



# MESOPOTAMIA

## Overview

- Mesopotamian civilizations formed on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is today Iraq and Kuwait.
- Early civilizations began to form around the time of the Neolithic Revolution—12000 BC.
- Some of the major Mesopotamian civilizations include the Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian, and Babylonian 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 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 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

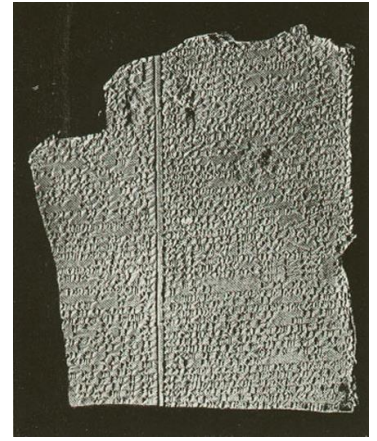
Mesopotamia—mainly modern-day Iraq and Kuwait—in particular is often referred to as the cradle of civilization because some of the most influential early city-states and empires first emerged there—although it's not the only place! Its modern name comes from the Greek for middle—*mesos*—and river—*potamos*—and 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 stimulated 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. These terms can also be associated with city-states, languages, religions, or empires—depending on the time and context we are looking at.

## Sumerians

Let's start with Sumer. We believe Sumerian civilization first took form in southern Mesopotamia around 4000 BC—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 scripts around 3000 BC: wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay tablets. This **cuneiform**—another way to say wedge-shaped—script was also adapted by surrounding peoples to write their

own languages for roughly 2000 years, until Phoenician, which the letters you are reading now are based on, began to become the dominant script in the first millennium BC. Cuneiform is also the script that one of the world's first great works of literature, **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 incredibly important invention of the wheel is also credited to the Sumerians; the earliest discovered wheel dates to 3500 BC in Mesopotamia.



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

Sumerian religion was polytheistic—or worshipped multiple gods—many of which were anthropomorphic—they took human-like form. 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.

## Akkadian Empire

Around 3000 BC, the Sumerians had significant cultural interchange 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. These languages are known as Semitic languages. The term Semitic comes from the biblical character Shem, a son of Noah, the purported progenitor of Abraham and, accordingly, the Jewish and Arab people. Around 2334 BC, 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. The Empire of Akkad collapsed in 2154 BC, within 180 years of its founding.



## Assyrian Empire

Assyria is named for its original capital, the ancient city of Asur—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 during the Akkadian Empire. Within several hundred years of the collapse of the Akkadian Empire, Assyria had become a major empire.

For much of the 1400 years from the late twenty-first century BC until the late seventh century BC, the Akkadian-speaking Assyrians were the dominant power in Mesopotamia, especially in the north. The empire reached its peak near the end of this period in the seventh century. 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. The major exceptions to Assyrian dominance were the Babylonian Empire established by Hammurabi and some more chaotic dark ages where there wasn't a dominant power.

## Babylon

Babylon was a minor city-state in central Mesopotamia for a century after it was founded in 1894 BC. Things changed with the reign of Hammurabi, from 1792 to 1750 BC. He was an efficient ruler, establishing a centralized bureaucracy with taxation. Hammurabi freed Babylon from foreign rule and then conquered the whole of southern Mesopotamia, bringing stability and the name of Babylonia to the region.

One of the most important works of this First Dynasty of Babylon was the compilation in about 1754 BC of a code of laws, called the **Code of Hammurabi**, which echoed and improved upon the earlier written laws of Sumer, Akkad, and Assyria. It's similar to the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu of Ur's code, written from 2100 to 2050 BC. Hammurabi's code is one of the oldest deciphered writings of significant length in the world. Written in about 1754 BC by the sixth king of Babylon, Hammurabi, the Code was written on stone **stele**—slabs—and clay tablets. The Code consists of 282 laws with scaled 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 BC. In the period between 626 BC and 539 BC, Babylon asserted itself again over the region with the Neo-Babylonian Empire. This new empire was overthrown in 539 BC by the Persians who then ruled over the region until the time of Alexander the Great, 335 BC.

