

Ancient River Valley Civilizations

Mesopotamia



<https://sabbathsermons.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/dan-nebuchadnezzar.jpg>

The first humans were nomads who continually traveled in search of food. As these hunter-gathers developed better ways of doing things, they began to develop and created civilization. The first civilization developed in Mesopotamia.

Civilized societies (civilizations) have written languages, permanent structures (buildings), forms of government, dependence on agriculture, and specialization of labor. These societies have also developed customs such as formal religions and traditions in family structure, food, and clothing that have endured.

Geography of Mesopotamia

The **Tigris and Euphrates Rivers** are the most important physical features of the region that is sometimes known as **Mesopotamia**. The word Mesopotamia literally means “land between the rivers.” (Meso=middle/between &

potamia=river). The valley these rivers offered food, water, good soil, natural protection, and trade/transportation. It was a beneficial place to live. Another reason early humans settled down in Mesopotamia was that it was a part of a geographic feature called the **Fertile Crescent**. This crescent (arch shaped area of land) had naturally fertile soil. Today is it located in a region we call the **Middle East**, specifically the country of Iraq.



Look at the shape of this crescent moon and compare it to the shape of the Fertile Crescent

Map of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent
<http://my-ecoach.com/online/resources/5/AncientMesopotamianMap1.jpg>

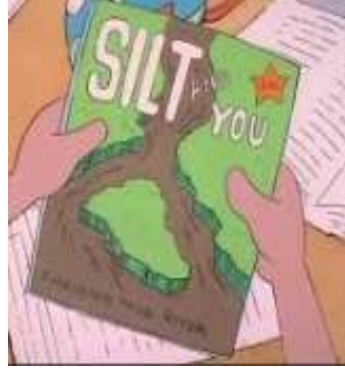
Question: What five things did a river valley offer? Explain how each would be useful to early humans.

The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flooded **unpredictably**. When it rained, or snow from the mountains melted, the extra water made these two rivers very dangerous and destructive. However, when this occurred, the rivers deposited a layer of **silt** over the flooded area. Silt is made up of small dirt particles and rocks that were picked up from the rivers bottom. It is full of rich nutrients and made the land very fertile. This made the land ideal for farming and early people settled close to the rivers.

Question: What were the pros (reasons for) and cons (reasons against) settling next to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Explain each.



Notice the dark rich color



Silt is still important today for farming

http://moitruong.com.vn/Upload/48/Nam_2011/1803phanhuuco.jpeg
<http://1986.photobucket.com/albums/ae342/dougunnieiscrazy/Dougs%20Lost%20Weekend/13.jpg>

Farming in Mesopotamia was challenging. The Middle East is known for being a hot and dry place. This made fertile land and water very valuable. Sometimes areas would experience **droughts** or periods without rainfall. When the rainfall did come, it was usually in great amounts, causing the rivers to rise and flood.

Early farmers came up with a way to solve the drought conditions and problems that came with flooding. They invented **irrigation**, a system of controlling water and taking it to where it is needed. They dug large water-holding areas called basins and then created man-made **canals**. By digging networks of ditches, farmers had a ready water supply along with a way to harness or control the flood waters. They also used **dams** and **waterwheels**. This helped them to harness the water of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.



Ancient irrigation canal and ditches in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq)

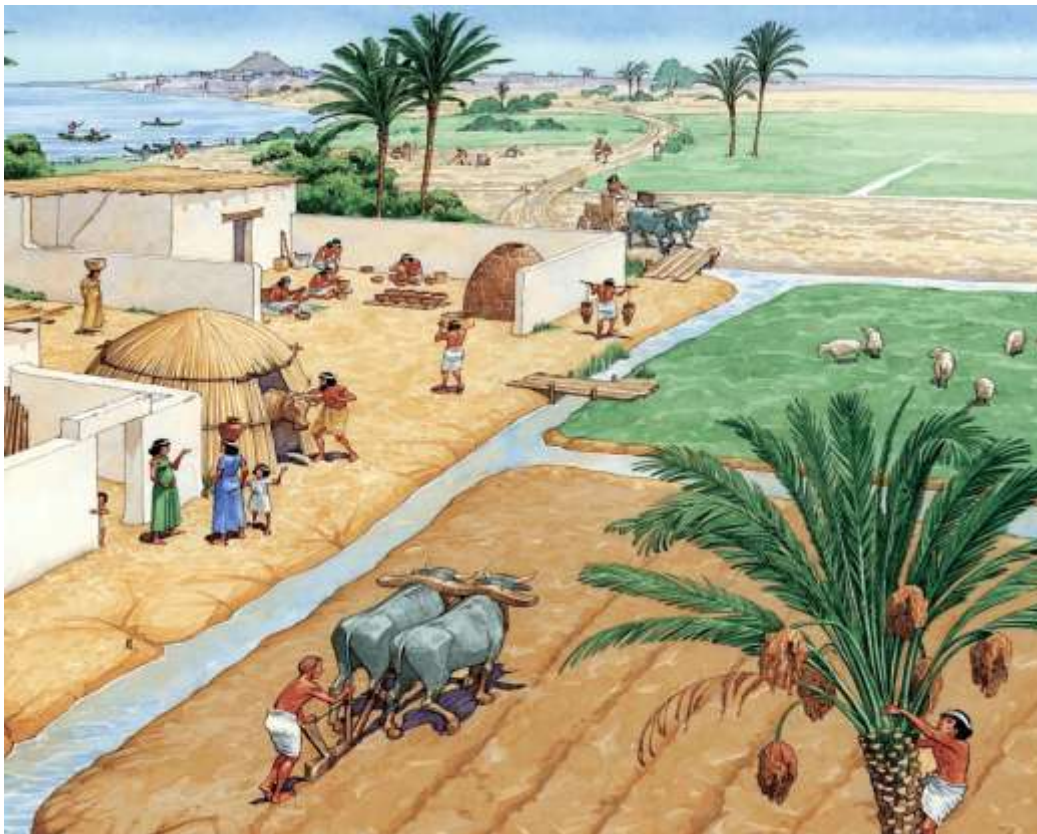
<http://www.blogodisea.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/canal-irrigacion-sumerio-cerca-eufrates.jpg>

Irrigation made farming way more productive and created a **surplus** or extra food. As farming settlements grew, agricultural products became plentiful. This extra food could be used to feed people or for trade. It also caused the population to grow, along with the number of the villages. This growth caused these early people to organize civilization and is why Mesopotamia is known as the “**Cradle of Civilization.**”

Question: What factors allowed the first civilization to rise in Mesopotamia?

Question: What scientific knowledge would Mesopotamian farmers have to have in order to be able to make the above irrigation system succeed?

Fewer people were needed to farm so they became free to do other jobs. New occupations began to develop. People began to make tools, lead religions, and help with the work of the government. The type of arrangement in which each worker **specializes** in a particular task or job is called a **division of labor**. With more people available to do more work, projects got larger and tasks became easier. Construction of buildings, dams, and irrigation systems became the work of many.



Life in ancient Mesopotamia

<http://blogs.birmingham.k12.mi.us/mrsfazzolaragilmore/files/2013/11/mesofarmer-2aury0b.jpg>

Sumer

Around 3,000 B.C., the first advanced society was created in the southern part of Mesopotamia. **Sumer**, was made up of mostly farmers; however, the centers of this society were the cities. Some of these cities had as many as 100,000 people living in them. This basic political unit was called a **city-state**. A city-state was a city surrounded by countryside. The amount of countryside depended upon the city's ability to control these large areas. Most often, control of the countryside depended upon a military. Because city-states desired more fertile farmland, permanent armies were created to fight for and protect the valuable countryside. The very first city-state of Sumer also protected itself by building strong walls around the city for protection.



Question: Examine this early image of a city-state. What would be some of the needs of people who lived inside the wall? What would be some of the needs of people not living inside the walls?

Sumerian Religion

Throughout history, religion has always played a role in the lives of humans. The same was true of Mesopotamian society. The Sumerians believed in many gods and goddesses. The practice of worshipping many gods is called **polytheism**. They believed these gods and goddesses had enormous powers of controlling the floods and harvests. These gods could bring illness, health, wealth, disease, life, or death. So pleasing these gods became very important and it was the duty of each individual to worship and serve them.

They built tall temple towers called **ziggurats** for worship. These temples were constructed in the middle of the city-state and were the center of society.

People came here to worship and to make sacrifices. They were layered and resemble a wedding cake. On the top of the ziggurat was the most sacred place, the home of the **patron** (main) god or goddess. It was painted blue and only the priest/king was allowed to enter.

Even though, the Sumerians were polytheistic, each city-state had one god or goddess they considered to be most important and protector of their city. Ziggurats were purposely constructed to be the tallest building within the city-state, reaching for the heavens.

Question: Why do you think ziggurats were placed in the middle of the city-states?



Sumerian Ziggurat

<http://destinationterre2.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/ur.jpg>



Statues of Sumerian gods and goddesses

http://eyesofreason.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/sumerian_idols.jpg

Sumerian Government and Society

As the Sumerian civilization developed, government and society began to organize. Most Sumerian city-states had a type of government we call a **monarchy**, which meant that their city-state was ruled by a king. As certain occupations began to take on different ranks or values, this created a **social hierarchy**. This social hierarchy governed all throughout Mesopotamia and **Sumeria** (name for all of the city-states of Sumer).

Sumerian priests had a high status/rank in society, in fact priests ranked just below kings on the social hierarchy. The Sumerians considered priests to be useful in interpreting the wishes of the gods and could help citizens gain favor with the gods. Priests also performed religious rituals.



Below the priests on the social hierarchy were skilled craftspeople, merchants, and traders. Trade had a great impact on these early ancient river valley civilizations. Traders could travel to faraway places and exchange goods that were important to them. Gold, silver, copper, lumber, food products, and precious stones were often traded. Farmers and laborers were below traders on the social hierarchy and at the very bottom were the slaves.

Many of the Sumerian leaders lived in large palaces and some of the wealthy members of society lived in very large homes as well. However, most people lived in smaller, one-story homes that were very close to each other.

Question: The triangle above represents the social hierarchy of Mesopotamia. This representation is referred to as a social pyramid. What questions come to mind as you look at this pyramid?

Question: What part of the triangle made up the largest part of the population? Explain your answer choice.

Sumerian Achievements

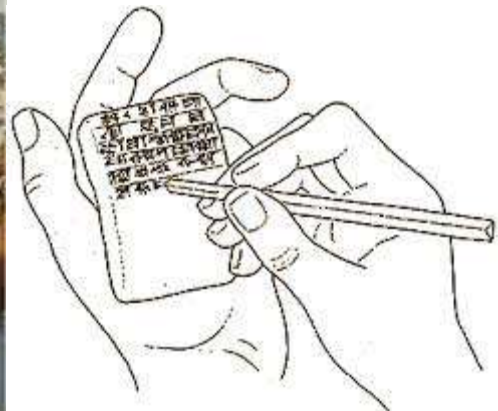
As the Mesopotamian civilization advanced, communication became very important. The Sumerians made one of the greatest advances in human history. They invented a form of writing called **cuneiform**. They did not have the modern writing tools that we have today. They used clay tablets and a stylus to produce wedge-shaped symbols. At first these symbols were **pictograms** (picture symbols). Later these symbols would represent sounds or syllables.



Cuneiform tablet on display in the National Museum of Iraq

http://www.wired.com/wp-content/uploads/images_blogs/gadgetlab/2011/03/cuneiform_660.jpg

At first, **cuneiform** was used to keep business records. The people who were chosen to be the writers were called **scribes** and their responsibility was to keep track of what was being traded. Later cuneiform was used by government workers and priests to keep records as well. By becoming a scribe, a person was able to move up the social pyramid.



<http://semanadelaciencia.cchs.csic.es/2010/sites/semanadelaciencia.cchs.csic.es.2010/files/Escribas%20Mesopotamia.jpg>

<http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/story/images/scribe.gif>

Question: What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using clay tablets?

Questions: What impact do you think this had on trade?

Question: Where do you think scribes would fit on the social pyramid? Justify your answer.

The Sumerians were also inventors. Probably the most important invention was the **wheel**. These wheels were placed on carts and wagons allowing the

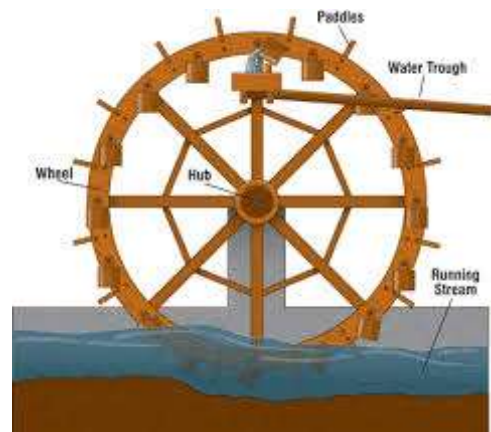
Sumerians to transport materials from one location to another. The potter's wheel was an offshoot of this invention. This tool allowed craftsmen to shape their materials out of clay. It made their job easier and improved the quality of their pottery. They also used a wheel to assist them with irrigation. The wheel helped them to bring water to areas of need.



<http://www.wheelfanatyk.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/sumerian-wheel.jpg>



Potter's wheel



Water wheel

http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_pCG_c3Rq788/S9aJenuz7BI/AAAAAAAAHU8/aGdM5s0s5do/s0/A+man+works+at+his+potter's+wheel+Srinagar+1929.jpg
<http://www.sswm.info/sites/default/files/toolbox/MACHINERY%20CORPORATION%202012%20Noria%20water%20wheel.jpg>

Other Sumerian advances were the creation of **bronze**. This **alloy** (mixture of metals) combined copper and tin. It allowed them to make their tools and weapons stronger than ever before. This made warfare more deadly and made farming more productive.

The plow was a major advancement in farming. It allowed the Sumerians to till or break the soil open, making planting easier and making it easier for crops to grow.

The Sumerians also worked with math. They developed a number system based on the number 60. Having a system of counting was very important for trade and daily life. They developed a 12 month calendar for the year.

Land of Conflict

Since civilization began in Mesopotamia, people have fought over the fertile land. Early city-states and groups of people fought many battles and wars with each other. New groups of people often came into the river valley challenging for power. Overtime, the great Sumerian civilization began to decline and was soon replaced by a more powerful group. This pattern occurred many times in ancient Mesopotamia. Even though the group in charge changed, they embraced the achievements and cultures of the previous rulers.



Babylonians

In 1800 B.C, the city of **Babylon** became the most powerful city-state in Mesopotamia. Through warfare, a man named **Hammurabi** carved out an empire in the Fertile Crescent. He was a skilled military leader and would make Babylon into one of the most important city-states of ancient times. His armies conquered Mesopotamia and he created a Babylonian Empire.

Hammurabi was more than a military leader. He was skilled in governing a large area. He coordinated large building projects and improved tax collection along with increasing trade. However, his most significant achievement was his code of laws.



One of the Hammurabi stele,
located in the Louve Museum



Hammurabi passing his judgment on those who broke his law code

195: If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.
201: If he has knocked out a commoner's tooth, he shall pay one-third mina of silver.

Examples of laws from Hammurabi's Law Code

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/classconnection/176/flashcards/6139176/jpg/d5e4bc9c9f-14B71C3813B7467C0A2.jpg>

Hammurabi's Code of Laws was a set of 282 laws that dealt with almost every part of daily life. These laws dealt with everything from trade, loans, theft, marriage, construction, injury, and murder. Specific crimes had specific penalties. Your punishment depended upon your social class. Wealthy people did not receive as harsh a penalty as the poor people. They were often able to simply pay a fine for their crime. Hammurabi had it displayed on **stele** (stone monuments) throughout his empire, so that all of the people could read it and know the law.

After Hammurabi's death the empire began to disintegrate and soon another group would rise to significance.

Phoenicians

Phoenicia was a small civilization located on the coast of the **Mediterranean Sea**. Although it was located outside of the river valley, the people here shared many characteristics and culture with those of Mesopotamia. Geographically, Phoenicia was surrounded by mountain ranges and hostile enemies. They also had few natural resources.

Because of these challenges, the Phoenician civilization became expert sailors. In fact they are known as some of the best sailors of the ancient world. One of the resources they did have was cedar forests. Cedar wood was extremely desired throughout the Middle East, especially for building. Phoenician ships would sail throughout the Mediterranean Sea, trading and establishing colonies.



<http://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/edsitement.neh.gov/files/images/content/AlphaMeditPhn.gif>

Question: How would establishing colonies help the Phoenicians overcome their lack of natural resources?

Question: What major trade cities did the Phoenicians control?

Phoenician Achievements

Even though they were tiny, the Phoenicians made one the most important achievements to our society today. They invented the alphabet, which allowed for better communication. It has changed and developed over thousands years, but we can thank the Phoenicians for our ABC's.



<http://wonderopolis.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Wonder-31-Alphabet-wide.jpg>

The Phoenicians also used the sea to help them produce purple dye. They took mollusk shell-fish and crushed them to extract the purple color they produced. Purple dyed clothing became a luxury and was worn by kings and the upper class.



Phoenician processing purple dye for clothing
<http://www.ukdivers.net/images/cards/bb02.jpg>

Question: What affect do you think purple dye had on the Phoenician economy?