

Mesopotamia
World History
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By 5800 BCE, people were living in the southern plains of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The land in this region was exceptionally fertile, but the rainfall was insufficient to grow crops. The rivers were undependable, drying up in the searing heat of the summer. Irrigation was the solution to these problems. Over time, ditches laced the fields near the rivers, making the land a maze of artificial waterways.

No one knows for sure why urbanization began in Mesopotamia. The development of cities could have occurred due to environmental conditions. Lack of rainfall might have been the inspiration for people to organize themselves in a common effort to build canals for the irrigation of farmland. Another reason may have been the need for protection on the open plain, which could have led people to gather together to create walled enclaves. Whatever the reasons, this was the first time in history that humankind channeled its energies towards addressing the needs of a community as a whole.

One mistake often made about Mesopotamia is to think of the land as a united kingdom. Throughout most of Mesopotamian history cities were “city-states”, independent from each other. Cities such as Ur, Uruk, and Babylon all had their own independent governments. The reason historians call this area Mesopotamia is that most Mesopotamian city-states shared common characteristics. All city states were ruled by a dynasty, meaning they had a line of kings from the same family. Rulers in the city-states believed they were given their power by the gods, a concept now known as divine right. Each city used the same type of writing system, called cuneiform. Writing emerged in many different cultures and in numerous locations throughout the ancient world. It was not the creation of any one people. However, the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia are credited with inventing the earliest form of writing, which appeared ca. 3500 BCE. Most Mesopotamian cities also built grand towers called “ziggurats” that historians now believe served as religious centers. Another purpose of monumental architecture such as ziggurats and defensive walls was to demonstrate the power of the leader. Leaders often used these massive structures to remind their people who was in charge of their society and establish themselves as a legitimate leader. These methods of establishing political legitimacy were used by a number of other later states.

One reason why the concepts of divine right and building monumental architecture were shared with other civilizations was through trade. Mesopotamian cities traded heavily with other societies such as India and Egypt. Mesopotamian cities produced bronze and wheat and traded for gold and ivory with the Egyptians and for cotton from India.

The main reason why we know so much about the Mesopotamians is due to their ability to write. The first writings clay tablets are simple pictures, or pictograms, which represent an object or an idea. Because clay is a difficult material on which to draw lines and curves, the Mesopotamians eventually reduced pictograms into a series of wedge-shaped signs that they pressed into clay with a reed stylus. The invention of writing was the dawn of the information revolution. This great technological advance allowed news and ideas to be carried to distant places without having to rely on a messenger's memory. Like all inventions, writing emerged because there was

a need for it. In Mesopotamia, it was developed as a record-keeping vehicle for commercial transactions or administrative procedures. There are also texts that served as "copy books" for the education of future scribes. Eventually, cuneiform script was used to produce some of the greatest literary works in recorded history.

The finest literary work from ancient Mesopotamia is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Originally recited aloud, this towering work was probably recorded on clay tablets around 2000 BC, more than one thousand years before the Iliad and the Odyssey were recorded in writing. Gilgamesh is a long narrative poem that describes the deeds of a hero in his quest for identity and the meaning of life. Part man and part god, Gilgamesh deals with such universal themes as the meaning of friendship; fear of sickness, death, and the forces of evil; and the search for immortality.

Ultimately, Mesopotamian cities became strong states due to the same social, political, and economic factors as other ancient states. Early states established social classes, also called social hierarchy, they established strong centralized governments, and they promoted trade which made their societies stronger. Mesopotamian social classes put the king on top, priests below the king along with the king's government ministers. Few others had any social status since the people were just expected to be obedient and stay within their class. It was believed by most ancient societies that strict social classes kept society orderly and stable. Centralized government was needed to organize society as well, promoting trade and organizing the building of irrigation, walls, and monumental architecture.

Governments also passed law codes to keep people organized. The Laws of Hammurabi are the longest and best organized of the law collections that survive from ancient Mesopotamia. King Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792-1750 BCE, had the laws inscribed on stone stelae which he placed in various temples throughout his realm. The law collection was mainly comprised of a compilation of legal verdicts describing specific offenses and the penalties to be enforced in particular situations. Hammurabi's role was to act as guardian and protector of the weak and powerless, and to pay care and attention to the specific needs of the patron deities of the many cities incorporated into his realm. Following the laws is an epilogue describing the king as the military leader who brings peace to his subjects. It explicitly states that these laws were inscribed on a stela and publicly displayed in order to testify to Hammurabi's righteous and just rule, to bring consolation to anyone seeking justice, and to serve as an example for future rulers.