

Ancient Mesopotamia



Historians often referred to the ancient Near East as the "cradle of civilization." Many great civilizations rose and fell here. The religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam began in this area.

The Fertile Crescent is the region in which humans first began farming and hunting around 8,000 B.C.E. This change from hunting and gathering allowed early humans to settle into permanent villages and to produce a supply of food.

The area of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) within the Fertile Crescent gave rise to the region's most powerful empires and greatest cities. Mesopotamia was the land between the Tigris River and Euphrates River.

With a surplus of food, people could focus on developing the skills needed for civilization. Some people became priests, scribes, merchants, artists, teachers, and government officials. They begin to build cities and establish empires.

Sumerian Cities (4,000 BCE - 2,000 BCE)

Geography and agriculture - the Sumerians settled in Mesopotamia around 4,000 B.C.E. They lived in independent, walled city-states (independent countries that only take up one city).

The climate was very dry. There was very little natural vegetation and palm trees were the only trees that grew there. The rivers flooded in the spring, and deposited a rich layer of silt (very fine soil that is great for agriculture) on the surrounding floodplain. This silt provided fertilizer for growing crops. Sumerian farmers built large irrigation systems of canals and dams. Before long, the desert was blooming with a surplus of barley, dates, and other crops. They were also the first people to use the plow to lift this rich soil to their crop fields.

Economy - this surplus allowed many people to specialize in jobs other than farming. People became artisans, merchants, and craftspeople. They helped build cities and increase the wealth of the city-states through trade with neighboring societies.

The land of Mesopotamia did not have a lot of natural resources, so they had to trade to get the items they needed. Docks were built along the sides of the river so that ships could unload their trade goods. The merchants traded food, clothing, jewelry, wine and other goods between the cities.

To buy or trade these goods, Sumerians used a system of barter. They used barley for local trade. Because barley was heavy they used lead, copper, bronze, tin, silver, and gold to buy things away from their local area.

Government - the Sumerians built the first cities and establish the first monarchies (governments run by a royal family). The city was ruled by the gods through the king, who exercised divine authority. Under the king were priests who surveyed the land, ran the irrigation system, and distributed the harvest.

Technology - Sumerians learned to build with clay bricks made from the mud and were skilled metal workers. They also invented the wheel (around 3,500 BCE) and the sailboat, and created the first lunar calendar.

Because of the surplus of grain, the government could grow in size to support many officials and priests. It could also pay thousands of workers with barley while they were building canals, city walls, and ziggurats, or while they were fighting to defend their city-state.

Religion - Sumerians were polytheistic, which means they believed in many gods. They believed in as many as 3,000 to 4,000 gods. Ziggurats were believed to be dwelling places for the gods. Each city had its own God. Only priests were allowed inside the ziggurat. It was their responsibility to care for needs of the gods

Writing - as the government and economy grew, officials and merchants needed a writing system to record information. Developed between 3500 B.C.E. and 3000 B.C.E., the writing system, called cuneiform, consisted of wedge-shaped characters. Sumerians wrote on clay tablets, using a reed pen called a stylus. The world's oldest book is the Epic of Gilgamesh, a collection of stories about a Sumerian hero.



Babylonian Empire (1792 B.C.E. - 1595 B.C.E)

As many Sumerian city-states grew weak from outside invasions in military conflict, the city-state of Babylon took over and established an empire in Mesopotamia. Babylonian rulers constructed temples, roads, and an extensive canal system. They also organize laws.

Technology - Nebuchadnezzar built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world. Babylon received little rain, and there were few stone slabs needed to hold terraces in place in the region. Engineers devised a chain pump that brought water from the Euphrates River to irrigate the gardens. The gardens were a lush mountain of vegetation in the middle of a flat, dry desert.



Government and law - Hammurabi came to power in 1792 B.C.E., and is best known of all Mesopotamian kings. As he conquered city-states and his empire grew, he wanted one set of laws for all the diverse peoples he conquered. He sent legal experts throughout his kingdom to gather existing laws. Some were changed or removed because compiling the final list of 282 laws, known as the code of Hammurabi (shown to the left).

The phrase "an eye for an eye" represents what many people view as a harsh sense of justice based on revenge. The entire code, however, is much more complex than one phrase. The code outlines rules for witnesses in those making accusation of crimes. It details how theft or destruction of property should be handled and gives guidelines for dealing with trade and business problems.

The code also gives rules for family matters such as marriage, divorce, and adoption. Payment amounts for the work of doctors and other professionals are outlined. The code covers all types of issues related to farming and hunting animals, and it also lays out rules on the ownership and sales of slaves.

Babylonians did not believe all people are equal. The code treated slaves, commoners, and nobles differently. Women had some rights, including the ability to buy and sell property and to obtain a divorce.

Assyrian Empire (1365 BCE - 609 BCE)

Assyria was located in the middle in northern part of Mesopotamia. Well Babylon is best remembered for their contributions in literature, architecture, and the law, Assyria is remembered for its military strength, advances in weapons, and conquest. At the time the Assyrian empire was the greatest the world had ever seen. Their armies were highly trained and professional. And their troops had a great deal of experience in battle. Assyrian armies used movable towers and iron headed battering rams for sieges on walled towns. Soldiers used iron weapons, which were much stronger than the bronze weapons of some of their foes. The Syrians also built roads for a quick and easy movement of troops, so that conquering rebelling kingdoms could easily be brought back under control.

With the wealth they obtained, the Assyrian kings built well fortified and beautiful cities. In the cities they placed their grand Palace in, some of which spans several acres.

The first glassmaking, the invention of backgammon, the earlier version of the lock and key, even a massage, are believed to be Assyrian inventions.