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Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-5 The Decline of Mesopotamia in World History

Book Title: World Civilizations

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2-5 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 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 as a result of 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 c.E., 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.

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