

Mesopotamia

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Mesopotamia (from the [Greek](#), meaning 'between two rivers') was an ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean bounded in the northeast by the Zagros Mountains and in the southeast by the Arabian Plateau, corresponding to today's Iraq, mostly, but also parts of modern-day Iran, [Syria](#) and [Turkey](#). The 'two rivers' of the name referred to the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers and the land was known as 'Al-Jazirah' (the island) by the Arabs referencing what Egyptologist J.H. Breasted would later call the [Fertile Crescent](#), where Mesopotamian [civilization](#) began.

The Cradle of Civilization

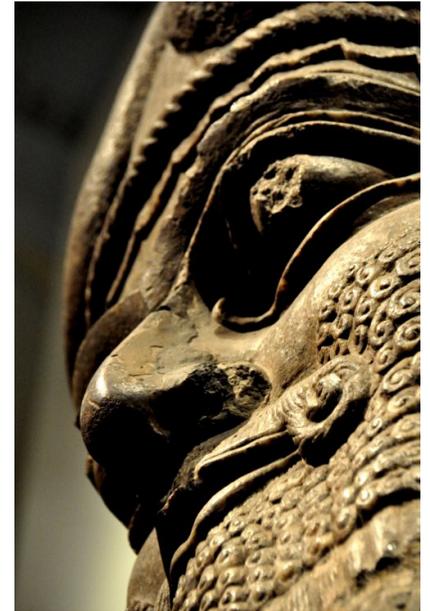
Unlike the more unified civilizations of [Egypt](#) or [Greece](#), Mesopotamia was a collection of varied cultures whose only real bonds were their [script](#), their gods, and their attitude toward women. The social customs, laws, and even language of [Akkad](#), for example, cannot be assumed to correspond to those of [Babylon](#); it does seem, however, that the rights of women, the importance of literacy, and the [pantheon](#) of the gods were indeed shared throughout the region (though the gods had different names in various regions and periods). As a result of this, Mesopotamia should be more properly understood as a region that produced multiple empires and civilizations rather than any single civilization. Even so, Mesopotamia is known as the "cradle of civilization" primarily because of two developments that occurred there, in the region of [Sumer](#), in the 4th millenium BCE:

1. the rise of the [city](#) as we recognize that entity today,
2. and the invention of [writing](#) (although writing is also known to have developed in Egypt, in the [Indus Valley](#), in [China](#), and to have taken form independently in Mesoamerica).

Women enjoyed nearly equal rights and could own land, file for divorce, own their own businesses, and make contracts in trade

The invention of the wheel is also credited to the Mesopotamians and, in 1922 CE, the archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley discovered "the remains of two four-wheeled wagons, [at the site of the ancient city of [Ur](#)] the oldest wheeled vehicles in history ever found, along with their leather tires" (Bertman, 35). Other important developments or inventions credited to the Mesopotamians include, but are by no means limited to, domestication of animals, agriculture, common tools, sophisticated weaponry and [warfare](#), the [chariot](#), wine, [beer](#), demarcation of time into hours, minutes, and seconds, religious rites, the sail (sailboats), and irrigation.

Archaeological excavations starting in the 1840s CE have revealed human settlements dating to 10,000 BCE in Mesopotamia that indicate that the fertile conditions of the land between two rivers allowed an ancient hunter-gatherer people to settle in the land, domesticate animals, and turn their attention to agriculture. Trade soon followed, and with prosperity came [urbanization](#) and the birth of the city. It is generally thought that writing was invented due to trade, out of the necessity for long-distance communication, and for keeping more careful track of accounts.



Learning and Religion

Mesopotamia was known in antiquity as a seat of learning, and it is believed that [Thales of Miletus](#) (known as the 'first philosopher') studied there. As the Babylonians believed that water was the 'first principle' from which all else flowed, and as Thales is famous for that very claim, it seems probable he studied in the region. Intellectual pursuits were highly valued across the region, and the schools (devoted primarily to the priestly class) were said to be as numerous as temples and taught reading, writing, religion, law, medicine, and astrology. There were over 1,000 deities in the pantheon of the gods of the Mesopotamian cultures and many stories concerning the gods (among them, the creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*), and it is generally accepted that biblical tales such as the Fall of Man and the Flood of Noah (among many others) originated in Mesopotamian lore, as they first appear in Mesopotamian works such as *The Myth of Adapa* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest written story in the world. The Mesopotamians believed that they were co-workers with the gods and that the land was infused with spirits and demons (though 'demons' should not be understood in the modern, Christian, sense).

The beginning of the world, they believed, was a victory by the gods over the forces of chaos but, even though the gods had won, this did not mean chaos could not come again. Through daily rituals, attention to the deities, proper funeral practices, and simple civic duty, the people of Mesopotamia felt they helped maintain balance in the world and kept the forces of chaos and destruction at bay. Along with expectations that one would honor one's elders and treat people with respect, the citizens of the land were also to honor the gods through the jobs they performed every day.



Map of Mesopotamia, 2000-1600 BC

Jobs

Men and women both worked, and "because ancient Mesopotamia was fundamentally an agrarian society, the principal occupations were growing crops and raising livestock" (Bertman, 274). Other occupations included those of

the scribe, the healer, artisan, weaver, potter, shoemaker, fisherman, teacher, and priest or priestess. The historian Bertman writes:

At the head of society were the kings and priests served by the populous staff of palace and temple. With the institution of standing armies and the spread of imperialism, military officers and professional soldiers took their place in Mesopotamia's expanding and diverse workforce. (274)

Women enjoyed nearly equal rights and could own land, file for divorce, own their own businesses, and make contracts in trade. The early brewers of beer and wine, as well as the healers in the community, were initially women. These trades were later taken over by men, it seems, when it became apparent they were lucrative occupations. The work one did, however, was never considered simply a 'job' but one's contribution to the community and, by extension, to the gods' efforts in keeping the world at peace and in harmony.

Buildings and Government

The king was responsible for the welfare of his people and a good king, who ruled in accordance with divine will, was recognized by the prosperity of the region he reigned over.

The temple, at the center of every city (often on a raised platform), symbolized the importance of the city's patron deity who would also be worshipped by whatever communities that city presided over. Mesopotamia gave birth to the world's first cities which were largely built of sun-dried brick. In the words of Bertman, "The domestic architecture of Mesopotamia grew out of the soil upon which it stood. Unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia –especially in the south– was barren of stone that could be quarried for construction." The land was equally devoid of trees for timber, so the people "turned to other natural resources that lay abundantly at hand: the muddy clay of its riverbanks and the rushes and reeds that grew in their marshes. With them, the Mesopotamians created the world's first columns, arches, and roofed structures" (285). Simple homes were constructed from bundles of reeds lashed together and inserted in the ground, while more complex homes were built of sun-dried clay brick (a practice followed later by the Egyptians). Cities and temple complexes, with their famous ziggurats (the step-pyramid structures indigenous to the region), were all built using oven-baked bricks of clay which were then painted.

The gods were thought to be present in the planning and execution of any building project and very specific prayers, recited in a set order to the proper deity, were considered of utmost importance in the success of the project and the prosperity of the occupants of the home. Whichever kingdom or empire held sway across Mesopotamia, in whatever historical period, the vital role of the gods in the lives of the people remained undiminished. This reverence for the divine characterized the lives of both the field worker and the king. The historian Helen Chapin Metz writes:

The precariousness of existence in southern Mesopotamia led to a highly developed sense of religion. Cult centers such as Eridu, dating back to 5000 BCE, served as important centers of pilgrimage and devotion even before the rise of Sumer. Many of the most important Mesopotamian cities emerged in areas surrounding the pre-Sumerian cult centers, thus reinforcing the close relationship between religion and government.

The role of the king was established at some point after 3600 BCE and, unlike the priest-rulers who came before, the king dealt directly with the people and made his will clear through laws of his own devising. Prior to the concept of a king, the priestly rulers are believed to have dictated the law according to religious precepts and received divine messages through signs and omens; the king, while still honoring and placating the gods, was considered a powerful enough representative of those gods to be able to speak their will through his own dictates, using his own

voice.



Sargon II

This is most clearly seen in the famous laws of [Hammurabi](#) of Babylon, but a ruler claiming direct contact with the gods was quite common throughout Mesopotamian history, most notably in the Akkadian king [Naram-Sin](#) who went so far as to proclaim himself a god incarnate. The king was responsible for the welfare of his people and a good king, who ruled in accordance with divine will, was recognized by the prosperity of the region he reigned over. Still, even very efficient rulers, such as [Sargon of Akkad](#), had to deal with perpetual uprisings and revolts by factions, or whole regions, contesting his legitimacy. As Mesopotamia was so vast a region, with so many different cultures and ethnicities within its borders, a single ruler attempting to enforce the laws of a central government would invariably be met with resistance from some quarter.

The History of Mesopotamia

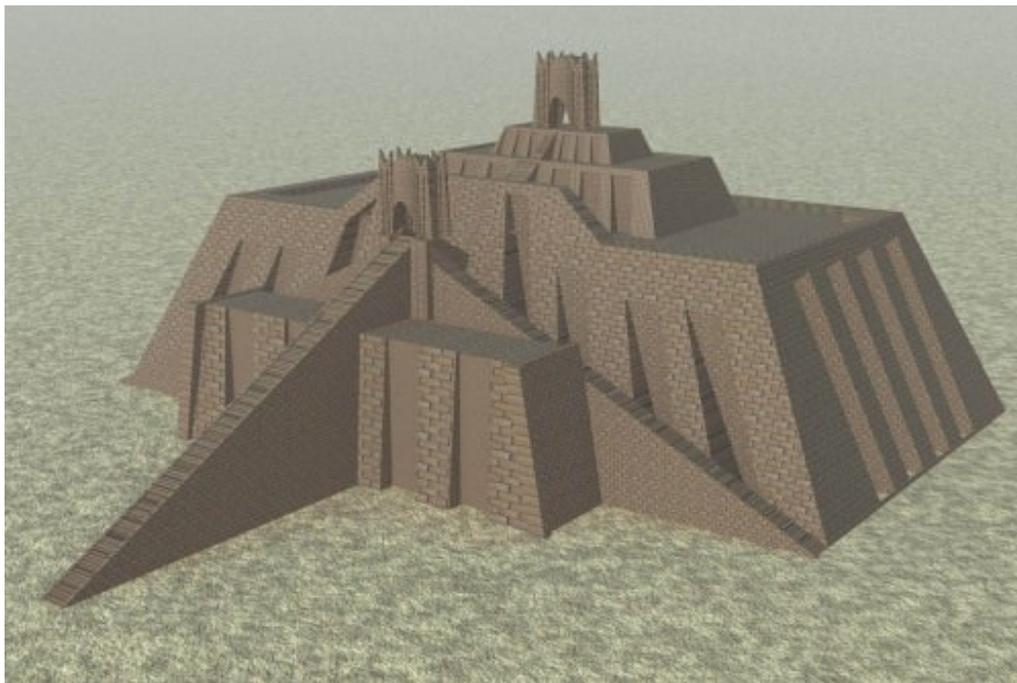
The history of the region, and the development of the civilizations which flourished there, is most easily understood by dividing it into periods:

Pre-Pottery Neolithic Age: Also known as The [Stone Age](#) (c. 10,000 BCE though evidence suggests human habitation much earlier). There is archaeological confirmation of crude settlements and early signs of warfare between tribes, most likely over fertile land for crops and fields for grazing livestock. [Animal husbandry](#) was increasingly practiced during this time with a shift from a hunter-gatherer culture to an agrarian one. Even so, the historian Marc Van De Mieroop notes:

There was not a sudden change from hunting-gathering to farming, but rather a slow process during which people increased their reliance on resources they managed directly, but still supplemented their diets by hunting wild animals. Agriculture enabled an increase in continuous settlement by people (12).

As more settlements grew, architectural developments slowly became more sophisticated in the construction of permanent dwellings.

Pottery Neolithic Age: (c. 7,000 BCE) In this period there was a widespread use of tools and clay pots and a specific culture begins to emerge in the Fertile Crescent. The historian Bertman writes, “during this era, the only advanced technology was literally ‘cutting edge’” as stone tools and weapons became more sophisticated. Bertman further notes that “the Neolithic economy was primarily based on food production through farming and animal husbandry” (55) and was more settled, as opposed to the Stone Age in which communities were more mobile. Architectural advancements naturally followed in the wake of permanent settlements as did developments in the manufacture of ceramics and stone tools.



[Reconstruction of the Ziggurat of Ur](#)

Copper Age: (5,900 – 3,200 BCE) Also known as The Chalcolithic Period owing to the transition from stone tools and weapons to ones made of copper. The rise of cities began in this period, most notably in the regions of Sumer in which thrived the cities of Eridu, [Uruk](#), Ur, Kish, Nuzi, Lagash, Nippur, and Ngirsu, and in Elam with its city of [Susa](#). The earliest city is often cited as Uruk, although Eridu and Ur have also been suggested. Van De Mieroop writes, “Mesopotamia was the most densely urbanized region in the ancient world” (as cited in Bertman, 201), and the cities which grew up along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as those founded further away, established systems of

trade which resulted in great prosperity. This period saw the invention of the wheel (c. 3500 BCE) and writing (c. 3000 BCE), both by the [Sumerians](#), the establishment of kingships to replace priestly rule, and the first [war](#) in the world recorded between the kingdoms of Sumer and Elam (3,200 BCE) with Sumer as the victor. Increased prosperity in the region gave rise to ornate temples and statuary, sophisticated pottery and figurines, toys for children (including dolls for girls and wheeled carts for boys), and the use of personal seals to denote ownership of property or stand for an individual's signature.

Early Bronze Age: (3,000 – 2119 BCE) During this period, bronze supplanted copper as the material from which tools and weapons were made. The rise of the [city-state](#) laid the foundation for economic and political stability which would eventually lead to the rise of the Akkadian Empire (2350 BCE) and the rapid growth of the cities of Akkad and [Mari](#), two of the most prosperous urban centers of the time. The cultural stability necessary for the creation of art in the region resulted in more intricate designs in architecture and sculpture, as well as “a number of specific and momentous inventions: the plough and the wheel, the chariot and the sailboat, and the cylinder-seal, the single most distinctive art form of ancient Mesopotamia and a pervasive demonstration of the importance of property ownership and business in the country's daily life,” were all either invented or improved upon during this time (Bertman, 55-56). The Akkadian Empire of [Sargon](#) was the first multi-national realm in the world and Sargon's daughter, [Enheduanna](#), the first author of literary works known by name. The library at Mari contained over 20,000 [cuneiform](#) tablets (books) and the palace there was considered one of the finest in the region.

Middle Bronze Age: (2119-1700 BCE) The expansion of the Assyrian Kingdoms ([Assur](#), [Nimrud](#), Sharrukin, Dur, and [Nineveh](#)) and the rise of the Babylonian Dynasty (centered in Babylon and Chaldea) created an atmosphere conducive to trade and, with it, increased warfare. The Gutu Tribe, fierce nomads who succeeded in toppling the Akkadian Empire, dominated the politics of Mesopotamia until they were defeated by the allied forces of the kings of Sumer. Hammurabi, King of Babylon (1792-1750 BCE), rose from relative obscurity to [conquer](#) the region and reign for 43 years. Among his many accomplishments was his famous code of laws, inscribed on the stele of the gods. Babylon became a leading centre at this time for intellectual pursuit and high accomplishment in arts and letters. This cultural centre was not to last, however, and was sacked and looted by the [Hittites](#) who were then succeeded by the Kassites.

Late Bronze Age: (1700-1100 BCE) The rise of the [Kassite](#) Dynasty (a tribe who came from the Zagros Mountains in the north and are thought to have originated in modern-day Iran) leads to a shift in power and an expansion of culture and learning after the Kassites conquered Babylon. The collapse of the Bronze Age followed the discovery of how to mine ore and make use of iron, a technology which the Kassites and, earlier, the Hittites made singular use of in warfare. The period also saw the beginning of the decline of Babylonian culture due to the rise in power of the Kassites until they were defeated by the Elamites and driven out. After the Elamites gave way to the Aramaeans, the small Kingdom of [Assyria](#) began a series of successful campaigns, and the Assyrian Empire was firmly established and prospered under the rule of [Tiglath-Pileser I](#) and, after him, [Ashurnasirpal II](#). Most Mesopotamian states were either destroyed or weakened following the Bronze Age Collapse around 1200 BCE, leading to a short "dark age".



Head of a Tribute Bearer from Khorsabad

Iron Age: (1000 – 500 BCE) This age saw the rise and expansion of the [Neo-Assyrian Empire](#) under Tiglath-Pileser III and that Empire's meteoric rise to power and [conquest](#) under the rule of [Esarhaddon](#) and [Ashurbanipal](#) (who conquered [Babylonia](#), Syria, [Israel](#), and Egypt). The Empire suffered a decline as rapid as its rise due to repeated attacks on central cities by Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians. The tribes of the Hittites and the [Mitanni](#) consolidated their respective powers during this time which resulted in the rise of the Neo-[Hittite](#) and Neo-Babylonian Empires. King [Nebuchadnezzar II](#) of Babylon destroyed [Jerusalem](#) (588 BCE) during this period and forced the inhabitants of Israel into the "Babylonian Exile". He was also responsible for extensive construction in Babylon, creating famous buildings such as the [Ishtar Gate](#) and the Great Ziggurat (the "Tower of [Babel](#)"). The fall of Babylon to [Cyrus II](#) of [Persia](#) in 539 BCE effectively ended Babylonian culture.

Classical Antiquity: (500 BCE – 7th century CE) After Cyrus II took Babylon, the bulk of Mesopotamia became part of the Persian Empire, and this period saw a rapid cultural decline, most notably in the loss of the knowledge of cuneiform script. The conquest of the Persians by [Alexander the Great](#) in 331 BCE brought Hellenization of the culture and religion, and even though [Alexander](#) tried to again make Babylon a city of consequence, its days of glory were a thing of the past. After his death, Alexander's general Seleucus took control of the region and founded the [Seleucid](#) Dynasty which ruled until 126 BCE when the land was conquered by the Parthians who were, in turn,

dominated by the Sassanians (a people of Persian descent). Bertman writes, “Under [Sassanian](#) domination, Mesopotamia lay in ruins, its fields dried out or turned into a swampy morass, its once great cities made [ghost towns](#)” (58). By the time of the conquest by the [Roman Empire](#) (116 CE), Mesopotamia was a largely Hellenized region, lacking in any unity, which had forgotten the old gods and the old ways. The Romans improved the infrastructure of their colonies significantly through their introduction of better roads and plumbing and brought [Roman Law](#) to the land. The entire culture of the region once known as Mesopotamia was swept away in the final conquest of the area by Muslim Arabs in the 7th century CE which resulted in the unification of law, language, religion and culture under Islam. Bertman notes, “With the Islamic conquest of 651 CE the history of ancient Mesopotamia ends” (58). Today the great cities that once rose along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are largely unexcavated mounds or broken bricks on arid plains, and the once fertile crescent has steadily dwindled to a wasteland due to human factors (such as overuse of the land through agricultural pursuits or urban development) and to climate change.



[Aurochs from Ishtar gate](#)

Legacy

The legacy of Mesopotamia endures today through many of the most basic aspects of modern life such as the sixty-second minute and the sixty-minute hour. Helen Chapin Metz writes,

Because the well-being of the community depended upon close observation of natural phenomena, scientific or protoscientific activities occupied much of the priests' time. For example, the Sumerians believed that each of the gods was represented by a number. The number sixty, sacred to the god An, was their basic unit of calculation. The minutes of an hour and the notational degrees of a circle were Sumerian concepts. The highly developed agricultural system and the refined irrigation and water-control systems that enabled Sumer to achieve surplus production also led to the growth of large cities.

Urbanization, the wheel, writing, astronomy, mathematics, wind power, irrigation, agricultural developments, animal

husbandry, and the narratives which would eventually be re-written as the Hebrew Scriptures and form the Christian Old Testament all came from the land of Mesopotamia.

According to Bertman, "In his book, *History Begins at Sumer*, Samuel Noah Kramer lists 39 'firsts' in recorded history that can be credited to the Sumerians and the culture they created" (326). Among these 'firsts' are Man's First Cosmogony and Cosmology, The First Moral Ideas, The First Biblical Parallels, The First 'Noah', 'Moses', and 'Job', Man's First Epic [Literature](#), The First Case of Library Borrowing, The First Legal Precedent, The First Aquarium, and The First Proverbs and Sayings. Mesopotamia generally, and Sumer specifically, gave the world some of its most enduring cultural aspects and, even though the cities and great palaces are long gone, that legacy continues.