

Ancient Mesopotamia

A Reading A-Z Level Z Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,396

Connections

Writing

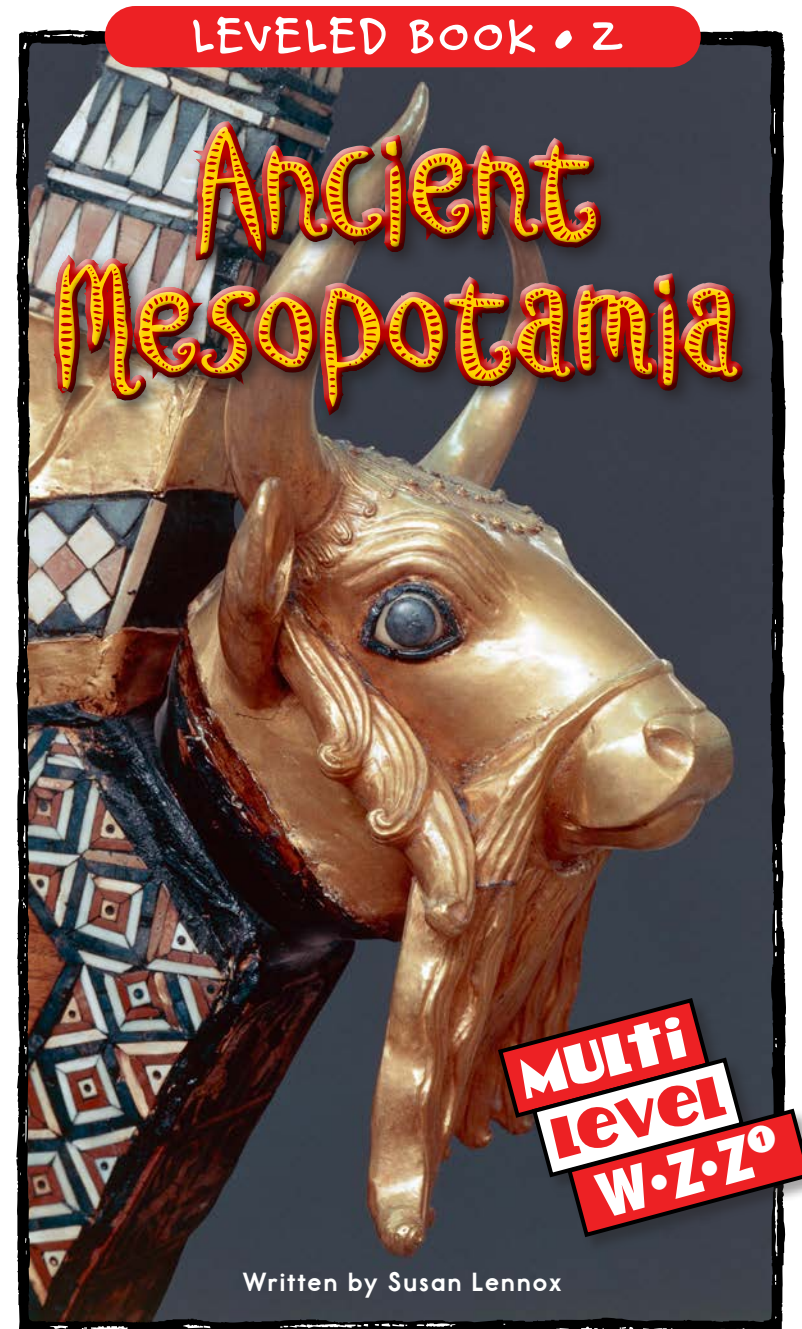
Write an essay describing the significance of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where the ancient Mesopotamians settled.

Social Studies

Name another important contribution of the Sumerians. Write a script for a commercial to advertise this new technology. Present it to your class.

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Ancient Mesopotamia



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Focus Question

What were the important features of ancient Mesopotamia?

Words to Know

alloy	nomadic
city-states	phonologic
civilized	pictographs
commerce	smelted
cuneiform	stele
demigod	ziggurat

Front cover: An ornate bull's head decorates a harp owned by a Sumerian princess of Ur.

Title page: A sculpture of a lion-headed eagle was discovered at an ancient Sumerian archaeological site.

Page 3: A clay tablet was used to record rations and goods. The images were inscribed using a sharp instrument.

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Correlation

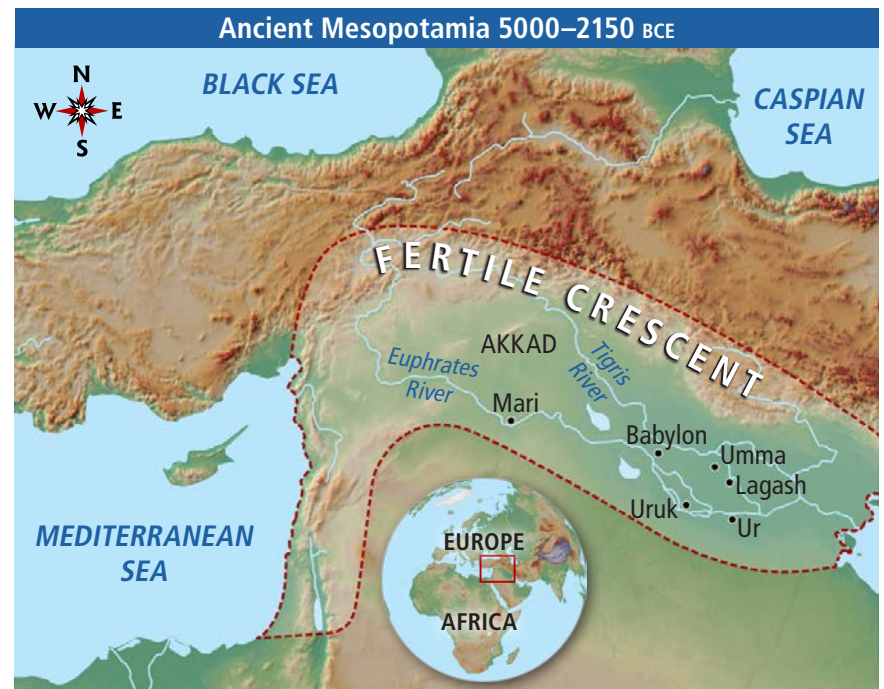
LEVEL Z

Fountas & Pinnell	U-V
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	50



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The name Mesopotamia means “the land between two rivers,” referring to its location between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Introduction

Human beings have been around for nearly two hundred thousand years. They did not, however, form **civilized** societies until relatively recently. A civilized society is one that has rules and policies that help groups of people live and work together.

One of the earliest examples of a civilized society was found in ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was located where Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Kuwait are now. This “land between two rivers” was the birthplace of civilization.

The Ubaid

The heart of ancient Mesopotamian civilization was between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. That land came to be known as the Fertile Crescent. The first people to live in Mesopotamia settled the southernmost region of the crescent. Today, this area is Iraq and Kuwait.

Modern archaeologists came across ancient stone tools, bricks, and pottery near the Euphrates River. These artifacts told stories about the lives of these ancient people. The items show that farming settlements existed as early as 5000 BCE. Researchers named these early settlers the Ubaid after the site where the artifacts were found.



A small mosaic box thought to be a case for a musical instrument depicts life in early Mesopotamia.

The Ubaid were the first people to settle the land known as Sumer. Before the Ubaid formed settlements, they and other Sumerian tribes were **nomadic** hunters and gatherers. They roamed from place to place in search of food and water. In time, the Ubaid found ways to live in one place.

They drained marshes and grew crops in the rich soil. They built irrigation canals to bring water to drier areas. In addition, they made pottery from river clay and wove baskets from reeds that grew in shallow water.

The river's riches not only met their personal needs but also provided goods for trade with



Copper lion heads were commonly used as protective guardian figures on Mesopotamian structures.

travelers. Major trade routes from Asia and Europe went through the rich plains of Sumeria. Items that the Ubaid could not grow or make themselves were obtained from traders.

Uruk, the First City

Over the years, more Sumerian settlements sprang up in the Fertile Crescent. Some grew to become true cities and eventually **city-states**. Most important was the city of Uruk (modern-day Warka, Iraq). From 4100 through 3000 BCE, Uruk was the area's center of authority and trade. At one point, Uruk had up to eighty thousand residents. The city covered more than 2.6 square kilometers (1 sq. mi.) and had huge buildings made of mud bricks. A multilevel **ziggurat**, or temple, served as a center of worship and sacrifice.



A drawing (top) shows a ziggurat from ancient Mesopotamia. The stone base of Uruk's ziggurat (bottom) still sits at its original site.



An account of monthly grain rations was written in cuneiform script on a clay tablet around 2350 BCE.

Uruk was where Mesopotamian **pictographs** first appeared. Pictographs are symbols used in writing. This early written language grew out of Uruk's role as a center of trade and business. Simple images were marked on clay tablets to add up workers' rations and as a record of goods. Over time, pictographs changed into a system of writing known as **cuneiform**. Symbols stood for sounds rather than objects. These sound symbols could be used to write in any language.

This **phonologic** system had several advantages over a pictographic system. Since the same set of symbols could be shuffled to form different words, fewer symbols were needed. The system also made it easier to express abstract concepts that would be difficult to show as pictures.

Clay tablets marked with wedge-shaped cuneiform symbols provide information about Sumerian life during that era. Residents of Uruk and other city-states within Sumeria lived in structured societies. At the highest level was a priest-king. That person led various other ranking officials, such as a leader of the plow, leader of the law, and so on. Women of that time were granted many of the same rights as men. Trade became an important way to enhance the roles of city rulers. Leaders sought more and more luxury items to show off their influence and power.

Ancient Paycheck

Beveled-rim bowls were mass-produced in Uruk. They were used throughout the region as measuring and rationing tools to pay workers since wages at the time were calculated in bowls of grain. The clay tablet was used for keeping account of the rationed goods.

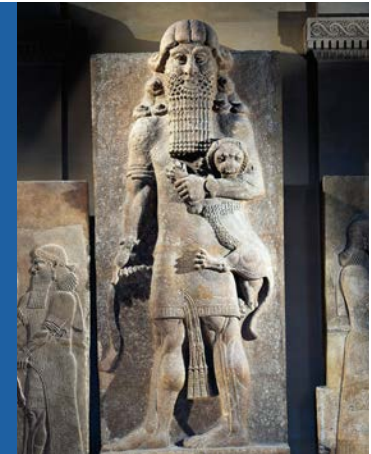


One of the most famous and celebrated rulers was King Gilgamesh (Bilgames in Sumerian). Gilgamesh is believed to have ruled Uruk around 2700 BCE during the Early Dynastic Period (2900–2350 BCE). He became an epic hero of song and legend. Poems were written about his 126-year reign. He was said to be a **demigod**, the son of King Lugalbanda and the Sumerian mother-goddess Ninsumun. Gilgamesh is credited with building the massive wall that protected Uruk. That wall still stands today.

In 2003, German scientists found a tomb in a Euphrates riverbed that they thought belonged to Gilgamesh. It was quite similar to the tomb described in the epic.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a collection of ancient Mesopotamian poems that tell of the exciting adventures of an ancient king's battles, struggles, and achievements as he strives to attain immortality. It is also believed to be the oldest surviving literary work in history. Stone tablets inscribed with individual poems date back to about 2100 BCE.



The epic tale describes Gilgamesh wearing the skins of lions he slew.

Warring City-States

As the Sumerian city-states expanded and thrived, they began to fight with each other for control of the region. War became more and more common. The earliest detailed record of Sumerian warfare shows a battle between the Mesopotamian city-states of Lagash and Umma in 2525 BCE. Figures and writing on an upright stone column called a **stele** (STEE-lee) show soldiers carrying swords, spears, and shields into battle. Military leaders rode in wheeled carts pulled by pairs of onagers, a native species of donkey.

Trade routes supplied the materials needed to craft the tools of warfare. Blacksmiths had discovered that two soft metals, copper and tin, could be **smelted** together to make a harder substance. This **alloy**, known as bronze, was used for making swords and spear tips. Tin, however, was rare. It could only be obtained from traders from central Asia or Europe. Disrupting trade routes was a way to keep weapons out of the hands of an opposing army.

This fragment from a stele is one of the oldest known historical documents. It describes the war between Lagash and Umma.



The Sumerians' fighting came to an end when King Sargon of Akkad took control of the region in about 2340 BCE. He united the city-states into the Akkadian Empire. Sargon maintained control by placing key trusted allies in positions of power. The Akkadian empire lasted until 2150 BCE. At its peak, it stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west and Arabia in the south to Iran in the east and the Anatolian Peninsula in the north.

The Akkadians did not speak Sumerian. However, they adapted the Sumerian cuneiform script to write in their own language. The Sumerian languages were only used in official and religious ceremonies. The earliest Sumerian literary works credited to a person were poems written by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna. She served as high priestess in the city of Ur. Among her poems were many verses praising the goddess Inanna, the most popular deity in Mesopotamia.

Prosperity and Advancement

Peace during the Akkadian empire brought progress to Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia created the first postal system. Clay tablets were inscribed with cuneiform messages, then wrapped in clay envelopes. An envelope was marked with the seal of the sender and the name and address of the recipient. No one but the recipient could read the message because the clay envelope had to be broken in order to get to what was inside.

A central government enforced laws and regulations. Trade networks expanded, and **commerce** boomed. Business was conducted using cylinder seals—carved tubes that were pressed into clay. Pressing one's seal into the clay was like signing one's name today.

The Mesopotamians also developed the idea of numerical place value. The way we measure time uses this same system from long ago.

A System of Sixty

We use numerical base systems when we count certain objects. For example, when counting dozens of eggs, we use base twelve: twelve eggs equal one dozen.



When we count time, we use a system devised by the ancient Mesopotamians—base sixty. There are sixty seconds in one minute and sixty minutes in one hour.



The Sumerians' invention of the wheel was one of the most important technological advances in human history.

Around 3500 BCE, the Sumerians began using a round flat mechanical device to make clay bowls. The potter's wheel sat horizontally on an axis and, when spun, allowed the potter to make a bowl with even edges and surfaces. It took a while for the Sumerians to realize they could use it as a way to easily move objects and transport people. After much experimenting, the Sumerians tried attaching one wheel to each side of a single axle. The result was a device that made it easy to carry loads. The cart rolled across the ground with minimal effort. Other civilizations copied the invention, and wheels were soon used across the world.

Fall of an Empire

The Akkadian Empire ended in about 2150 BCE after many internal uprisings and an invasion by the Gutians (GOO-tee-uhnz). The Gutians were nomads from the mountains to the north. Gutian war parties held regular raids on the outer reaches of the kingdom. As a result, trade slowed and fields lay untended. Eventually, the Gutian nomads took over Akkad, and the Akkadian Empire collapsed.

The Gutians had little understanding of how a civilized society worked. They let the canal network fall apart and brought on a terrible famine. Their 125-year rule of Sumer led to what came to be known as the Dark Age of Mesopotamia. It was not until the seventeenth century BCE under the reign of King Hammurabi that Mesopotamia would return as a thriving empire called Babylonia.



A statue shows Gudea, a Gutian prince who ruled Lagash between 2144 and 2124 BCE.

Glossary

alloy (<i>n.</i>)	a metal that is a combination of two or more metals (p. 11)
city-states (<i>n.</i>)	cities or urban areas that act as independent countries (p. 7)
civilized (<i>adj.</i>)	having an advanced level of social order and cultural development (p. 4)
commerce (<i>n.</i>)	the buying and selling of goods; business or trade (p. 13)
cuneiform (<i>n.</i>)	a system of writing made up of wedge-shaped characters, used in parts of the ancient Middle East (p. 8)
demigod (<i>n.</i>)	a being from mythology who is part human and part god (p. 10)
nomadic (<i>adj.</i>)	moving from place to place without a permanent home (p. 6)
phonologic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the study of speech sounds within or among languages (p. 9)
pictographs (<i>n.</i>)	symbols or pictures that represent words or ideas (p. 8)
smelted (<i>v.</i>)	melted or fused using extreme heat (p. 11)
stele (<i>n.</i>)	a large, upright slab or column of rock, usually inscribed with designs or words that commemorate something or someone; stela (p. 11)
ziggurat (<i>n.</i>)	a rectangular structure in ancient Mesopotamia with steps up the sides and a temple at the top (p. 7)