-1.jpg

state. He was seen as a sacred being. To go against the king was to go against god. The king was responsible for leading the military, providing justice and order, making laws, and guiding the people.

Of all the advancements made by the people of Mesopotamia, one of the most important is the development of a written code of laws. The most famous of these is the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi was a ruler of Babylon, one of the

empires to follow the Sumerians. Hammurabi used his code of laws to unify his empire and to preserve order. The laws were based on both his authority as king and the word of the gods. The code was written on clay tablets so they could be displayed in public.

The code was detailed, covering many situations like trade, money exchange, marriage, and divorce. The code spelled out both laws and punishments, many of which may seem harsh to us today. For example, if a person were to build a home and that house were to collapse, killing a family member, then the builders own family member would be put to death. The laws did not treat people of all social levels equally, but it was the first to be written down and apply to everyone.

System of Writing

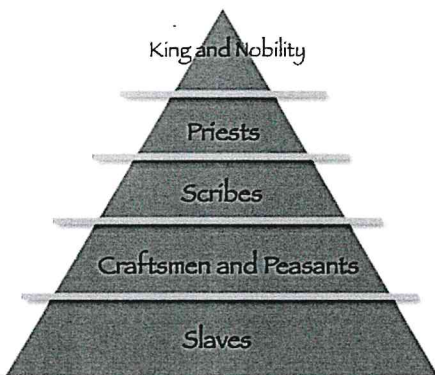
Of course, laws or anything else could not be written down until the system of spoken language developed into a written one. Around 2500 BCE, early forms of script began to take shape and develop into a written language. Sumerian cuneiform, or wedge shaped writing, was a major change in the technology of the time. The Sumerians used a wedge shaped stylus (sharp, pointed tool) to etch the writing into soft clay tablets. It was used to record information about trade, create administrative documents, literature, letters, prayers and other religious works, as well as all forms of economic transactions.

Interactive 3.3 Writing in Ancient Mesopotamia



Learn more about the systems of writing that developed in the ancient world.

Cuneiform was based on an early form of writing known as pictograph. This simpler form of writing used symbols to stand for real objects, such as a house or water. As the language developed, these pictures became less detailed and eventually a series of lines and wedges remained. At the beginning, there may have been upwards of 2,000 symbols.



Social Systems

All civilizations have a complex organization known as a social structure (system). The social structure is made up of the different jobs and social levels found in a given civilization. Higher levels enjoy a greater status than those in the lower levels.

Several classes have made up the various structures found in different Mesopotamian city-states. Even with the differences between them, there were some common levels to all the structures. At the top level were the priests, kings, landowners, and government officials. They would own the largest homes and live near the center of the city. The middle level consisted of the merchants and artisans, farmers and fishers. Artisans were skilled craftsman who made swords and arrows for the army as well as tools like plows for farmers. Many would craft jewelry and other luxury items for the upper class. Merchants bought and sold goods or offered services. In times of war, many people living in the middle levels were forced to serve in the army. The bottom level were slaves; they lived in the smallest homes and owned very little property.

Organized Religion

Religion is one of the defining factors of being a civilization. The religious system found in Mesopotamia had a very deep influence on everyday life. The people of Mesopotamia tried to please their

gods, from tilling fields to serving in government. Religion bound the people together in a way that nothing else would.



Image Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Khashkhamer_seal_moon_worship.jpg

The center for all religious expressions was temples and religious towers, ziggurats, that were built in the center of all city-states. Ziggurats were the largest building; some could be seen for many miles away. The people believed that the god of their city-state lived in the ziggurat.

The Mesopotamian culture believed in over 1,000 gods and goddesses in their faith. They believed that the beginning of the world was a victory of the gods over evil spirits. Through daily rituals, funeral practices, civic duty, and many other aspects of everyday life, people felt that they could help control the balance of good over evil. In conjunction with daily rituals, the people held

great honor for elders and were to treat people with respect. Doing this and honoring the gods was the primary way to show and keep their faith.

Early Mesopotamian Empires: Unifying the Region with Force

The Sumerians flourished between 3500 and 2300 BCE, but the city-states were never able to unify under a single empire. They often fought for land and water rights. This lack of unity would ultimately lead to their downfall, as their lack of unity left them open to attacks.

Akkadians

Around 2300 BCE a group of people, the Akkadians, came from northern Mesopotamia into the land of the Sumerian city-states. The Akkadians found the city-states lacking unity and were able to conquer the land. They were led by an ambitious king named Sargon. Sargon would become the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire. Sargon was a strong king and a skilled military leader. His army used effective military strategies such as tight formations, using shields and spears.



Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akkadian_Empire#/media/File:Empire_akkad.svg

Sargon was also a brilliant political leader. Once he established himself as king, he

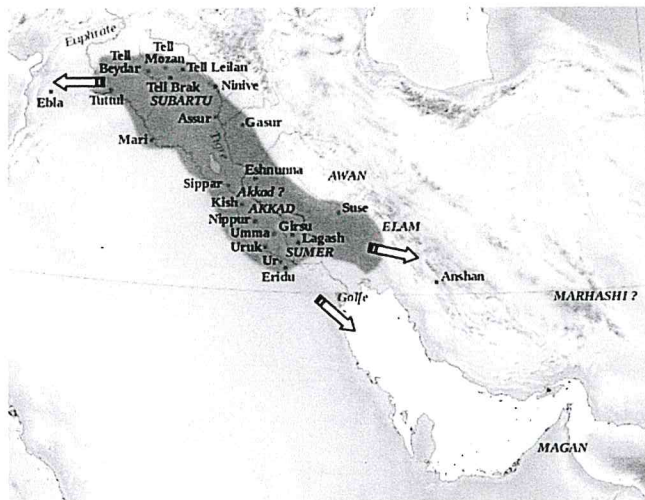


Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akkadian_Empire#/media/File:Empire_akkad.svg

replaced the governors of the city-states with his own officials. He also made the Akkadian language the official language of business. He tore down the walls of many cities to make it harder for those city-states to rebel. After his death, many fought for control of the empire.

The Akkadian empire still had many Sumerian cultural influences. Farmers used the Sumerian irrigation techniques. They adopted the system of cuneiform for writing and even began worshipping

their gods. Over time, the Akkadian and Sumerian cultures blended.

After 200 years, the empire began to lose strength. Naram-Sin, Sargon's grandson, would be the last great king. Soon invaders from northern Mesopotamia invaded and brought the first real empire in history to an end.

Babylonian

With the fall of the Akkadian Empire, Sumer once again was a collection of independent city-states. The next empire to come to power would be the Babylonians around 1750 BCE. King Hammurabi, famous for his written code of laws, would unite all of Mesopotamia under the Babylonian Empire.

Babylonia thrived under Hammurabi's leadership. Trade and agriculture boomed unlike ever before. The empire set up a regular way to carefully maintain the irrigation systems so that land remained fertile and would grow plenty of food. Trading in grain and other products grown in the land, the empire took advantage of the two rivers for more than just the fertile farm land.

What stands out above the economic advancements is that Babylonian society was oddly fair for this time period. Laws treated the classes differently, but even the lowest level, slaves, had rights. They were able to work outside of their owners' home

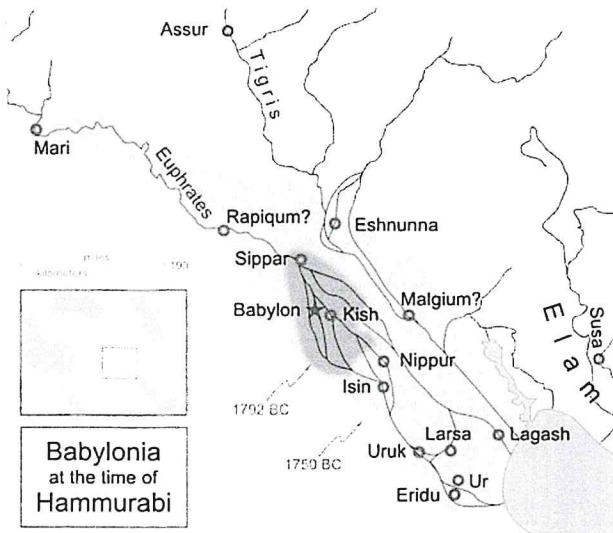


Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonia#/media/File:Hammurabi%27s_Babylonia_1.svg

and could keep their wages. They were able to own property and could even save money to eventually purchase their freedom.

Following Hammurabi's death, mass revolts created unrest in the empire. Over time, portions of the vast empire began to break off, either gaining independence or being conquered. Around 1595 BCE, the empire finally fell to the Hittites when they sacked Babylon and removed the standing king.

Assyrian

The next major empire to take control of Mesopotamia was the warlike people known as the Assyrians. The Assyrians had lived in Mesopotamia for centuries when Hammurabi conquered the people, making them part of the Babylonian Empire. Around 900 BCE a line of rulers began training up an army with the goal of preparing for war. Soon the army began to expand the Assyrian territory.

The Assyrians were feared for their cruelty and military might. They used strong iron weapons and became skilled horsemen. They also became highly effective at siege warfare. This technique had soldiers camp outside the city for many days repeatedly attacking until the defenses fell. They used battering rams to destroy walls and tall movable towers that could be rolled up to the walls and gates allowing soldiers to climb over the walls.

The empire was ruled by a series of powerful kings. The Assyrians used many of the same techniques of irrigation and farming to keep the region fertile and producing food. They also were the first in the region to begin using aqueducts. An aqueduct is a system of pipes or channels used to carry water into cities. The aqueduct system brought drinking water into the city of Nineveh from over 30 miles away.

The Assyrian empire lasted for almost 300 years. At its height, the empire extended from Mesopotamia to the area surrounding the Nile River in Egypt and to the Taurus Mountains in the north. Controlling such a large region became its weakness, stretching its army too thin. This issue left the Assyrians exposed and they found it difficult to fight off invading neighbors. In the early 600s BCE, Nineveh was plundered and the Assyrian empire was over.

Further Study: Visit the following sites for more information and activities on Ancient Mesopotamia

History of Mesopotamia- University of Chicago

Mesopotamia- The British Museum

Interactive 3.4 Palace without Rival



Task: Follow the link to complete the online scavenger hunt or test your knowledge.

Interactive 3.5 World GeoHistoGram



Fire up the World GeoHistoGram and click on the button "Mesopotamia" - What do you notice about the length of this empire?

Interactive 3.6 Crash Course - Ancient Mesopotamia



Interested in learning even more? Watch this video from John Green's "Crash Course"



Reflection: Looking back on all the information in this previous section, which is greater: the impact of the environment on people or the people on the environment?