2 Mesopotamia

They see the cedar-mountain,
the abode of the gods, . . .
On the mountain the cedars
uplift their abundance.
Their shadow is beautiful, is all
delight.
Thistles hide thereunder, and
the dark prick-thorn,
Sweet-smelling flowers hide
under the cedars.

—Epic of Gilgamesh

THE POPULATION INCREASE due to the Agricultural Revolution led to the creation of farming villages, often in the same locations where nomadic hunter-gatherers had previously settled temporarily to plant their crops and graze their livestock. Grains were the usual basis of early agriculture, and the residents of those areas with fertile soil, sufficient rain, and a temperate climate to support wild grains were the pioneers of village development. From the farming village slowly evolved the much more socially differentiated town, with its various economic divisions and occupational specialties. From some small settlements grew the larger centers (called *cities*) of governmental power, religious ritual, manufacturing, trade, and cultural sophistication. A combination of agrarianism, city life, social complexity, government, trade networks, and writing produced the earliest known civilizations in world history. One of these was **Sumeria**, in southern Mesopotamia.

c. 15,000–10,000 BCE	End of the last Ice Age
c. 10,000 BCE	First evidence of agriculture in the Levantine Corridor
c. 5000 BCE	Sumerians arrive in Mesopotamia
c. 3500 BCE	Cuneiform writing
c. 3000 BCE	Sumerian city-states develop
c. 2300 BCE	Sargon of Akkad
1700s BCE	Hammurabi/Oldest surviving law code
c. 1500 BCE	Hittites conquer Mesopotamia
c. 900 BCE	Rise of Assyria
539 BCE	Conquest by Persia

Neolithic Southwest Asia

Around 15,000 BCE, the world's climate began warming after centuries of Ice-Age conditions, melting glaciers in the northern hemispheres, raising sea levels, and covering the planet's landmasses with vast inland lakes, streams, and forests. In southwestern Asia, giant stands of oak and pistachio forests and the bounteous herds of game replaced Ice-Age grasslands. Hunter-gatherers of the Near and Middle East, called **Natufians** (nah-TOO-fee-ans), stalked antelope

and Persian gazelle and harvested wild nuts and grasses, using flint-bladed sickles, enabling them to expand their populations dramatically. However, around 11,000 BCE, a catastrophe occurred. Known to archaeologists as the *Younger Dryas Event*, glacial melt water that had accumulated in a colossal, freshwater lake in northern Canada suddenly burst into the Atlantic Gulf Stream, triggering a thousand-year-long regression in Europe and southwestern Asia to the cooler and drier conditions of the late Ice Age.

The abundant sources of water and plant foods previously available to humans and animals alike disappeared, forcing Natufians to congregate in small, semipermanent villages near surviving streams and rivers. Coming after a time when populations had grown dramatically, these catastrophic events forced small groups of these western Asians to adopt more intensive ways of managing their food resources. Basically, this encouraged them to switch from gathering and hunting to planting and domesticating cereals like barley and wheat, which grew in wild forms in their natural environment. Thus, the world's first farming settlements appeared in a section of the Near East called the **Levantine Corridor**, an arc of land that was endowed with especially high water tables and included much of present-day Turkey, Israel, Syria, and the Euphrates River valley. Here, by 8000 BCE, cereal agriculture had become widespread and people had added to their food stocks by domesticating and breeding goats and sheep. Later still, cattle were introduced, possibly from Africa.

The switch to agriculture and livestock breeding provided an abundance that allowed people to grow their populations and congregate in towns and cities for the first time in history; and wherever this transformation occurred, the world's earliest recorded civilizations also appeared. The first of these was in a part of the Levantine Corridor that included the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—a land that the ancient Greeks called **Mesopotamia** ("land between the rivers"), now the southeastern portion of Iraq.

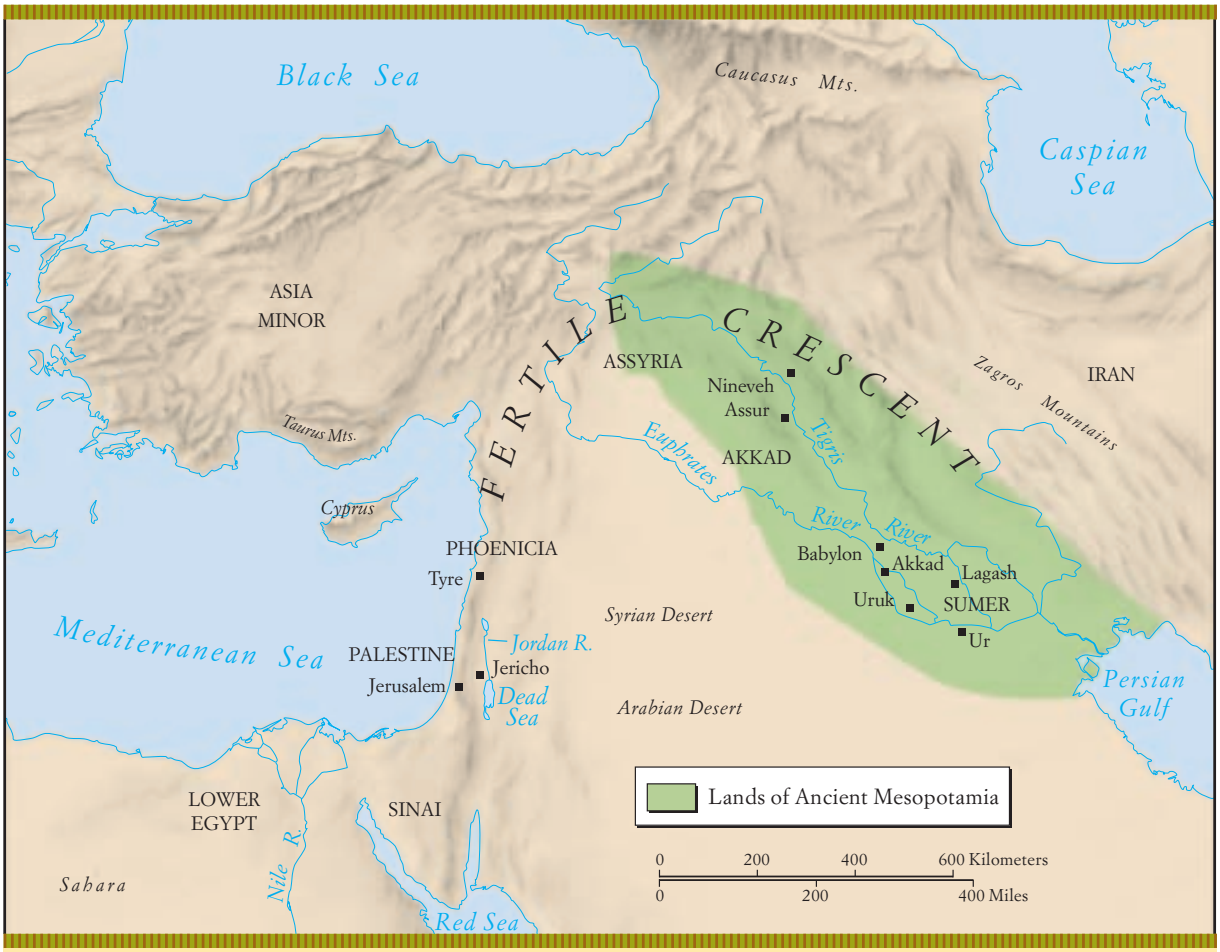
Sumerian Civilization

Along with early evidence of agriculture and herding, some of the earliest towns and cities archaeologists have discovered are in southwestern Asia. The Euphrates and Tigris Rivers originate in present-day Turkey and flow parallel to each other for about 400 miles before joining together to flow into the head of the Persian Gulf (see Map 2.1). In the third millennium BCE, the first urban civilization of the world developed in the lower courses of these rivers. This agrarian civilization was supported by extensive irrigation farming, pioneered by a people called the Sumerians (soo-MAY-ree-ans), who came into Lower Mesopotamia from somewhere to the east about 5000 BCE. Gradually, the Sumerians created a series of small, competing kingdoms, or city-states. Here they developed a series of ideas and techniques that would provide the foundation of a distinct and highly influential civilization.

The Sumerians were the first people to do a number of highly significant things.

- They created the first large cities, as distinct from towns and small cities like Jericho. The largest of

JERICHO. Located in the West Bank, Palestinian Territory, the ruins of Jericho date to about 8000 BCE, making it one of the oldest Neolithic cities in the world. This is a view of the round tower of the city, which the biblical prophet, Joshua, is said to have toppled. Archaeologists believe that an earthquake in the second millennium BCE actually destroyed the fortifications.



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MAP 2.1 The Ancient Near East

The Mesopotamian city-states were concentrated in the rich agricultural plain (shown here in green) created by silt from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as they flowed toward the head of the Persian Gulf. The wide belt of land reaching from Mesopotamia to Egypt along the Mediterranean coast is known as the Fertile Crescent.

>> MAP QUESTIONS

How did the location of the Sumerian urban centers facilitate trade?

View an interactive version of this or a related map online.

these may have contained upward of 100,000 people. All early civilizations had advanced centers such as these—ones that drew their sustenance from a surrounding countryside that they had subjected to their rule. Each city was encircled for miles by villages of farmers who built the canals and provided the agricultural surplus on which the city elite depended. Most of these **city-states** began as places of ritual prayer and sacrificial offerings that honored one or more of their gods, whose good-will was purchased so agriculture could flourish. Gradually, the ceremonial aspects of the shrines and their priests were joined by commercial and governmental pursuits, so it became a place in which a growing population of labor-specialized people was supported by sophisticated irrigation agriculture.

- They developed the first sophisticated system of *writing.*
- They built the first monumental buildings, using sun-baked bricks and the post-and-lintel system (beams held up by columns, used today in structures as varied as monkey bars and bridges) as the basic elements of support.
- They probably invented the wheel as a load-bearing transportation device.
- They were the first to design and build an irrigation system powered by the force of gravity.
- They were the first to use the plow and among the first to make bronze metal utensils and weaponry.

What we know of the Sumerians is extremely impressive. We know a good deal not only because they left extensive records and physical evidence of their own, but also because they had enormous influence on their neighbors and rivals—such as the Akkadians and Egyptians—as well as on their several conquering successors in Mesopotamia.

The early history of Mesopotamia under the Sumerians is a tale of great technological and cultural advances, marred by strife, disunion, and unceasing warfare among the principal city-states. Trade wars and disputes over water assured that no centralized governing power was possible. Whenever one city managed to seize control of substantial supplies of water and trade, the others upstream or downstream would band together against it or its subjects would rebel. Conflicts seem to have been the order of the day, with city-state vying against city-state in a constant struggle for mastery over precious irrigated lands.

Not until about 2300 BCE was the land between the rivers brought under one effective rule, and that was imposed by a Semitic invader known as Sargon the Great, who conquered the entire plain. Sargon established his capital in the new town of Akkad, near modern-day Baghdad, capital of Iraq. Although the Akkadian Empire lasted less than a century, its influence was great, for it spread Sumerian culture and methods far and wide in the Near and Middle East, through that wide belt of land reaching from Mesopotamia to Egypt that is called the **Fertile Crescent** (see Map 2.1).

Although the separate Sumerian city-states never united until outsiders overwhelmed them, their cultural and religious achievements and beliefs would be picked up by their conquerors and essentially retained by all their successors in Mesopotamia.

Earning a Living

Most Mesopotamians at this time drew their livelihood from the land either directly, as farmers and herders, or indirectly, as carters, wine pressers, millers, or any of the dozens of other occupations that transformed agrarian products into food and drink and delivered them to the consumer. For every person who lived in an urban setting and did not have to grow his or her own food, there were ten or twenty who lived in the agrarian villages that surrounded the cities and spent most of their labor in the fields or the pasture.

As we know from both historical and archaeological evidence of many kinds and from many places, commerce was also primarily concerned with trade in foodstuffs—grain above all—although other commodities essential to living had to be imported. It is easy for us to forget just how much of the time and energy of early civilizations went into the pursuit of sufficient caloric intake! Three square meals a day were often the exception, and the ordinary person rarely took them for granted.

Not all occupations involved farming or foodstuffs, however. A few required education and a degree of formal training: scribes, bookkeepers, and the priesthood, for example. Although each civilization had some learned occupations, they varied in prestige and in the number of persons who practiced them. Mesopotamian city dwellers seem to have been literate to an unusual degree and took writing for granted as a normal part of daily life. Many other occupations did not require literacy, but they did demand a lengthy period of apprenticeship. Most of these occupations were found in the towns. They included metalworking, leatherwork, jewelry making, and all types of ceramics, as well as fine and rough carpentry, masonry, and other building trades.

Besides these skilled jobs, there were shopkeepers, their clerks and errand boys, casual laborers available for any type of manual task, and a large number of trades connected with the production of clothing and textiles. Many people were also involved in the preparation, distribution, and sale of food, whether in shops or at eating places such as taverns and street booths. One crucial task, which we in the present-day United States rarely think about, was obtaining a regular supply of water. This was one of the most important tasks of women and children, and it took great amounts of time and labor.

Some civilized centers employed more of one type of labor than others, but overall there was a rough parity. Most jobs were in very small-scale enterprises. These were usually family owned and staffed, with perhaps two or three paid or slave laborers. Slavery was less common in some places, but slaves made up a sizable portion of the working population in all ancient societies except early Egypt and China. They sometimes performed much of the particularly unpleasant or dangerous work (mining and handling the dead, for example).

Religion and the Afterlife

Our knowledge of the Sumerians' religion is sketchy and unsure. As in most agrarian civilizations, they believed in a host of nature gods (**polytheism**—Greek for "many gods") of various ranks. There were many male and female deities, each with specific competencies in natural and human affairs. Among the most important were *Innana,* the goddess of love and fertility, and the water god, *Enki* (ENG-kee). These gods were much like super humans, with all the faults and weaknesses of men and women. Some were immensely powerful: Their will affected all the Sumerian settlements, and they were believed to rule over all of nature and humanity.

In addition, each city-kingdom had its local gods and spirits of the land and sky who were crucial to the prosperity of the citizens and who had to be carefully placated by

Georg Gerster/Photo Researchers, Inc.

ZIGGURAT. The stepped pyramidal form has been used from one end of the earth to the other for religious monuments. It combines an overpowering sense of mass and permanency with a mystical projection of divine superiority over earthbound humans. Pyramids like this Mesopotamian ziggurat can also be found in Egypt, South and Central America, and, in modified form, Southeast Asia. The Mesopotamian variety was constructed of earthen bricks, which demanded frequent renovation lest they dissolve into ruins through time's erosive force or an enemy's vandalism.

professionally trained priests. The gods were thought to reside at times in the great temple complexes crowned and protected by the **ziggurats** (ZIHG-goo-rahts), or stepped pyramids. Here, hundreds of priests and their dependents ritually prayed and made offerings to them on behalf of the city-state's welfare. The best-known ziggurat, erected by the powerful city of **Babylon** long after the Sumerian Epoch, was the Tower of Babel of biblical fame.

The two features of Mesopotamia's natural environment that stood out the most were the aridity of the climate and the unpredictability of the rivers' annual floods, on which everyone relied for growing food. Like nature, which they controlled, the Mesopotamian gods were frequently cruel toward their human creatures and highly unpredictable. Men and women were the slaves of their god-creators, intended as the providers of the labors that the gods didn't wish to perform. Every religious function was performed on behalf of the community; hence, there is little evidence of a personal, loving relationship between deities and humans.

Nor is there any trace of ethics in Mesopotamian religion. The demands of the gods had no intrinsic connection with doing good or avoiding evil on Earth beyond what offerings and ritual acts could win from them to assure the regularity of the natural cycles on which a farm-based economy depended. The gods often punished humans, but not for "moral" failings, or what we would call *sin*. Being nature gods, the punishments often took the form of natural catastrophes, such as droughts or floods that harmed the entire community. To avert punishment, the gods had to be appeased with frequent, costly rituals and ceremonies, which were the responsibility of a hereditary priesthood and, to a lesser extent, the rulers.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis

WARKA VASE. Sumerian priests from Uruk (3500–3000 BCE) used vases like this one to make offerings to the gods. The vase depicts water, wheat or barley growing from the water, and naked priests gratefully presenting the "first fruits" of a successful crop to Innana, the goddess of fertility.

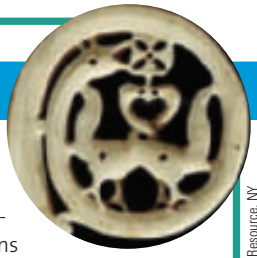
The priests used their power as interpreters of the will of the gods to create large and wealthy temple communities supported by the offerings of the citizens. In some Sumerian cities, the priests seem to have been the true rulers for a time. This practice ended with the conquest by Sargon the Great, who made the royal throne—supported by a powerful army—the undisputed center of authority.

The religion was certainly not an optimistic one, and it seems to have had no clear ideas on the nature of the afterlife or who, if

anyone, could enjoy immortality. The best approach seemed to be to honor and obey the gods as well as you could, appease them by making offerings through their powerful priests, and hope to prosper in this life and the afterlife, if there was one. Much of what is known about Mesopotamian religious belief derives from their literature, in which several major myths of Western civilization—including the Flood and the Garden of Eden—find their first expression.

Particularly important is the creation myth embraced in the ***Epic of Gilgamesh*** (GIL-gah-mesh), the first epic poem in world literature. Gilgamesh is a man, a king of one of the city-states, who desires the secret of immortal life; but the gods, jealous of his power, defeat him. The

PATTERNS OF BELIEF



Monastery, Goettweig, Austria/© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The collection of stories that is termed the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest approaches to analyzing the relations of gods and humans. It portrays a society in search of a religious basis for human action. Stories of the Flood occur in many ancient cultural traditions, such as the Noah story in the Hebrew Bible, the creation myths of the Hindus, and some of the North American Indian creation accounts. In each case, the story tells of a disastrous flood that engulfed the entire earth and nearly annihilated humanity.

In the Middle Eastern tradition, the narrative of the Flood is first found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this version, the main focus of the story is on the inevitability of death and the defeat of the hero as he attempts to achieve immortality. The Mesopotamian counterpart of the biblical Noah is Utnapishtim. Here his description of the flood is contrasted with the version recounted in Genesis:

Gilgamesh

The gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the netherworld, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dikes . . . a stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of storms turned daylight into darkness, when he smashed the earth like a teacup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, and it poured over the people like the tide of battle; a man could not see his brother nor could the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven . . . they crouched against the walls, cowering . . . the gods of heaven and hell wept . . . for six days and six nights the winds blew, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. . . . I looked at the face of the earth, and all was silence, all mankind was turned into clay. . . . I bowed low, and I wept. . . .

Genesis

All the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights. . . . The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose above the earth. The waters rose higher and higher, and increased greatly on the earth . . . the waters rose higher and higher, so that all the highest mountains everywhere under the heavens were covered. All flesh that moved on the earth died: birds, cattle, wild animals, all creatures that crawl upon the earth, and all men. Only Noah and those with him in the ark were saved.

Gilgamesh is a grim tale that speaks of death and the afterlife in pessimistic and fearful tones. Indicative is this description by Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu of a vivid dream he had had, foreshadowing his approaching death:

> I stood alone before an awful Being; his face was somber like the blackbird of the storm. He fell upon me with the talons of an eagle, and he held me fast, pinioned by his claws until I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers . . . and he led me away, to the house from which those who enter never return . . . whose people sit in darkness, dust their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for coverings, they see no light, they sit in darkness.

The epic ends with the failure of Gilgamesh's quest for the secret of immortal life. The somber funeral chant seems to underline the poet's sense of resignation and futility:

> The king has laid himself down, and will not rise again.
> The Lord of Kullab [that is, Gilgamesh] will not rise again,
> He overcame evil, but he will not rise again, Though he was strong of arm, he will not rise again, Possessing wisdom and a comely face, he will not rise again.

>> Analyze and Interpret

What does the emphasis on defeat and death in the Gilgamesh story signify in terms of the beliefs of the peoples who created these myths? Read the full accounts of the flood in *Gilgamesh* and Genesis. What do you make of the differences?

Source: Reprinted with permission from Penguin Classics, 1960, 2d rev. ed., 1972. © N. K. Sanders, 1960, 1964, 1972.

You can read the entire *Epic of Gilgamesh* online.

excerpts in the Patterns of Belief box show the similarity between the flood stories in *Gilgamesh* and the book of Genesis of the Judeo-Christian scripture.

Mathematics and Chronology

Like almost all agrarian civilizations, Mesopotamians' sense of time was shaped by the cyclic nature of seasonal change. The year was based on the passage of seasons, and their way of reckoning this was by observing and recording the positions of heavenly bodies as well as the recurring changes in their surroundings. Their calendar was subdivided into lunar months, corresponding to the period between one full moon and the next. In calculating the year's length, the Sumerians arrived at a figure close to our own—although not quite as close as the Egyptians—by employing their solar calendar. All in all, Sumerian math (along with its further development by the Babylonians and Persians) has held up very well and has been influential in all later Western science, including that of the Greeks.

After the invention of writing, perhaps the most dramatic advances made by these early inhabitants of Mesopotamia were in mathematics and chronology. Sumerian math was based on units of 60 and its divisors, and this, of course, is the reason that we still measure time in intervals of 60 seconds and 60 minutes. Much of our basic geometry and trigonometry, such as the 360 degrees of a circle, also stems from the Sumerians.

CUNEIFORM WRITING. This example of cuneiform writing is an astrological tablet from Uruk in Sumer. Probably recorded by a priest, it serves as a reminder of the linkage that existed between religious ritual and timekeeping in ancient agrarian societies.

The Evolution of Writing

Spoken language was one of the key achievements of early human beings, enabling an intensity and variety of communication that was previously unknown. We have no certain idea when modern forms of speech occurred, but linguists theorize that this was around 80,000 years ago. Not until sometime in the fourth millennium (4000–3000 BCE), however, was oral language joined to a written form, and so remained permanently accessible.

Perhaps the most important and lasting of all the Sumerian accomplishments was the gradual invention of a system of writing, which evolved from their need to have good records. This was for the purpose of keeping their calendar and predicting seasonal changes, as well as for commercial and religious taxation, marital and inheritance contracts, and some other activities in which it was important to have a clear, mutually agreed-upon version of past events. Some type of marks on some type of medium (clay, paper, wood, stone) had been in use long, long before 3500 BCE. What did the Sumerians of that epoch do to justify the claim of having invented writing? Significantly, they moved beyond pictorial writing, or symbols derived from pictures, into a further phase of conveying meaning through abstract marks.

All writing derives originally from a simplified picture. This is called *pictography*, and it has been used from one end of the earth to the other. Pictography had several obvious disadvantages, though. For one thing, it could not convey the meaning of abstractions (things that have no material, tangible existence). Nor could it communicate the tense of a verb, the degree of an adjective or adverb, or many other things that language has to handle well.

The way that the Sumerians (and later peoples) got around these difficulties was to expand their pictorial writing gradually to a much more sophisticated level so that it included special signs for abstractions, tenses, and so on—signs that had nothing to do with tangible objects. These are called *conventional signs* and may be invented for any meaning desired by their users. For example, if both of us agree that the sign *cc* stands for "the boy in the blue suit," then that is what it means when we see it on a piece of paper, or a rock surface, or wherever. If we further agree that by adding the vertical stroke *!* we make a verb into a future tense, then it is future tense so far as we're concerned. Very slowly, the Sumerians expanded their pictographic vocabulary in this way, while simultaneously simplifying and standardizing their pictures so that they could be written more rapidly and recognized more easily by strangers.

A big breakthrough came sometime in the third millennium, when a series of clever scribes began to use written signs to indicate the sounds of the spoken language. This was the beginning of the *phonetic written language*, in which the signs had a direct connection with the oral language. Although the Sumerians did not progress as far as

an alphabet, they started down the path that would culminate in one about 2,000 years later.

The basic format of the written language after about 3500 BCE was a script written in wedge-shaped characters, the **cuneiform** (KYOO-neh-form), on clay tablets about the size of your hand. Tens of thousands of these tablets covered by cuneiform writings have been dug up in modern times. Most of them pertain to contracts between private parties or between a private party and officials. But other tablets contain prayers of all sorts, proclamations by officials, law codes and judgments, and some letters and poetry. Sumerian cuneiform remained the basic script of most Near and Middle Eastern languages until about 1000 BCE, when its use began to fade out.

Law

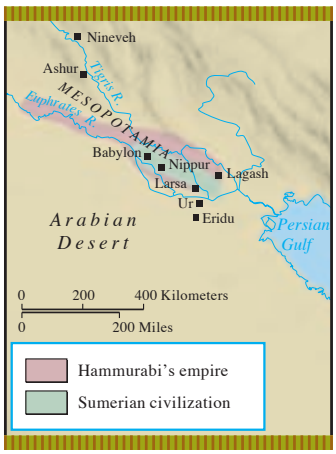
One of the earliest known complete codes of laws originated in post-Sumerian Mesopotamia in the 1700s BCE, during the reign of the emperor Hammurabi (ham-moo-RAH-bee). He is the first of the historic lawgivers whose work has survived into our times. His code certainly had predecessors that have been lost, because its legal concepts and vocabulary are much too sophisticated for it to have been a first effort. The code is based on two distinctive principles: Punishment depended on the social rank of the violator, and offenders were subjected to the same damages or injury they caused to others. These ideas would be incorporated into many later codes over the next 2,000 years, although rejected by modern democratic theory. A commoner would get a different, more severe punishment than would a noble or official for the same offense. And a slave (of whom there were many) would be treated more harshly still. If in the same social class as the victim, the offender would have to give "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

Another basic principle of Mesopotamian law was that the government should act as an impartial referee among its subject citizens, seeing to it that the wronged party got satisfaction from the wrongdoer. The victim had the right to demand personal compensation from the person who had caused him grief—a legal concept that is being reintroduced into American criminal law.

People were not equal before the law: Husbands had a great deal of power over wives, fathers over children, rich over poor, free citizens over slaves. Nevertheless, a definite attempt was made to protect the defenseless and to see that all received justice.

Much of **Hammurabi's law code** dealt with social and family problems, such as the support of widows and orphans, illegitimacy, adultery, and rape. Clearly, the position of women was inferior to that of men, but women did have certain legal rights and were not just the property of their male relatives. A wife could divorce her husband, and if the husband was found to be at fault, the wife was entitled to the property she had brought into the marriage. Women could also enter into contracts and have custody over minor children under certain conditions—two rights that many later civilizations denied them.

HAMMURABI'S EMPIRE



Government and Social Structure

Government in Mesopotamia can be divided into two types: the **theocracy** (rule by gods or their priests) of the early city-states of the Sumerians and the kingdom-empires of their successors, starting with Sargon the Great of Akkad. A king, assisted by noble officials and priests, ruled the cities. In Sumerian times, the kings were no more than figureheads for the priests, but later they exercised decisive power.

The city, ruled by an elite headed by a king, was quite different in its social subdivisions from the village. In the village, social equality was rarely challenged, and a leveling interdependency in everyday life was taken for granted. In the urban areas, on the contrary, distinctions among people were essential and expected to be displayed in many fashions and activities. Above all, the lower classes supported the far-less-numerous upper classes through both labor and taxes.

The Mesopotamian civilization apparently had but three classes of people, the first of which were the small groups of priests and noble landlords (often two branches of a single group) who were large landowners and had a monopoly on the higher offices of the city. Behind the priesthood stood the immense power of the high gods of the Sumerians and their successors: the deities of earth, sky, fire, freshwater, salt water, and storm.

The second group, the freemen, was the most numerous class. They did the bulk of the city's work and trading, and owned and worked most of the outlying farmlands. The relatively protected position of freemen is attested to by Hammurabi's code and by the thousands of other documents recovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the ruins of Sumerian cities. Both priests and nobles depended on their skills and their labor, which was presumably given on a more-or-less voluntary basis.

Finally, the slaves—who at times were very numerous—often possessed considerable skills and were given some responsible positions. Freemen had some political rights, but slaves had none. As we will see repeatedly, slaves were common in most ancient

The Wheel of the Law, 7th-8th century (stone), Siamese School/National Museum, Bangkok, Thailand/Photo © Luca Tettoni/The Bridgeman Art Library International.

LAW AND GOVERNMENT

Hammurabi and the Mesopotamian Ideal of Kingship

The Emperor Hammurabi, who ruled Babylon in Mesopotamia from about 1792 to 1750 BCE, erected a monument to his reign on a stone pillar. Called the Stela of Hammurabi, the monument proclaimed his accomplishments and claims to greatness.

. . . . When the deities of old
who allot the destinies of the world,
Gave the rule of human beings to [the god] Marduk,
[and] set him over all other deities,
. . . . [and] made Babylon the foremost city-state in all the earth
and the capital of an everlasting kingdom,
with foundations laid strong as those of heaven and earth,
At that time I, Hammurabi,
the pious, god-fearing prince,
. . . . was called forth by name for the welfare of the people:
To cause justice to appear in the world,
to destroy the evil and the wicked
so that the strong should not oppress the weak,
and to rise like Shamash to give light to the land.

. . . I, Hammurabi, the shepherd,
have gathered abundance and plenty,
have stormed the four quarters of the world,
have magnified the fame of Babylon,
and have elated the mind of Marduk my lord.

. . . . To me has been given the authority,
and I have been faithful to Shamash.
I am like a god among kings,
endued with knowledge and wisdom.
I have provided plentiful offerings for the deities
. . . . and built their temples.
I am pure of mind,
and the deities listen to my prayers.
I am the wise ruler
who bears the responsibility of government,
. . . . who has attained the source of wisdom,
who has enlarged the kingdom,
and who has established pure sacrifices forever.
I am first of all kings;
I have conquered all peoples.
. . . . I am the shepherd of the people
who causes the truth to appear,
guiding my flock rightly.
I am the pious prince,
deep in prayer to the great deities.

. . . . I am the mighty king, the sun of Babylon,
who causes light to appear in the land,
who brings all the world to obedience.
I am the favorite of the deities.
When Marduk commanded me
. . . . to establish justice for the people of the land
and to provide orderly government,
I set forth truth and justice throughout the land,
and caused the people to prosper.

Louvre, Paris, France/Bridgeman Art Library

THE HAMURABI STELA. The stela is about five feet high. Its top depicts King Hammurabi standing before the god Shamash.

>> Analyze and Interpret

Based on this memorial, what requirements did a king like Hammurabi have to satisfy to measure up to the Mesopotamian ideal of a great king? From what god did a king have to obtain his right to govern?

Source: From the Hammurabi Stele, translated by Stan Rummel at the "Photo Gallery of Ancient Mesopotamia and Persia," by K. C. Hanson. The Ancient History Sourcebook.

You can read the entire Code of Hammurabi online.

societies, and enslavement was by no means the morally contemptible and personally humiliating condition it would frequently become later. Slavery had nothing much to do with race or ethnicity and everything to do with bad luck, such as being on the losing side of a war or falling into debt. Most slaves in Mesopotamia—and elsewhere—had run up debts that they could not otherwise repay. It was not at all uncommon to become someone's slave for a few years and then resume your freedom when you had paid off what you owed. Hereditary slavery was rare. Many owners routinely freed their slaves in their wills as a mark of piety and benevolence.

Maltreatment of slaves did occur, but mostly to fieldworkers, miners, or criminals who had been enslaved as punishment and had no personal contacts with their owner. On the other side, in all ancient societies many slaves engaged in business, many had advanced skills in the crafts, and some managed to accumulate enough money working on their own accounts that they could buy their freedom. The conditions of slaves in the ancient world varied so enormously that we cannot generalize about them with any accuracy except to say that slaves were politically and legally inferior to free citizens.

Women's Rights, Sex, and Marriage

Historians generally agree on some categorical statements about the women of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. In the earliest stage of civilization, women shared more or less equally with men in social prestige and power. This egalitarianism was undermined and overturned by the coming of militarized society (armies), the heavy plow in agriculture, and the establishment of large-scale trade over long distances. The trend toward **patriarchy** (PAY-tree-ahr-kee)—a society in which males have social and political dominance—proceeded at varying speeds in different societies but was impossible to reverse once it started.

Because children and the continuity of the family were the real reasons for marriage, the marital bed was an honorable and even sacred place, and what took place there was in no way shameful. But the male and female had desires that went beyond the creation of children, and these were also nothing to be ashamed of, for they were implanted in humans by the all-wise gods. Everywhere in the Near East—apparently starting with the Sumerians and continuing long after—the rites of the Sacred Marriage between a god and his high priestess, celebrating the fertility of the earth and of all creatures on it, were central to religious practice. The result was a fundamentally different attitude toward sex than we commonly find in civilized society today. Whether sexual pleasure outside marriage was permissible, however, depended on the status of the individuals concerned.

Adultery was always considered the worst of all possible offenses between husband and wife because it put the children's parentage under a cloud of doubt and thus undermined the family's continuity. Punishment for wifely adultery could be death, not only for her but also for her lover if he were caught. Note that in Hammurabi's code, adultery as a legal concept was limited to the wife's acts. The husband's sexual activity with slave girls or freeborn concubines, as he saw fit, was taken for granted. The double standard has existed since the beginnings of history.

Marriage was always arranged by the two families; something so important could never be left to chance attraction. A great many of the clay tablets dug up in Mesopotamian ruins deal with marital contracts. Some of them were made when the bride and groom were still babies. Such early arrangements were especially common for girls, who normally were considerably younger at marriage than their husbands.

Marriage usually involved the exchange of bride money and a dowry. Bride money was a payment by the groom's family to the bride's family as specified in the marital contract. The dowry was also specified in the contract and was paid by the bride's family to the groom when the couple began to live together. The dowry remained in the husband's control as long as the marriage lasted. When the wife died, the dowry was distributed among her children, if she had any.

Every ancient culture insisted that brides should be virgins. This was one of the reasons for the early marriage of women. Although many literary works and folktales describe the social condemnation that awaited a woman who lost her virginity before marriage, it is still quite clear that lovemaking between young unmarried persons was by no means unheard of and did not always result in shame. Loss of virginity was regarded as damage to the family's property rather than a moral offense. As such, it could be made good by the payment of a fine. Punishment for seducing a virgin was less severe than for adultery or rape. Some authorities believe that civilizations in the early stages in all areas were more tolerant of nonvirginal marriage for women than were later ones. If premarital relations were followed by marriage, very little fuss was made.

Trade and an Expansion of Scale

The Sumerians were not the only settlers of the broad plain on either side of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In fact, they probably were not the first people in those regions. Unlike most of their neighboring tribes, the Sumerians were not members of the **Semitic** (seh-MIH-tic) language family. (*Note:* A language group or family is related by its grammar and sometimes by its vocabulary and alphabet. The Semitic family is one of the major language families in the world and includes Hebrew and Arabic as well as many others.)

By 3000 BCE, the Sumerians had extended their domain upriver into Semite-inhabited regions, as far as

the future city of Babylon. Trade grew rapidly, not only between food-growing villages and the towns but also with Semitic-speaking communities scattered for hundreds of miles along the banks of the rivers. Out of these, large towns grew, with neighborhoods of craftspeople, merchants, and laborers. Sumerian civilization took root and matured among these so-called *barbarians* (a Greek word simply meaning people who speak a different language and are supposedly inferior).

In the period of Sumerian greatness (to about 2000 BCE), political development never exceeded that of warring city-states. So, ironically, it was their Semitic-speaking stepchildren—the Akkadians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians—who unified Mesopotamia and expanded the reach of Mesopotamian civilization over a considerably wider region than anything the Sumerians had ever imagined.

In the earliest days of Mesopotamian trade, Sumerian cities depended on importing basic materials like obsidian, wood, and later copper and more exotic goods from regions both east and west of the Tigris-Euphrates valleys. Mesopotamian trade eventually extended across a broad expanse that stretched from the Indus Valley in modern-day Pakistan (Chapter 3) to the Nile Valley and the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean. Scholars think that this region comprised the earliest global trade network in world history.

Eventually, in many places where Sumerian commercial tentacles reached, Sumerian culture followed. Many centuries after the passing of Sumeria's greatness, its cuneiform system of writing and its literature continued to be the foundation of Mesopotamian culture. Epics like *Gilgamesh* remained popular, and the Creation account in the Hebrew book of Genesis originated in Mesopotamia, quite likely from as far back as Sumerian times.

Successors to Sumeria

After the conquest of Sumeria by Sargon of Akkad, nomadic peoples eager to enjoy the fruits of civilized life subjected Mesopotamia to a long series of foreign invasions and conquests. These barbaric nomads generally adopted the beliefs and values of those they conquered. After the Akkadians, the most important of them were as follows, in sequence:

1. The *Amorites*, or *Old Babylonians*, were a Semitic people who conquered the plains under their great emperor Hammurabi in the 1700s BCE.
2. The **Hittites** were an Indo-European group of tribes who came out of modern-day Turkey and constructed an empire there that reached as far into the east and south as the Zagros Mountains and Palestine. The first people to smelt iron, the Hittites were a remarkable group who took over the river plain about 1500 BCE. They were skilled administrators and established the first multiethnic state, which worked fairly well.
3. After the Hittites fell to unknown invaders about 1200 BCE, the Assyrians gradually rose to power around 900 BCE, operating from their northern Mesopotamian center at Nineveh. We will discuss the imperial Assyrian Period from about 800–600 BCE in Chapter 4.
4. The **Hebrews** were another important Semitic people. According to the Hebrew Bible, or the **Tanakh** (the "Old Testament" in the Christian Bible), they originated in Mesopotamia. After centuries of wandering, they settled in Canaan, or Palestine (see Chapter 5).
5. Finally, after a brief period under the *New Babylonians* (or *Chaldees,* as the Old Testament calls them), the plains fell to the mighty *Persian Empire* in the 500s BCE and stayed under Persian (Iranian) rule for most of the next thousand years (see Chapter 5).

The Decline of Mesopotamia in World History

The valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers ceased to be of central importance in the ancient world after the Persian conquest. The Persians did not choose to make their capital there, nor did they adopt the ideas and the cultural models of their new province, as all previous conquerors had. The Persians were already far advanced beyond barbarism when they conquered Mesopotamia and perhaps were not so easily impressed.

Various problems contributed to the decline of Mesopotamia, but it is certain that it proceeded in part due to one of the first known examples of long-term environmental degradation. Significantly, the cities' food supply declined as the irrigated farms of the lower plains no longer produced abundant harvests. Thanks to several thousand years of salt deposits from the evaporated waters of the canals and ditches, the fields—unrenewed by fertilizers and exposed to a gradually harshening climate of sandstorms and great heat—were simply not capable of producing as much as the population needed. The once-thriving city-states and rich fields were gradually abandoned, and the center of power and culture moved elsewhere.

Mesopotamia slowly receded into the background of civilized activities from the Persian conquest until the ninth century CE, when for a time it became the political and spiritual center of the far-flung world of Islam. But it was not until the mid-twentieth century, with the coming of the Oil Age, that the area again became a vital world center.