

# THE KINGDOMS OF MESOPOTAMIA



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

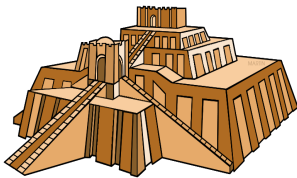
- Mesopotamian civilizations formed on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is today Iraq and Kuwait (coo-wait).
- Early civilizations began to form around the time of the Neolithic Revolution—12,000 BCE.
- Some of the major Mesopotamian civilizations include the Sumerian (soo-mayr-ian), Assyrian, Akkadian (a-kay-dian), and Babylonian (bab-a-lone-ian) civilizations.
- Evidence shows extensive use of technology, literature, legal codes, philosophy, religion, and architecture in these societies.

## CIVILIZATIONS BORN ALONG RIVERS

By roughly 6000 to 8000 years ago, agriculture (farming) was well under way in several regions including Ancient Egypt, around the Nile River; the Indus Valley civilization; Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; and Ancient China, along the Yellow and Yangtze (yang-zuh) rivers. This is because the regular river floods made for fertile soil around the banks and the rivers could also supply fresh water to irrigate crops. It's no coincidence that as agriculture allowed for denser and denser populations along with more specialized societies, some of the world's first civilizations developed in these areas as well.

## ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia—mainly modern-day Iraq and Kuwait—in particular is often referred to as the cradle of civilization because some of the most influential early city-states and empires first emerged there—although it's not the only place! Its modern name comes from the Greek for middle—*mesos*—and river—*potamos*—and literally means a “country between two rivers.” Those two rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates. Not only was Mesopotamia one of the first places to develop agriculture, it was also at the crossroads of the Egyptian and the Indus Valley civilizations. This made it a melting pot of languages and cultures that created a lasting impact on writing, technology, language, trade, religion, and law.



Associated with Mesopotamia are ancient cultures like the Sumerians, Assyrians, Akkadians, and Babylonians. Learning about this time period can be a little confusing because these cultures interacted with and ruled over each other over the course of several thousand years.

## SUMERIANS

Let's start with Sumer. We believe Sumerian civilization first took form in southern Mesopotamia around 4000 BCE—or 6000 years ago—which would make it the first urban civilization in the region. Mesopotamians are noted for developing one of the first written languages around 3000 BCE: wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay tablets. This language known as **cuneiform** (cue-nay-a-form) — another way to say wedge-shaped—script was also adapted by surrounding peoples to write their own languages for roughly 2000 years. Cuneiform is also the script that one of the world's first great works of literature from the Sumerians, **The Epic of Gilgamesh**, was written in. Mesopotamians used writing to record sales and purchases, to write letters to one another, and to tell stories. The important invention of the wheel is also credited to the Sumerians; the earliest discovered wheel

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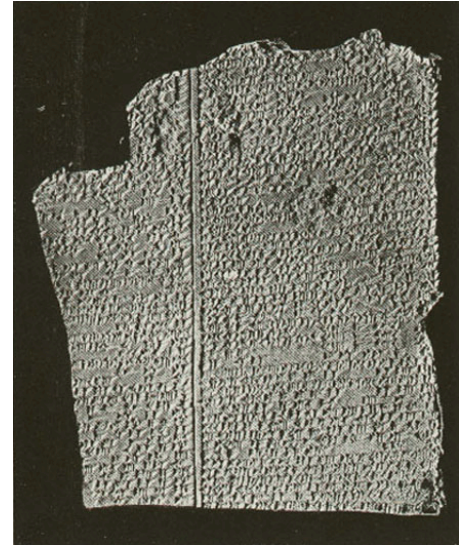
dates to 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia.

Sumerians built ships that allowed them to travel into the Persian Gulf and trade with other early civilizations, such as the Harappans (ha-rop-ans) in northern India. They traded textiles, leather goods, and jewelry for Harappan semi-precious stones, copper, pearls, and ivory.

Sumerian religion was polytheistic (pol-ee-thee-istic) — or worshipped multiple gods. Temples to these gods were constructed atop massive ziggurats which were in the centers of most cities. These structures would have taken thousands of people many years to construct.

A black-and-white image of an Epic of Gilgamesh tablet on a black background with cuneiform (wedge-shaped) writing. →

*A tablet from the Epic of Gilgamesh. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.*



### AKKADIAN EMPIRE

Around 3000 BCE, the Sumerians had significant cultural interaction with a group in northern Mesopotamia known as the Akkadians—named after the city-state of Akkad. The Akkadian language is related to the modern languages of Hebrew and Arabic.

Around 2334 BCE, Sargon of Akkad came to power and established what might have been the world's first dynastic empire. The Akkadian Empire ruled over both the Akkadian and Sumerian speakers in Mesopotamia and the Levant—modern day Syria and Lebanon. While the stories of his upbringing are mixed, his system of government was to become the standard that would be the basis for many centuries to come.

Under Sargon the Great, life in ancient Mesopotamia flourished. There was political stability within the borders of the empire which led to the massive improvements of public works projects such as roads, canals, and other irrigation projects essential to life in the desert. Under Sargon, the Akkadian Empire was bound together by a series of roads, which also included one of the world's first postal services. Back then clay seals and cuneiform were used instead of stamps. The system of roads would allow Sargon's armies to move quickly between territories and also helped spread their culture through the region.

Sargon put trusted men throughout the various city-states of the region. Usually each city-state had its own area of territory and was either directly conquered or was able to keep its original leadership by paying tribute. These men became the first governors as now know them. Sargon even placed his daughter as the High Priestess of Inanna in one of the city-states, which was a very respected religion position.

The Empire of Akkad collapsed in 2154 BCE, within 180 years of its founding, though much of the downfall of the city of Akkad is one of the biggest mysteries of Mesopotamian civilization.

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← The Akkadian Empire is pictured in brown. The directions of the military campaigns are shown as yellow arrows.

*Map of the Akkadian Empire. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.*

## ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Assyria is named for its original capital, the ancient city of Ašur—also known as Ashur—in northern Mesopotamia. Ashur was originally one of a number of Akkadian-speaking city states ruled by Sargon and his descendants. Within several hundred years of the collapse of the Akkadian Empire, Assyria had become a major empire around 1890 BCE. Nineveh was one of its most important and flourishing capitals of the empire.

The first major collection of cuneiform tablets was discovered by archaeologists at a library built in the capital of Nineveh. There were over 30,000 tablets recovered and historians say these tablets make up around 10,000 different texts. Without this discovery, we would have limited knowledge about life in ancient Mesopotamia.

Assyrian art is usually associated with winged bulls and lions to show the strength of the empire. The extravagant palaces built for kings had the walls covered in carvings and carved ivories to decorate the furniture. The carvings show Assyrian kings hunting, kneeling before their gods, or conquering foreign cities. They used art to retell stories of battles and honor war heroes, too.

For much of the 1400 years from 2000 B.C.E. until 605 B.C.E., the Akkadian-speaking Assyrians were the dominant power in Mesopotamia, especially in the north. The Assyrians were perhaps most famous for their fearsome army. They were a warrior society where fighting was a part of life. Every young man was expected to train to be a warrior and ready to fight for Assyria. They were known throughout the region of Mesopotamia as cruel and ruthless warriors. Assyrian warriors would maim, spear, and burn their captives. They had the strongest chariots and iron weapons, such as swords, spears, daggers, bows & arrows, compared to the copper weapons that most of the surrounding civilizations used. The empire reached its peak near the end of this period in the 800s B.C.E. At that time, the Assyrian Empire stretched from Egypt and Cyprus in the west to the borders of Persia—modern-day Iran—in the east.

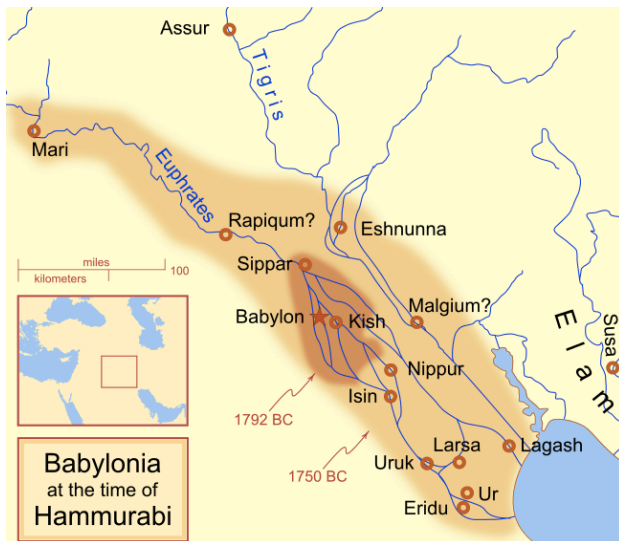
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## BABYLON



← Map of Babylonia at the time of Hammurabi. Map is of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the surrounding areas. Empire highlighted in brown and, near Babylon, red.

*The extent of the Babylonian Empire at the start and end of Hammurabi's reign. [Image](#) courtesy Boundless.*

Babylon was founded in 1894 BCE after the fall of the Akkadian Empire. Babylonia was the first empire that encompassed all of Mesopotamia. Things changed with the reign of Hammurabi, from 1792 to 1750 BCE. He was an efficient ruler, establishing a central government with taxes.

Hammurabi freed Babylon from foreign rule and then conquered the whole of southern Mesopotamia, bringing stability and the name of Babylonia to the region.

Located on the Euphrates River, the city of Babylon became a major trade hub bringing together new ideas and products among Mesopotamia and other civilizations. The city was also famous for its gardens, palaces, towers, and artwork.

It was also here that art, science, music, mathematics, astronomy, and literature began to grow and thrive for Mesopotamians.

One of the most important works of the First Dynasty of Babylon was the creation **Code of Hammurabi** in 1754 BCE which echoed and improved upon the earlier written laws of Sumer, Akkad, and Assyria. Hammurabi's code is one of the oldest translated writings of significant length in the world. The Code was written on stone slabs and clay tablets. The Code consists of 282 laws with punishments depending on social status, adjusting "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". For example, if a person from a noble class broke an enslaved person's arm, they would have to pay a fine, whereas if a noble person broke another noble person's arm, the offending noble would have their arm broken. Some have seen the Code as an early form of constitutional government, the presumption of innocence, and the ability to present evidence in one's case.

The Babylonian Empire established by Hammurabi lasted for 260 years until Babylon got sacked by invaders in 1531 BCE. The Babylonians gained control of the region again in 612 BCE; the second empire is known as the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

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