

Chapter 2

Mesopotamia

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Chapter Chronology

c. 15,000–10,000 B.C.E.

End of the last Ice Age

c. 10,000 B.C.E.

First evidence of agriculture in the Levantine Corridor

c. 5000 B.C.E.

Sumerians arrive in Mesopotamia

c. 3500 B.C.E.

Cuneiform writing

c. 3000 B.C.E.

Sumerian city-states develop

c. 2300 B.C.E.

Sargon of Akkad

1700s B.C.E.

Hammurabi/oldest surviving law code

c. 1500 B.C.E.

Hittites conquer Mesopotamia

c. 900 B.C.E.

Rise of Assyria

539 B.C.E.

Conquest by Persia



Neolithic Southwest Asia (slide 1 of 3)

Global Warming After Ice Age, c.15,000 BCE

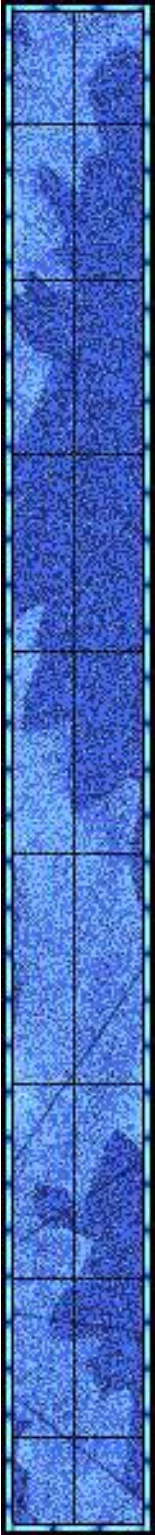
- Grasslands replaced by oak and pistachio forests
- **Natufians** (early hunter-gatherers in Mideast)
 - Stalked antelope, gazelle
 - Harvested wild nuts and grasses



Neolithic Southwest Asia (slide 2 of 3)

Cooling-Off Period, c. 11,000 BCE

- **Younger Dryas Event** led to first farming settlements
 - Cooler, drier climate in Europe, SW Asia
 - Abundant water, food disappeared
 - Small groups congregated together
 - There, scarcity compelled birth of agriculture



Neolithic Southwest Asia (slide 3 of 3)

Farming developed in **Levantine Corridor**
(Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Israel)

- Cereal agriculture was widespread by 7500 BCE
- Domestication of livestock followed
- Led to an abundance in supply
- Resulted in population growth
- People began to congregate in towns and cities
- Earliest recorded civilizations

Sumerian Society

- Located in lower Mesopotamia, c. 5000 BCE
- Developed first urban civilization
- Engaged in irrigation farming and trade
- Lived in **city-states** (e.g. Lagash, Ur)
 - Urban center and agricultural land that supports it
 - Population of 8,000 to 10,000
 - Temple priests dominated society
 - **Lugals** (kinglike figures combined priestly and secular duties) emerged, c. 3000 BCE



Sumerian Achievements

- Large cities
- **Cuneiform** – writing system
- Monumental buildings using
 - Sun-baked bricks
 - Post and lintel construction
- Wheel for transportation
- Horse-drawn chariots in warfare
- Irrigation system using force of gravity
- Plow
- Bronze tools and weapons

Mesopotamia

- Area around Tigris and Euphrates Rivers
- Sumerian Period, c. 5000-2300 BCE
 - Great technological and cultural advances
 - Strife, disunion, unceasing wars over trade, water, irrigated land
- Akkadian Period, c. 2300-2200 BCE
 - Sargon the Great conquered area and ruled effectively
 - Capital at Akkad (near Baghdad)
 - Spread Sumerian culture across the **Fertile Crescent**

Earning a Living

- Livelihood came from land
 - Directly (farmers, herders)
 - Indirectly (carters, wine pressers, millers)
- Trade in foodstuffs – grain – but forced to import other commodities (copper, tin)
- Some occupations required education, formal training and apprenticeships:
 - Scribes, priesthood, metalworking
 - Shopkeepers, clerks, laborers, clothing and textiles
- Obtaining water was a crucial task
 - Performed by women, children

Sumerian Religion and Afterlife

(Slide 1 of 2)

- **Polytheism** – belief in many gods
- Nature gods like superhumans with faults and weaknesses
 - Innana/Ishtar (love and fertility)
 - Enki (water-god)
- **Ziggurats** – stepped pyramids served as temple complexes
 - Most famous in Babylon (Biblical Tower of Babel)
- Like nature, Mesopotamian gods frequently cruel, unpredictable
- Men, women viewed as slaves of god-creators
- Priests appeased the gods to avoid natural catastrophes
- No trace of ethics
- No clear sense of afterlife, immortality

Sumerian Religion and Afterlife

(Slide 2 of 2)

Epic of Gilgamesh – creation myth

- First epic poem in world literature
- A king's desire for the secret of immortal life
- Gods jealous of king's power defeat him
- Many major western “myths” originated in Mesopotamian religion, literature
 - Example: The flood myth and Noah's ark

Sumerian Mathematics

- Calendar - Sense of time shaped by cyclic nature of seasonal change
 - Lunar months between full moons, and
 - A solar calendar almost as accurate as our own
- Mathematics - influential in western science
 - Based on units of 60 (60 seconds and 60 minutes)
 - Basic geometry and trigonometry (360° circle)

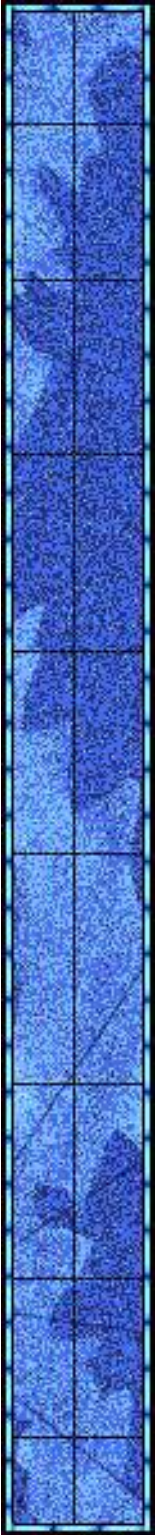
The Evolution of Writing

- Modern forms of speech from 80,000 BCE?
- Written Communication from 4th millennium
- Need for good records
 - Seasonal changes and calendars
 - Taxation
 - Contracts
- Symbols derived from pictures (**pictography**)
- Conventional signs for abstractions and tenses followed
- In **Mesopotamia**:
 - **Cuneiform** - script in wedge-shaped characters
 - Basic script in the Near East until about 1000 BCE
 - Phonetic languages appear later

Sumerian Law

Hammurabi Code, 1700 BE

- Oldest surviving law code
- Derived from earlier, lost works
- Two distinct principles:
 - Punishment depends on social rank
 - “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”
- Other aspects:
 - Government should act as impartial referee
 - Dealt with social, family problems



Government and Social Structure

- Two types
 - **Theocracy** (priestly dominated) early city-states
 - Kingdom-empires beginning with Sargon the Great
- Two different structures
 - City, with king as head and class distinctions
 - Villages more egalitarian
- Three classes of Mesopotamian civilization
 - Priests and noble landlords
 - Freeman (majority)
 - Performed bulk of work, trading
 - Protected by Hammurabi's Law Code
 - Slaves
 - Often possessed considerable skills and some responsibilities
 - No political rights
 - Slave status resulted from wars or from debts

Status of Women

Status of women declined due to:

- Growing militarization
- Use of the heavy plow led to smaller role for women in agriculture
- Growth of long distance trade
- Trend toward **patriarchy** became irreversible Household
- Marriages arranged
- Dowries and bride money stipulated in contracts
- Adultery – defined by martial status of the woman
 - Put parentage of children in question
 - Punishment? Death for wife and lover

An Expansion of Scale and Trade

- Sumerians extended domain into Semite-language regions by 3000 BCE
- Semitic-speaking peoples, such as the Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, united Mesopotamia and expanded it
- Trade stretched from the Indus Valley to Nile Valley and eastern Mediterranean
 - Exported grain
 - Imported obsidian, wood and later copper
- Sumerian culture followed with trade

Successors to Sumeria (Slide 1 of 2)

- **Amorites** (Old Babylonians)
 - Semitic empire
 - Established under leadership of Hammurabi, c. 1700 BCE
- **Hittites** (Indo-Europeans, from modern-day Turkey)
 - First to smelt iron
 - Took over river plains by 1500 BCE
 - Skilled administrators of first multi-ethnic state
 - Conquered by invaders by 1200 BCE

Successors to Sumeria (Slide 2 of 2)

- **Assyrians**

- Rose to power by 900 BCE
- Center at Nineveh

- **Hebrews**

- Tanakh (Old Testament)
- Originated in Mesopotamia; settled in Canaan

- **Chaldeans (New Babylonians)**

- Ruled until Persian Conquest, 6th c. BCE

Decline of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia declined after Persian conquest

- Persians did not adopt ideas and cultural models of Sumeria
- Growing environmental degradation
 - Lands could no longer supply large harvests
 - Growing salt deposits from evaporation in canals, ditches
 - City-states gradually abandoned
- Slowly receded into background until rise of Islam in region during 800s CE