

Mesopotamia

(The Land Between Two Rivers)

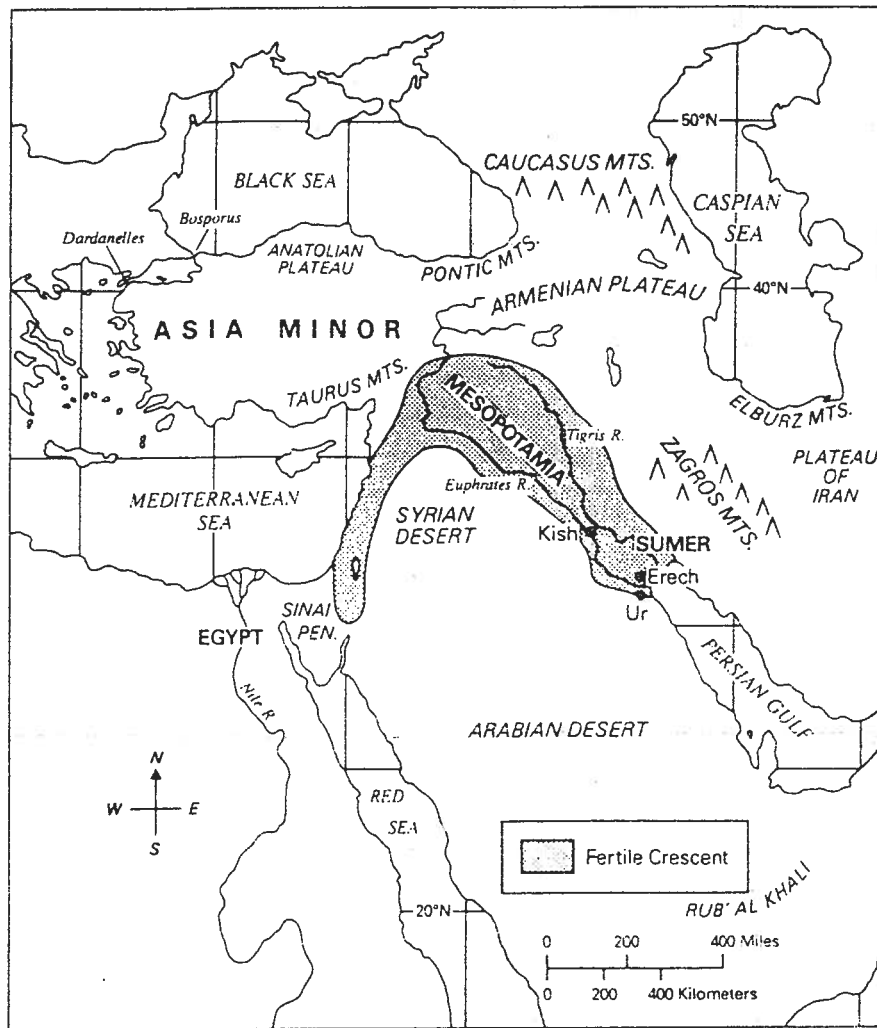
The **Tigris and Euphrates rivers** begin in the snow-capped Taurus Mountains of what is today Turkey. The rivers flow through the plateau of Northern Iraq (an area of elevated flatland), onwards across the lower lands of Iraq and flows into the Persian Gulf.

The Tigris and Euphrates often did not flood during Spring, the usual planting season; instead the floods often came during harvest season. There was also the constant threat of droughts. Northern Mesopotamia usually had enough rain for farming but the soil was rocky and the floods did not leave a large amount of silt. Southern Mesopotamia rarely received more than a few sprinkles of rain each year but because it was situated in the late stages of the rivers it did have more silt than the north.

To compensate for these weather patterns Fall became the planting season and Spring became the harvest season. Water-control (dikes, canals and storage ponds) and irrigation systems were created. By using the water during the dry periods the farmers were able to grow two crops a year. Farmers not only had enough food for themselves but produced a surplus. Early Mesopotamian farmers grew different crops. There were fields of wheat and barley, gardens of beans, onions, lettuce, cucumbers and spice plants. These ancient farmers also had orchards for palm, apple and pomegranate trees. By the edge of a village you would see shepherds tending their sheep and goats, raised for their milk and wool. Cattle were of great value, they were kept for their milk, leather and meat but most of all they were excellent work animals.

Around 5,000 years ago these villages between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers grew into large cities. This area, between the Mediterranean Sea to the West and the Persian Gulf to the South East became known as the **Fertile Crescent** because of the shape that it formed and the agriculture that developed around the rivers.

The **City-States** that formed in this area made up the civilization of **Sumer**. A person from this area was known as a **Sumerian**. Although these cities shared the same culture, they developed their own governments, each with its own rulers. Sumerian city-states included Uruk, Kish, Lagash, Umma and Ur. Different city-states fought each other for control of the region. Sumer's earliest governments were controlled by their priests. Their places of worship, the **ziggurat** were a place of worship and the city hall. Farmers believed that good crops came from the blessings of their gods. In return the priests demanded a portion of every farmer's crop as taxes. During a war the people were led by a military commander. Over time the leadership passed down within the war leader's families, and between 3000 and 2500 B.C. some Sumerian city-states began being ruled by a dynasty (a series of rulers from a single family).



The City of Ur

Between 1922 and 1934 a British archaeologist, Leonard Wooley and his team uncovered the lost civilization of Ur. He believed that around 3,000 B.C. Ur had a population around 30,000 people. There were well-defined social classes, where priests and rulers had great powers. From Wooley's findings, historians have been able to recreate how the area once looked.

There was a large agricultural economy outside of the city. Irrigation and water-control systems were found; oxen led the plows used to cultivate the crops. Wide dirt roads led from the fields to the city. The city was protected by a great wall and gates were built for entry. Most people lived in small, windowless, one-story, boxlike houses. Wealthier families lived in two-stories houses with inner courtyards.

The economy flourished due to the hard working artisans and craftsmen. Wooley found evidence that these people made **bronze** (a mixture of copper and tin) and used this metal for weapons and tools. He also found a great deal of pottery. The city had several markets or bazaars where merchants traded crops and crafts using the barter system. To keep track of these transactions scribes were used and they recorded the trades on clay tablets using cuneiform.

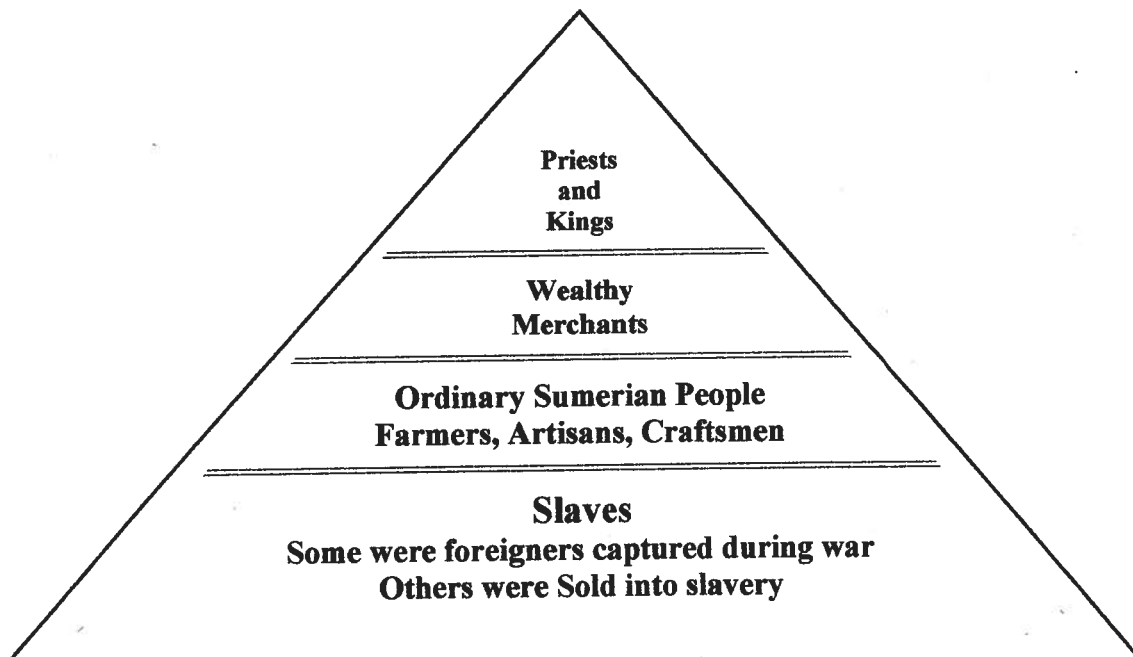
In the center of the city was the most important building, the temple or **ziggurat (the mountain of god)**. It was surrounded by its own wall and was a massive tiered structure that rose high above the other city buildings. The temple was the place for religious rituals (including sacrifices) as well as being the storage area for grains, woven fabrics and gems; the offerings made to the city's god.

Around 2500 B.C. new cities were being built all over the Fertile Crescent (in areas today we know as Syria, Northern Iraq and Turkey). As trade expanded Sumerians began to absorb ideas from neighboring cultures. This process of a new idea or a product spreading from one culture to another is called **Cultural Diffusion**.

Sumerians were polytheistic – they believed in many gods. Each god had a ranking. Enlil, the god of clouds and air was one of the most powerful while the lowest of all the gods was Wicked Uduga, the god of disease, misfortune and bad luck. It is believed that the Sumerians worshipped some 3,000 different gods. The Sumerians believed that the souls of the dead went to the “land of no return.” a dismal place between the earth’s crust and the ancient seas.

Societies had many myths and legends, one of the most famous being the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is one of the earliest known works of literature in the world. Gilgamesh was a legendary king who searches for immortality.

Social Classes in a Sumerian Society



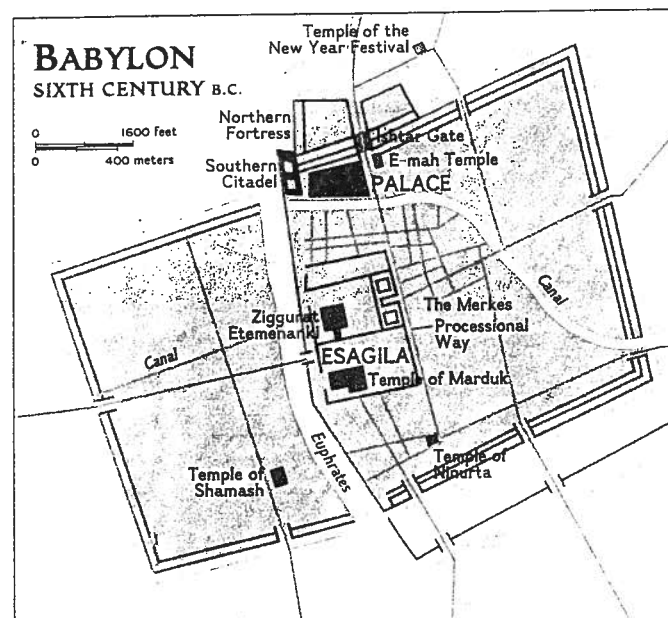
Sumerian law allowed parents, in order to pay off their debts, to sell their children into slavery. A Sumerian slave could work hard and then gain their freedom. Sumerian women could be farmers, artisans and craftspeople. They could own property and could even become priests. Only a few became scribes as girls were not allowed to attend school. Sumerian women had many more rights than many later civilizations.

Between 3000 to 2000 B.C. the city-states of Sumer were at war with one another. They became weakened from all of the fighting. About 2350 B.C. a conqueror from the city-state of Kish named Sargon defeated the city-states of Sumer. He came from the area north known as Akkad. They were Semitic peoples, who spoke a language related to Hebrew and Arabic. Sargon created the world's first known empire as he now controlled both northern and southern Mesopotamia. At its height the Akkadian empire stretched from the Mediterranean coast in the west to Iran in the east. His dynasty lasted about 200 years as it collapsed due to internal fighting, several invasions and a severe famine.

Around 2000 B.C. a sect of nomadic warriors known as the Amorites (also Semitic) invaded Mesopotamia. They established their capital on the Euphrates and called it **Babylon**. The Babylonian empire was at its peak between 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C. The greatest king of Babylon was Hammurabi. He was a great military leader, diplomat and administrator and the creator of a set of laws that settled many disputes. He ordered these laws to be carved on a stone pillar and placed in a public place so that everyone knew the laws of the city. The **Code of Hammurabi** contained 282 laws, many of which related to property issues. The laws applied to everyone but there were different punishments for rich and poor, men and women. Many times these laws used the principle of retaliation (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth).

(So) that the strong may not (abuse) the weak, to give justice to the orphan and the widow, I have inscribed my precious words... If a Freeman has put out the eye of another Freeman, they shall put out his eye. If he breaks the bone of another Freeman, they shall break his bone. Excerpt from The Code of Hammurabi, c. 1800 B.C.

An "eye for an eye" only applied if the person was of the highest or noble class. If the person injured was of the lower class then a payment in silver was the ruling. Hammurabi's Code reinforced the principle that the government had a responsibility for what took place within their society.



Not everyone thought that Babylon was a wonderful place. Many were brought to the city as prisoners, especially from where we call today Israel. To them Babylon was not beautiful and certainly not home. One poet wrote:

*By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat
sat and wept
when we thought of home.*

Two centuries after Hammurabi's reign, the Babylonian Empire fell to invading nomadic warriors. One such ruler was Darius of Persia who in 522 B.C. controlled an empire that stretched from Asia Minor to India. He divided his empire into **provinces** (locally controlled areas). Even though the empire collapsed many of the early Sumerian ideas were adopted by later peoples such as the Assyrians, Phoenicians and the Hebrews.

Many groups invaded and conquered the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. Some destroyed the city-states; some stayed and created well organized *empires - (a group of territories under the control of one ruler or government)*.

Civilizations of the Fertile Crescent

Civilization	Dates	Achievements
Babylonians	1790 B.C.	Code of Hammurabi (King of Babylon) Studied astronomy, especially sun, moon and the planets
Hittites	1400 B.C.	Forged iron tools and weapons
Assyrians	1100 B.C.	Set up first libraries Maintained well-organized society
Persians	539 B.C.	Conquered area from Asia Minor to India Improved trade by using coins and standard measures.
Phoenicians	600 B.C.	Gained fame as great sailors and traders Created alphabet similar to the one used today

It is hard to believe that the ruins of an ancient Mesopotamian city-state were once home to thousands of people. The lands were once covered in green fields and bustling cities. Their ideas about schools, literature, science and law are still with us today. Perhaps the answer to it all lays written on a clay tablet in cuneiform which states:-

"The gods alone live forever under the divine sun. But as for humans their days are numbered. All their activities will be nothing but wind".

Sumerian Science and Technology

Inventions and creations by Sumerians:

- The Wheel
- The Sail
- The Plow
- Bronze (mixing copper and tin)
- The first known system of writing – cuneiform
- One of the first known maps, a clay tablet around 2300 B.C.
- Some of the oldest written records of astronomy, chemical substances and disease symptoms
- Math (arithmetic and geometry) using a number system in base 60, 360° circle
- Buildings of mud, mortar and brick.
- Arches, columns, ramps, the pyramid design of the ziggurat.

Contributions by Sumerians:

- The first wheeled vehicles, especially chariots
- Systems of dikes and canals proving water for their crops
- They were the first known to write – a wedge shaped system called cuneiform
- Their record keeping dates back to 3200 B.C.
- They invented their own accurate calendar by studying the sun and the moon
- Built temples in center of each city called Ziggurats
- Protected their cities with thick walls
- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon
- They floated ice down the river to refrigerate food and drinks.

