

Mesopotamia

INTRODUCTION

As the Tigris and Euphrates flow south out of Turkey, they are 400 km (250 mi) apart; the Euphrates runs south and east for 1,300 km (800 mi) and the Tigris flows south for 885 km (550 mi) before they join, reaching the Persian Gulf as the Shatt al Arab. The river valleys and plains of Mesopotamia are open to attack from the rivers, the northern and eastern hills, and the Arabian Desert and Syrian steppe to the west. Mesopotamia's richness always attracted its poorer neighbors, and its history is a pattern of infiltration and invasion. Rainfall is sparse in most of the region, but when irrigated by canals the fertile soil yields heavy crops. In the south, date palms grow, supplying rich food, useful fiber, wood, and fodder. Both rivers have fish, and the southern marshes contain wildfowl.

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Mesopotamia and the Persian Empire

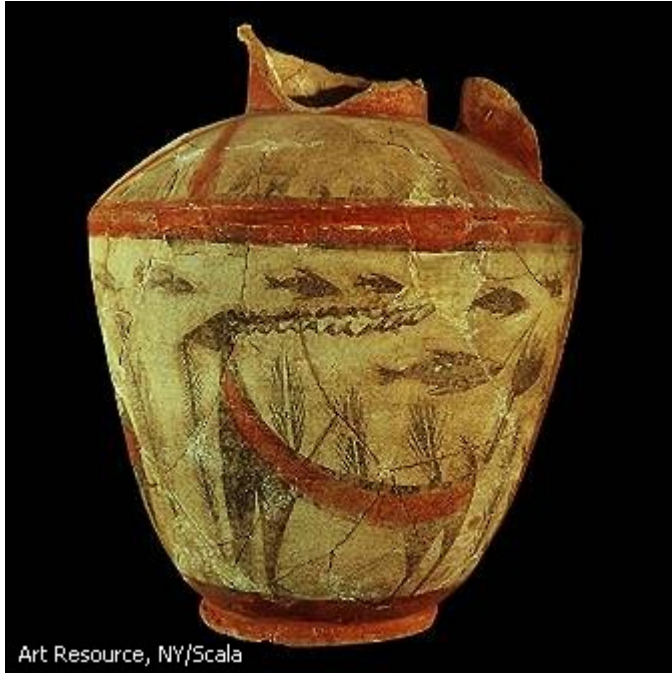
Mesopotamia, located in a region that included parts of what is now eastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and most of Iraq, lay between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The name *Mesopotamia* is a Greek word meaning “between the rivers.” Its oldest known communities date from 7000 BC. Several civilizations flourished in the region. In the 6th century BC it became part of the Persian Empire, the largest empire in the world up to then.

II.- EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN STATES



Cradle of Civilization

Known as the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia served as the site for some of the world’s earliest settlements. Named after the Greek word meaning “between the rivers,” Mesopotamia occupied the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that now constitutes the greater part of Iraq. The Sumerian civilization, which began in the region in about 3500 BC, built a canal system and the world’s first cities.



Mesopotamian Urn

This Mesopotamian terra-cotta urn (Iraq Museum, Baghdad) from the Neolithic Period dates back to between 5000 and 3000 BC. Found in the Middle East, the urn exhibits a design representative of ancient Persian art. Called "animal style," the decoration on the vase features animals, in this case fish, used in a symbolic manner. Because ancient nomadic tribes in the Middle East left no written records or permanent monuments, the artwork buried with their dead provides the most useful information about them. Art Resource, NY/Scala



Sumerian Medical Text

The culture and language of ancient Sumer remained a secret until the mid-1850s when archaeologists began uncovering vast caches of clay tablets, such as this one, in Iraq. This tablet is over 4000 years old and contains the world's oldest-known medical handbook. Corbis/UPI



Head of an Akkadian King

This bronze head from Nineveh, dating from about 2300 BC, represents an Akkadian king, possibly Naram-Sin. It stands about 30 cm (12 in) high and originally had precious gems embedded in the eye sockets. The stylized hair and beard are characteristic of Mesopotamian art. Art Resource, NY/Scala



Kingdom of Babylonia

Babylonia was one of the first civilizations in the world. It formed around the region where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow in relatively parallel courses toward the Persian Gulf. The region is also part of what is known as the Fertile Crescent, so named because the people who lived in this crescent-shaped area developed rich, irrigated farmlands.



Hammurabi

Hammurabi, king of Babylon, united the diverse tribes in Mesopotamia by strategically conquering territory in the region. During his rule (circa 1792 to 1750 BC), he proved to be as able an administrator as a general. The Code of Hammurabi, a set of laws for the conduct of individuals and society that he codified, is one of the first bodies of written law.

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

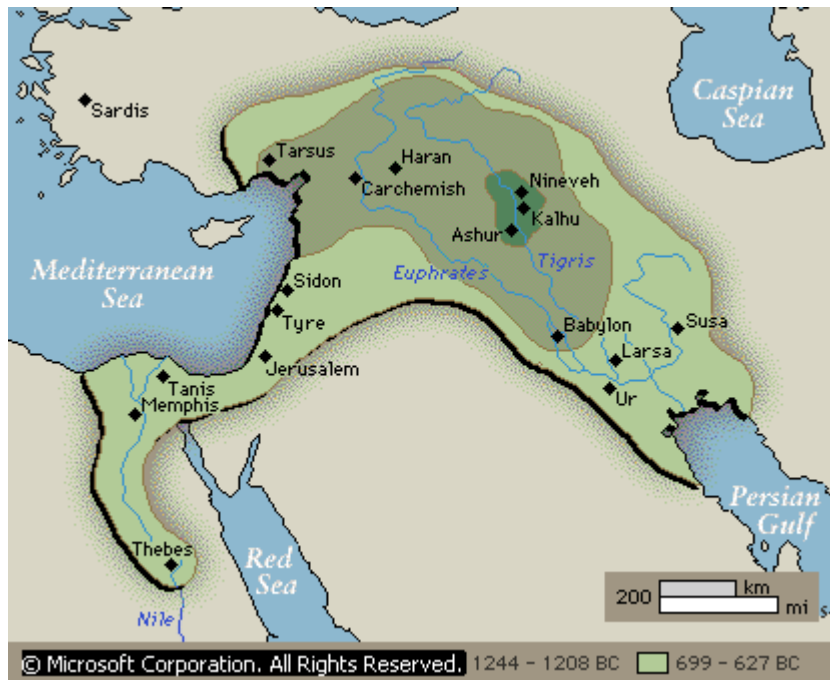
The need for self-defense and irrigation led the ancient Mesopotamians to organize and build canals and walled settlements. After 6000 BC the settlements grew, becoming cities by the 4th millennium BC. The oldest settlement in the area is believed to be Eridu, but the best example is Erech (Uruk) in the south, where mud-brick temples were decorated with fine metalwork and stonework, and growing administrative needs stimulated the invention of a form of writing, cuneiform. The Sumerians were probably responsible for this early urban culture, which spread north up the Euphrates. Important Sumerian cities, besides the two mentioned above, were Adab, Isin, Kish, Larsa, Nippur, and Ur (*see Sumer*).

About 2330 BC the region was conquered by the Akkadians, a Semitic people from central Mesopotamia. Their king Sargon I, called the Great (reigned about 2335-2279 BC), founded the dynasty of Akkad, and at this time the Akkadian language began to replace Sumerian. The Gutians, tribespeople from the eastern hills, ended Akkadian rule about 2218 BC, and, after an interval, the 3rd Dynasty of Ur arose to rule much of Mesopotamia. In Ur, Sumerian traditions had their final flower. Influxes of Elamites from the east eventually destroyed the city of Ur about 2000 BC. These tribes took over the ancient cities and mixed with the local people, and

no city gained overall control until Hammurabi of Babylon (reigned about 1792-1750 BC) united the country for a few years at the end of his reign. At the same time, an Amorite family took power in Ashur to the north; both cities, however, fell soon after to newcomers. A raid launched in around 1595 BC by the Hittites from Turkey brought Babylon down, and for four centuries it was controlled by non-Semitic Kassites. Ashur fell to the Mitanni state, set up by Hurrians from the Caucasus, who were presumably relatives of the Armenians. The Hurrians had been in Mesopotamia for centuries, but after 1700 BC they spread in large numbers across the whole of the north and into Anatolia.

Kassite Babylonia flourished, based on a few cities and many small villages in a tribal pattern. Its kings wrote as equals to the pharaohs of Egypt and traded widely.

III.- THE ASSYRIAN AND CHALDEAN EMPIRES



Assyria

Assyria flourished in the region the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia. An Assyrian king established what was probably the first centrally organized empire in the Middle East, between 1813 and 1780 BC. In defending their territory from nomadic invasions, Assyrians gained a reputation in the ancient Middle East for being relentless and ruthless warriors.



Cuneiform

The ancient peoples of Mesopotamia recorded important documents in cuneiform, a system of writing into clay or stone tablets that probably originated in Sumeria more than 4,000 years ago. Collections of cuneiform tablets in Mesopotamia functioned as the earliest known libraries.

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Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York/Giraudon

Mesopotamian Relief

The palaces of ancient Mesopotamia were covered with reliefs that told stories. These narrative reliefs, carved from alabaster, usually depicted scenes from the lives of the kings. This relief, once part of the palace at Dur Sharrukin, now Khorsabad, shows Sargon II (721-705 BC) with one of his subjects.

Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York/Giraudon



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Hanging Gardens of Babylon

This hand-colored engraving by 16th century Dutch artist Maarten van Heemskerck depicts the *Hanging Gardens of Babylon*, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Technically, the gardens did not hang, but grew on the roofs and terraces of the royal palace in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar II, the Chaldean king, probably built the gardens in about 600 BC as a consolation to his Median wife who missed the natural surroundings of her homeland.



Hulton Deutsch

Ruins of Babylon

The ancient city of Babylon, located east of the Euphrates River near present-day Baghdad, developed in stages and reached its peak of expansion during the Neo-Babylonian dynasty under Nebuchadnezzar II. The city was the capital of a kingdom encompassing a large part of southwest Asia and was the largest city in the known world.

Hulton Deutsch

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Beginning about 1350 BC, Assyria, a north Mesopotamian kingdom, began to assert itself. Assyrian armies defeated Mitanni, conquered Babylon briefly about 1225 BC, and reached the Mediterranean about 1100 BC. Aramaean tribes from the Syrian steppe halted Assyrian expansion for the next two centuries and, with related Chaldean tribes, overran Babylonia. To secure itself, Assyria fought these tribes and others, expanding again after 910 BC. At its greatest extent (around 730-650 BC) the Assyrian Empire controlled the Middle East from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. Conquered regions were left under client kings or, if troublesome, annexed. Following ancient practice, rebellious subjects were deported, resulting in a mixture of peoples across the empire. Frequent revolts demanded a strong military machine, but it could not maintain control of so vast a realm for long. Internal pressures and attacks from Iranian Medes and Chaldeans from Babylonia caused Assyria to collapse in 612 BC. The Medes took the hill country, leaving Mesopotamia to the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar II. The Chaldeans ruled Mesopotamia until 539 BC, when Cyrus the Great of Persia, who had conquered Media, captured Babylon.

IV-PERSIAN RULE

Under the Persians, Mesopotamia became the satrapies of Babylon and Ashur, Babylon having a major, although not capital, role in the empire. The Aramaic language, widely spoken earlier, became the common language, and the imperial government brought stability; it was oppressive, however, and Mesopotamia's prosperity declined.

V.- HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN TIMES

After Alexander the Great's conquest in 331 BC, the Greek dynasty of Seleucus I held Mesopotamia. A dozen cities were founded—Seleucia on the Tigris being the largest—bringing Hellenistic culture, new trade, and prosperity. A major new canal system, the Nahrawan, was initiated. About 250 BC the Parthians (*see* Parthia) took Mesopotamia from the Seleucids. The Parthian rulers (the Arsacids) organized their empire so that several autonomous vassal states developed, in which Greek and Iranian (Persian) ideas mingled. After rebuffing Roman attacks, the Parthians fell (AD 224) to the Sassanids (*see* Persia), whose domain extended from the Euphrates to present-day Afghanistan. Effective government with a hierarchy of officials and improved irrigation canals and drainage brought prosperity. Intermittent conflict in the northwest with the Roman province of Syria—part of the Eastern Roman (later Byzantine) empire after 395—and with Arabs in the desert border areas led to disaster when insurgent Arab tribes destroyed Sassanian Persia in 641, bringing with them a new religion, Islam. Despite this defeat, the Sassanid dynasty lasted until 651, when the last Sassanid ruler died.

VI.- MEDIEVAL AND MODERN TIMES

For the next century Mesopotamia was ruled by the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus. Hordes of tribespeople settled in the land, and the Arabic language displaced Greek and Persian. Conflicts divided the Muslims, and Baghdād became the center of the Islamic empire under the Abbasid caliphs. The caliphs introduced Turkish bodyguards, who gradually took control, establishing dynasties of their own in the area. After the Mongol sack of Baghdād in 1258, administrative decay and further attacks by Bedouins and Mongols led to the deterioration of the canal system, restricting agriculture and souring the soil. The sultans of the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid rulers of Persia vied for control of Mesopotamia from the 16th to the 18th century, when family dynasties controlled Baghdād and other Mesopotamian cities. The Ottomans eventually prevailed. During World War I British troops took the area after much hard fighting. The League of Nations then mandated Iraq to Great Britain and Syria to France. Iraq became independent in 1932, Syria in 1945.