

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2 Sumerian Civilization
Book Title: World Civilizations
Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)
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2-2 Sumerian Civilization

Along with early evidence of agriculture and herding, some of the earliest towns and cities discovered by archaeologists are in the Levantine Corridor. The Euphrates and Tigris Rivers originate in present-day Turkey and flow parallel to each other for about four hundred miles before joining together to flow into the head of the Persian Gulf (see [Map 2.1](#)). Between 7500 and 6000 B.C.E., large-scale irrigation was introduced in its northern region. These small farming communities of northern Mesopotamia produced perhaps the world's first food surpluses, which in turn enabled them to engage in regional manufacturing and trade. They needed planners and directors to organize agricultural labor, production, and trade, which also paved the way for the emergence of ruling elites.

Map 2.1

The Ancient Near East

The Mesopotamian city-states were concentrated in the rich agricultural plain (shown here in green) created by silt from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as they flowed toward the head of the Persian Gulf. The wide belt of land reaching from Mesopotamia to Egypt along the Mediterranean coast is known as the Fertile Crescent.

Thinking About This Map

How did the location of the Sumerian urban centers facilitate trade?



During the sixth millennium B.C.E., the world's first urban civilization developed in the lower courses of these rivers, in the region called Sumeria. This agrarian civilization was supported by extensive irrigation farming and trade, pioneered by Sumerians (soo-MAYR-ee-ans), who came into Lower Mesopotamia from somewhere to the east. Gradually, the Sumerians created a series of small, competing [city-states \(States or societies that are dominated by a single city.\)](#), with populations typically numbering between 8000 and 10,000. The largest and most important of these were Eridu (AYR-ree-doo), Lagash (LAH-gahsh), Ur (Oor), and Uruk (OO-ruhk). Here they developed ideas and techniques that would provide the foundation of a distinct and highly influential civilization.

The Sumerians were the first people to do a number of highly significant things:

- They created the first large cities, distinct from towns and small cities such as Jericho. During the period between 2000 and 1000 B.C.E., the largest of these may have contained upward of 100,000 people. All early civilizations had advanced centers such as these—ones that drew their sustenance from a surrounding countryside that they had subjected to their rule. Each city was encircled for miles by villages of farmers who built the canals and provided the agricultural surplus on which the city elite depended. Most of these city-states began as places of ritual prayer and sacrificial offerings that honored one or more of their gods, whose goodwill was purchased so agriculture could flourish. Gradually, the ceremonial aspects of the shrines and their priests were joined by commercial and governmental pursuits, so it became a place in

which a growing population of labor-specialized people was supported by sophisticated irrigation agriculture. The available evidence has revealed that, at first, temple priests wholly comprised the ruling elite who organized the peasant workforce, irrigation, and regional trade. By the end of the third millennium, kinglike figures, called *lugals* (LOO-guhls), combined both priestly and secular governing duties in most Sumerian city-states. One of these might have been the semifictional Gilgamesh. (see [Framing History: Patterns of Belief](#)).

- They developed the first sophisticated system of *writing*, called [cuneiform \(\(kyoo-nEE-eh-form\) Mesopotamian wedge-shaped writing begun by the Sumerians.\)](#) (kyoo-NEE-eh-form).
- They built the first monumental buildings, using sun-baked bricks and the post-and-lintel system (beams held up by columns, used today in structures as varied as monkey bars and bridges) as the basic elements of support. The most visible of these were palaces, temples, and other associated structures such as warehouses.
- They probably invented the wheel as a load-bearing transportation device.
- They were among the first to make use of horse-drawn chariots in warfare.
- They were the first to design and build an irrigation system powered by the force of gravity.
- They were the first to use the plow and among the first to make bronze metal utensils and weaponry.
- Mesopotamians and Sumerians were among the first to develop both short- and long-distance trade.

Framing History

Patterns of Belief: The Epic of Gilgamesh

The collection of stories called the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest approaches to analyzing the relations of gods and humans. It portrays a society in search of a religious basis for human action. Stories of the Flood occur in many ancient cultural traditions, such as the Noah story in the Hebrew Bible, the creation myths of the Hindus, and some of the North American Indian creation accounts. In each case the story tells of a disastrous flood that engulfed the entire earth and nearly annihilated humanity.

In the Middle Eastern tradition the earliest narrative of the Flood is found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this version the main focus of the story is on the inevitability of death and the defeat of the hero as he attempts to achieve immortality. The

Mesopotamian counterpart of the biblical Noah is Utnapishtim (oot-nah-PISH-tim). Here his description of the Flood is contrasted with the version recounted in Genesis:

Gilgamesh

The gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the netherworld, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dikes ... a stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of storms turned daylight into darkness, when he smashed the earth like a teacup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, and it poured over the people like the tide of battle; a man could not see his brother nor could the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven ... they crouched against the walls, cowering ... the gods of heaven and hell wept ... for six days and six nights the winds blew, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts.... I looked at the face of the earth, and all was silence, all mankind was turned into clay.... I bowed low, and I wept....

Genesis

... all of the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.... The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth.... And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole *heaven were covered.... And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind.... Only Noah was left and those who were with him in the ark.

Gilgamesh is a grim tale that speaks of death and the afterlife in pessimistic and fearful tones. Indicative is this description by Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu of a vivid dream he had, foreshadowing his approaching death:

I stood alone before an awful Being; his face was somber like the blackbird of the storm. He fell upon me with the talons of an eagle, and he held me fast, pinioned by his claws until I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers ... and he led me away, to the house from which those who enter never return ... whose people sit in darkness, dust their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for coverings, they see no light, they sit in darkness.

The epic ends with the failure of Gilgamesh's quest for the secret of immortal life. The somber funeral chant seems to underline the poet's sense of resignation and futility:

The king has laid himself down, and will not rise again. The Lord of Kullab [that is, Gilgamesh] will not rise again. He overcame evil, but he will not rise again, Though

he was strong of arm, he will not rise again, Possessing wisdom and a comely face, he will not rise again.

Analyze and Interpret

What does the emphasis on defeat and death in the Gilgamesh story signify in terms of the beliefs of the peoples who created these myths? Read the full accounts of the flood in *Gilgamesh* and Genesis. What do you make of the differences?

Sources: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Penguin Classics, 1960, 2nd rev. ed., 1972. © N. K. Sanders, 1960, 1964, 1972. (*Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Genesis, Chap. 7, Verses 11, 17, 18, 19, 23)

What we know of the Sumerians is extremely impressive. We know a good deal not only because they left extensive records and physical evidence of their own, but also because they had enormous influence on their neighbors and rivals, such as the Akkadians and Egyptians, as well as on their several conquering successors in Mesopotamia.

The early history of Mesopotamia under the Sumerians is a tale of great technological and cultural advances, marred by strife, disunion, and unceasing warfare among the principal city-states. Trade wars and disputes over water ensured that no centralized governing power was possible. Whenever one city managed to seize control of substantial water supplies and trade, the others upstream or downstream would band together against it or its subjects would rebel. Conflicts seem to have been the order of the day, with city-state vying against city-state in a constant struggle for mastery over precious irrigated lands.

Not until about 2300 B.C.E. was the land between the rivers brought under one effective rule; it was imposed by a Semitic invader known as Sargon (SAHR-gahn) the Great, who conquered the entire plain. Sargon established his capital in the new town of Akkad, near modern-day Baghdad, capital of Iraq. Although the Akkadian (ah-KAY-dee-an) Empire lasted less than a century, its influence was great because it spread Sumerian culture and methods far and wide in the Near and Middle East, through the wide belt of land reaching from Mesopotamia to Egypt that is called the [Fertile Crescent \(A belt of civilized settlements reaching from Lower Mesopotamia across Syria, Lebanon, and Israel and into Egypt.\)](#) (see Map 2.1).

Although the separate Sumerian city-states never united until outsiders overwhelmed them, their cultural and religious achievements and beliefs would be picked up by their conquerors and essentially retained by all their successors in Mesopotamia.

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