

The History of Mesopotamia

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Sculpted relief depicting Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian king, hunting lions, gypsum hall relief from the North Palace of Nineveh (Iraq), c. 645-635 B.C., British Museum. Photo by: Carole Raddato/Wikimedia.

Mesopotamia was an ancient region in what is now called the Middle East. Its history reaches back thousands of years and includes many civilizations. This history can be better understood by dividing it into different ages.

Pre-Pottery Neolithic Age (about 12,000 years ago in 10,000 B.C.)

This period is also known as the Stone Age. It saw the shift from a hunting and gathering way of life to one based around farming. There is evidence of early settlements and even some signs of warfare between tribes. People most likely fought over land for growing crops.

Pottery Neolithic Age (7000 B.C.)

In this period, we can start seeing a specific culture began in Mesopotamia. Stone tools and weapons became more complex. Most people were involved in food production through farming and raising animals. For this reason, communities were more settled than they were in the Stone Age. They moved around a lot less. Permanent settlements led to the construction of more advanced buildings and tools.

Copper Age (5900 - 3200 B.C.)

This period is known as the Copper Age, after people stopped using stone tools and weapons and started using ones made of copper. This period also saw the rise of cities. Mesopotamia was the most developed region in the ancient world. The cities along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers created systems of trade that produced great wealth.

This period saw the invention of the wheel and writing, both by the Sumerians. Increased wealth in the region gave rise to detailed temples, statues and pottery. People began using personal seals to mark their property.

Early Bronze Age (3000 - 2119 B.C.)

During this period, bronze replaced copper as the material from which tools and weapons were made. This period also saw the rise of city-states. These were independent cities that had their own governments. The growth of city-states would eventually lead to the Akkadian Empire, the first multinational empire in the world. The library in the city of Mari contained over 20,000 cuneiform tablets, the "books" of the time. The palace there was considered one of the finest in the region.

Middle Bronze Age (2119 - 1700 B.C.)

This period saw the expansion of the Assyrian Kingdoms and the rise of the Babylonian Dynasty. This growth led to increased trade and warfare.

The king of Babylon was Hammurabi, who conquered the region and ruled for 43 years. Among his many accomplishments was his famous code of laws, written on a large stone slab. Babylon became a leading center at this time for learning and the arts. This cultural center was not to last, however. It was destroyed by the Hittites, who were then succeeded by the Kassites.

Late Bronze Age (1700 - 1100 B.C.)

During the late Bronze Age, people discovered how to mine ore and make use of iron. The Kassites used iron weapons in war. However, the Kassites were defeated by the Elamites and driven out. Later, the small Kingdom of Assyria took over the region. Most Mesopotamian states were either destroyed or weakened following the Bronze Age Collapse around 1200 B.C.

Iron Age (1000 - 500 B.C.)

The Iron Age saw the rise and expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. However, the Empire soon fell due to attacks by Babylonians, Medes and Scythians. During this period, King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem. He also created famous buildings such as the Great Ziggurat (also called the "Tower of Babel"). The fall of Babylon to Persia in 539 B.C. effectively ended Babylonian culture.

Classical Antiquity (500 B.C. - 600 A.D.)

After Persia took Babylon, most of Mesopotamia became part of the Persian Empire. This period saw a rapid cultural decline. In 331 B.C. Alexander the Great conquered the Persians, bringing the culture and religion of ancient Greece to the region. After his death, Alexander's general Seleucus took control of the region and founded the Seleucid Dynasty.

In 116 A.D. the Roman Empire conquered the region. By then Mesopotamia had largely adopted Greek culture and forgotten its old ways. The Romans improved the region by introducing better roads and plumbing. They also brought Roman law to the land. Around 600 A.D. Muslim Arabs took over the region, which resulted in the unification of law, language, religion and culture under Islam.