

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2a Earning a Living  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 2-2a Earning a Living

Most Mesopotamians at this time drew their livelihood from the land either directly, as farmers and herders, or indirectly, as carters, wine pressers, millers, or any of the dozens of other occupations that transformed agrarian products into food and drink and delivered them to consumers. For every person who lived in an urban setting and did not have to grow his or her own food, there were ten or twenty who lived in the agrarian villages that surrounded the cities and spent most of their labor in the fields or the pasture.

As we know from both historical and archaeological evidence of many kinds and from many places, commerce was also primarily concerned with trade in metals and foodstuffs—grain above all—although other commodities essential to living had to be imported. It is easy for us to forget just how much of the time and energy of early civilizations went into the pursuit of sufficient caloric intake! Three square meals a day were often the exception, and the ordinary person rarely took them for granted. Bronze was the principal metal used for weapons, works of art, and sometimes tools; therefore, trade in copper and tin also was vital to Mesopotamian cities and states.

Not all occupations involved trade, farming, or foodstuffs, however. A few required education and a degree of formal training: scribes, bookkeepers, and priests, for example. Although each civilization had some learned occupations, they varied in prestige and in the number of persons who practiced them. Mesopotamian city dwellers seem to have been literate to an unusual degree and took writing for granted as a normal part of daily life. Many other occupations did not require literacy, but they did demand a lengthy period of apprenticeship. Most of these occupations were found in the towns. They included metalworking—chiefly in bronze—leatherwork, jewelry making, and all types of ceramics, as well as fine and rough carpentry, masonry, and other building trades.

In addition to these skilled jobs there were shopkeepers, their clerks and errand boys, casual laborers available for any type of manual task, and a large number of trades connected with the production of clothing and textiles. Many people were also involved in the preparation, distribution, and sale of food, whether in shops or at eating places such as taverns and street booths. One crucial task, which we in the present-day United States rarely think about, was obtaining a regular supply of water. This was one of the most important tasks of women and children, and it took great amounts of time and labor.

Some civilized centers employed more of one type of labor than others, but overall there was a rough parity. Most jobs were in small-scale enterprises. These were usually family owned and staffed, with perhaps two or three paid or slave laborers. Slavery was less common in some places, but slaves made up a sizable portion of the working population in

all ancient societies except early Egypt and China. They sometimes performed much of the particularly unpleasant or dangerous work (mining and handling the dead, for example).

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