

Ancient Mesopotamia

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,301

Connections

Writing

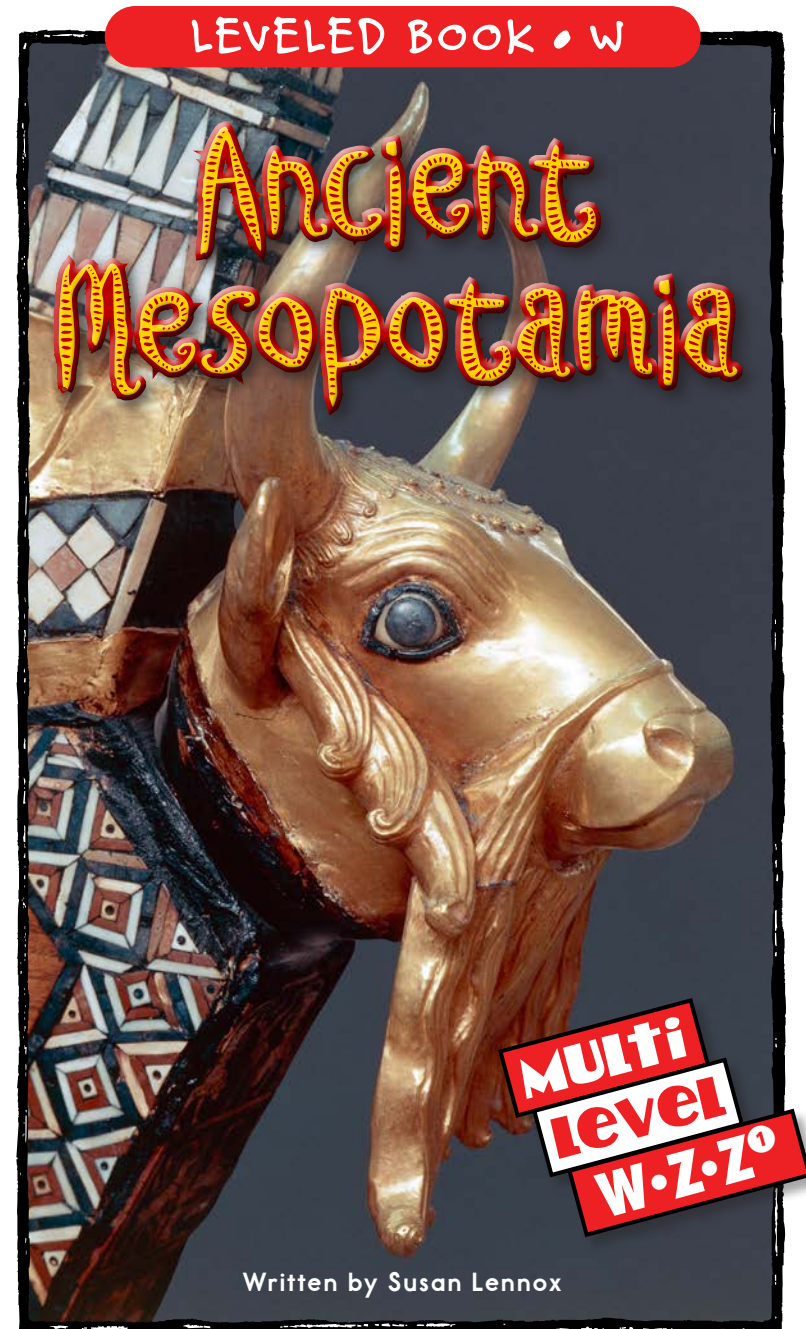
Write an essay describing the significance of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where the ancient Mesopotamians settled.

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

abstract	nomadic
city-states	phonologic
civilized	pictographs
cuneiform	raids
demigod	stele
empire	ziggurat

Front cover: A harp owned by a Sumerian princess featured a bull's head.

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

Page 3: A clay tablet was used to keep records. The pictures were carved in the clay with a sharp tool.

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Correlation

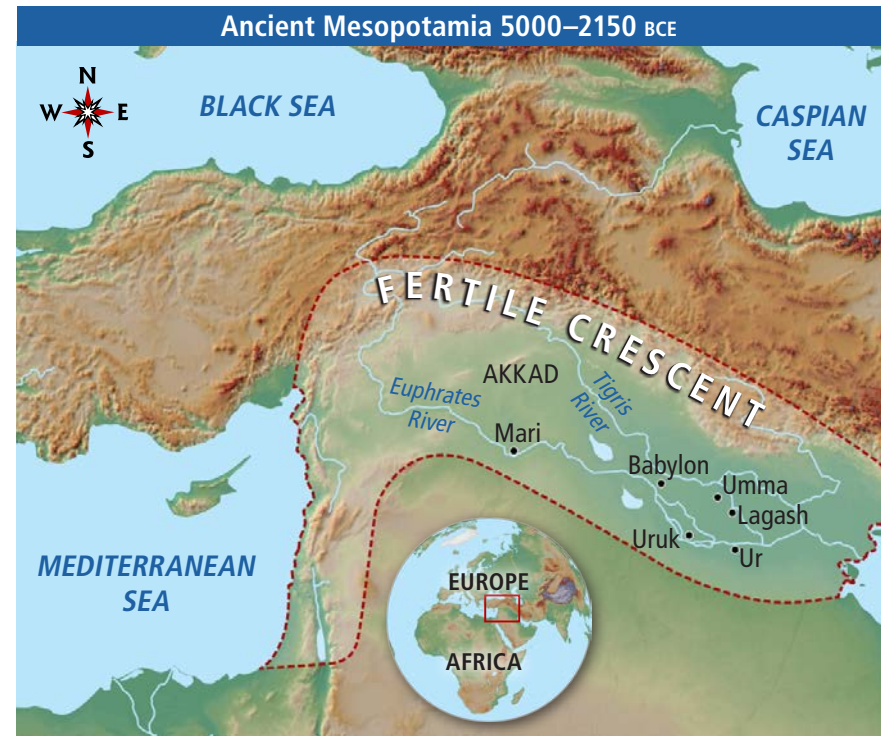
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DRA	40



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

Introduction

Human beings have been around for a long time. For much of that time, they lived in groups of families or tribes. It took a while for them to form **civilized** societies. A civilized society is one with rules that help people live and work together.

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

The Ubaid

Ancient Mesopotamian civilization started 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 southern part of that region. Today, this area is Iraq and Kuwait.

In modern times, ancient stone tools, bricks, and pottery were found near the Euphrates River. These items told stories about the lives of the early people. Researchers learned that farming settlements began there as early as 5000 BCE. They named these early settlers the Ubaid after the site where the items were discovered.



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

The Ubaid were the first people to settle the land known as Sumer. Before the Ubaid formed settlements, they 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 canals to bring water to drier areas. They made pottery from river clay. In addition, they wove baskets from plant stems that grew in shallow water.

The river did not only meet their personal needs. It also gave the Ubaid goods to trade with

others. Trade routes from Asia and Europe went through the rich plains of Sumeria. Traders provided items that the Ubaid could not grow or make themselves.



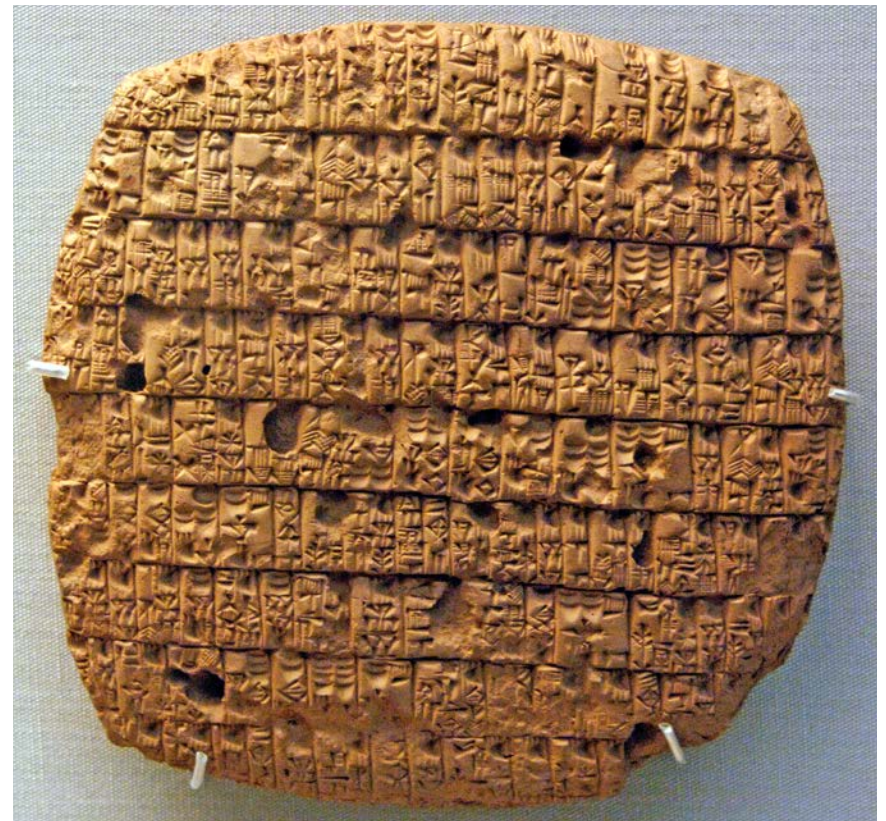
A lion's head was found at a famous Ubaid site.

Uruk, the First City

Over the years, there were more settlements in the Fertile Crescent. Some grew to become true cities. A number became **city-states**. The most important of these was Uruk (modern-day Warka, Iraq). At one point, Uruk had up to eighty thousand people. The city covered more than 2.6 square kilometers (1 sq. mi.) and had large buildings made of mud bricks. A huge **ziggurat**, or temple, was a center of worship.



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



A tablet written in cuneiform script from about 2350 BCE shows monthly grain amounts.

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' pay and as a record of goods. Over time, pictographs changed into a system of writing known as **cuneiform**. 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 cuneiform symbols gave information about Sumerian life during that time. The people of Uruk and other city-states lived in organized societies. Women had many of the same rights as men. At the highest level of society was a priest-king. That person led others, such as a leader of the plow, leader of the law, and so on. City rulers used trade to show how important they were. Having rare and valuable items was a way to show off their power.

Ancient Paycheck

Many bowls such as this one were produced in Uruk. They were used as measuring tools to pay workers in bowls of grain. The clay tablet was used for keeping track of the measured goods.



One of the most famous rulers was King Gilgamesh (Bilgames in Sumerian). Gilgamesh is believed to have ruled Uruk around 2700 BCE. He became an epic hero of song and legend. Poems were written about his 126-year rule. He was said to be a **demigod**, the son of a human king and a Sumerian mother-goddess. Gilgamesh is known for building the huge 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 similar to the tomb described in the epic.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a collection of ancient Mesopotamian poems. It tells of the exciting adventures of an ancient king's battles and victories. It is thought to be the oldest epic in history. Stone tablets on which the poem is written date back to about 2100 BCE.



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

Warring City-States

As the Sumerian city-states grew 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 city-states of Lagash and Umma in 2525 BCE. Figures on an upright stone post called a **stele** (STEE-lee) show soldiers carrying swords, spears, and shields into battle.

Trade routes supplied the materials needed to craft the tools of war. Blacksmiths had discovered that two soft metals, copper and tin, could be combined to make a harder substance. This metal, known as bronze, was used in swords and spear tips. Tin, however, was rare. It could only be gotten from central Asian or European traders. Blocking trade routes was a way to keep weapons out of the hands of an opposing army.



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



The Sumerians' constant fighting stopped when King Sargon of Akkad (in southern Mesopotamia) took control of the region in about 2340 BCE. He united the city-states into the Akkadian Empire. Sargon kept order by placing key trusted allies in positions of power. The king's followers continued this practice. The Akkadian **empire** lasted until 2150 BCE. At its peak, it stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to Arabia and from Iran to what is now Turkey.

The Akkadians did not speak Sumerian. However, they used Sumerian cuneiform script to write in their own language. The Sumerian languages were only used in important ceremonies. The earliest Sumerian writings in which the author was known were poems by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna. She served as high priestess in the city of Ur. Among her poems were many verses praising Inanna, the most popular goddess in Mesopotamia.

Prosperity and Advancement

Peace during the Akkadian empire brought progress to Mesopotamia. Under Akkadian rule, Mesopotamia created the first mail system. Clay tablets were marked with cuneiform messages, then wrapped in clay envelopes. An envelope was pressed with the seal of the sender and the name and address of the receiver. The clay envelope had to be broken in order to get to the message inside. This kept anyone but the receiver from reading it.

A central government carried out laws and regulations. Trade grew and expanded. Business deals used 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 number base systems to count certain things. For example, when counting dozens of eggs, we use base twelve: twelve eggs equal one dozen.



When we count time, we use a system created 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 use it 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 made it easy to carry loads. The cart rolled across the ground with minimal effort. Other civilizations copied the Sumerians' invention, and wheels were soon used across the world.

Fall of an Empire

The Akkadian Empire ended in about 2150 BCE after many revolts and an invasion by the Gutians (GOO-tee-uhnz). The Gutians came from the mountains to the north and held regular **raids** on the outer parts of the kingdom. This made it unsafe for Akkadians to travel or work in the fields. In time, the Gutian nomads took over Akkad, and the Akkadian Empire collapsed.

The Gutians let the canals 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 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

abstract (<i>adj.</i>)	existing as or relating to an idea rather than a physical thing; not concrete (p. 9)
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)
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)
empire (<i>n.</i>)	a collection of nations or people ruled by one person or government (p. 12)
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)
raids (<i>n.</i>)	sudden invasions or surprise attacks (p. 15)
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)