

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-3 An Expansion of Scale and Trade
Book Title: World Civilizations
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2-3 An Expansion of Scale and Trade

The Sumerians were not the only settlers of the broad plain on either side of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In fact, they might not have been the first people in those regions. Scholars of language, called *linguists*, are unsure who the Sumerians were, where they originated, and to what language family the Sumerian language belongs. Scholars agree, however, that unlike most of their neighboring tribes, the Sumerians were not members of the [Semitic \(\(seh-MIT-ic\) Adjective describing a person or language belonging to one of the most widespread of the western Asian groups; among many others, it embraces Hebrew and Arabic.\)](#) (seh-MIH-tic) language family. (Note: A language group or family is related by its shared grammar and a large portion of its vocabulary. The Semitic family is one of the major language families in the world and includes Arabic, Ethiopian, Hebrew, and many others.)

By 3000 B.C.E., the Sumerians had extended their domain upriver—as far as the future city of Babylon—into regions inhabited by people who spoke Semitic and possibly Indo-European languages. 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 B.C.E.), political development never exceeded that of warring city-states. Ironically, it was their Semitic-speaking neighbors—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.

The Cylinder Seal Depicting Dilmun.

This imprint of a cylindrical clay seal from Persia dates to about 3000–2700 B.C.E. Goats and sheep predominated in Dilmun because of their ability to live off marine life available to fisher folk who inhabited the seaports of the western Persian Gulf.



Impression of a cylinder seal depicting Dilmun, from Susa, 3rd millennium BC (plaster), Proto-Elamite (c.3200-2700 BC) / Ancient Art and Architecture Collection Ltd. / Bridgeman Images

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In the earliest days of Mesopotamian trade, Sumerian cities depended on importing basic materials like obsidian, wood, and, later, copper, as well as 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 (see [Chapter 4](#)) to the Nile Valley and the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean. Regional overland networks extended west toward the Mediterranean coast and east into the Iranian mountains. Mesopotamia also stood at the center of one of the world's first international, seaborne commercial networks, although the scanty evidence suggests that most of the impetus for this came from abroad. Indians from the Indus Valley to the east (see [Chapter 4](#)) and Arabian merchant vessels plying the Persian Gulf from western Arabian seaports located in Oman and Dilmun (on the island of Bahrain) were most involved in the overseas trade that connected Mesopotamia with Arabia and India. Scholars think that this region comprised the earliest global trade network in world history.

In many places where Sumerian commercial tentacles reached, Sumerian culture eventually 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.

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