

Ancient Near East

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Around 5000 BCE, the first true civilization started to develop in Mesopotamia, which was nestled between two rivers in an area called the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent influenced the development of civilization and helped prompt some of the important social, cultural, and technological innovations of the ancient Near East. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent

2. The Growth of Civilization



BIG IDEA

The Fertile Crescent of the Middle and Near East was one of the first major areas of cultural and artistic growth in history.



DID YOU KNOW

The term “Near East” might sound a little strange. That is because it dates back to the 1800s and relates to the British Empire. At this time, the British, French, Germans, Belgians, and other Europeans competed to acquire as many colonies as possible, mostly in Africa and Asia. The Near East was closer to Europe and distinguished from the Far East, from Japan, China, and other countries. Today we refer to the Near East as the Middle East. The term persists mostly as a way to group together the early city-states and kingdoms of present-day Iraq and surrounding areas.

1. Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent

Mesopotamia, which translates to “land between rivers,” is an area of land located where Iraq is now. The **Fertile Crescent** was an area concentrated around three rivers: the Nile in Africa and the Tigris and Euphrates in the present-day Middle East. Due to the geography of the region, these areas saw some of the greatest population surges and subsequent cultural developments in the ancient world.



DID YOU KNOW

While these were lands of rich soil and many resources long ago, the environment has since changed. During the 1950s, dam projects diverted water from Mesopotamia, causing it to dry up. Today, it is largely desert.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look at the image below. The modern-day borders of Iraq are superimposed, so you can see how these countries' borders correspond to the borders of the Fertile Crescent.



The next image shows the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Between them is Mesopotamia, an area that saw tremendous growth in the ancient world and development of some of the earliest known civilizations on the planet.



TERMS TO KNOW

Fertile Crescent

An agricultural region in the Middle and Near East; in the past, it was fertile but is now partly desert.

Mesopotamia

Ancient area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

2. The Growth of Civilization

The Neolithic Revolution is an important period of time in human history. Its focus for humans shifted from a largely nomadic, or hunter-gatherer, lifestyle to an agrarian, or agricultural, lifestyle. In other words, we went

from predominantly hunting and finding our food to growing it and farming it.

IN CONTEXT

Agriculture was one of the most important developments in human history because communities could now develop into civilizations where the exchange of ideas and interdependence allowed for tremendous cultural and technological growth.

The concept of civilization is complicated. It originated from the idea that Europe was the most civilized and highly developed society ever to have existed. Europeans used this idea to justify slavery, since they argued that the people they enslaved were more primitive and therefore less deserving of freedom. As you work your way through the units of this course, you might think about how art history reinforces the idea of Europe being the pinnacle of civilization.

Although the idea of Sumer being the first civilization in the world still persists, civilizations actually developed around the world at more or less the same time. As the Ice Age came to an end, the climate became warmer, and large animals went extinct, making agriculture a necessity. This also created the food surplus necessary for civilizations to exist.

Over time, scholars have come to view civilization in a more complicated way. While civilization brought division of labor, food surplus, writing systems, art, and foreign trade, with it came the subordination of certain classes of people, including women, forced tribute, warfare, slavery, and disease.

As civilizations began to develop, kings and other rulers began using **controlled space**, or architecture built to express authority over subjects, while also intimidating opponents.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This is a reconstruction of one of the Ishtar Gates. This was the eighth gate to the walled city of ancient Babylon. In order to understand the effect this structure would have had on the viewer, think back to a time before cell phones, the internet, computers, or electronics of any kind. Most people would not have ever traveled far from their homes and would not have seen a building larger than a mud hut. Viewing the Ishtar Gate would have been absolutely overwhelming, with the gate expressing the authority of the ruler who had it built.



Reconstruction of Ishtar Gates

575 BCE

Glazed brick



TERM TO KNOW

Controlled Space

A type of civic design intended to impress or intimidate the viewer.



SUMMARY

Some of the important social, cultural, and technological innovations of the ancient Near East occurred during the development of Sumerian civilization. The Fertile Crescent influenced **the growth of civilization** in many ways.

Today you learned about **Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent**. The geography of this region, situated between two rivers, helped shape this civilization.



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