

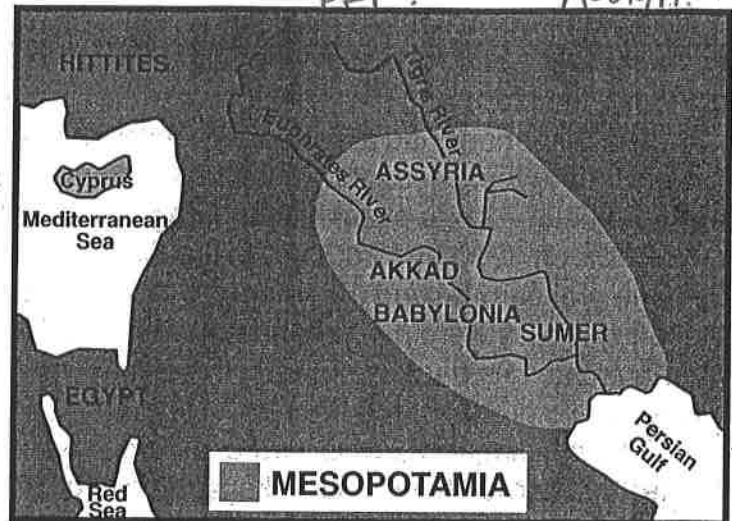
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Assign. # \_\_\_\_\_

## Mesopotamia

**Mesopotamia** is a Greek word that means "between two rivers." The two rivers referred to are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers begin in what is now Turkey, flow south-east, converge in the southeast in what is now Iraq, and empty into the Persian Gulf. The hot, dry climate of Mesopotamia was mixed with seasonal flooding, which made farming a challenge. Farmers in ancient Mesopotamia learned to deal with these problems by building levees to control the floods and developing irrigation systems in order to produce wheat, barley, sesame, and flax. They were also able to produce many different kinds of fruits and vegetables.

People talk about Mesopotamia as if it were a single civilization or culture. Actually, Mesopotamia was an area, not a civilization. It was composed of several independent city-states, each with its own religion, laws, language, and government. Many civilizations have existed in Mesopotamia, some of them at the same time. While one culture may have dominated a certain period, other cultures may have existed and were seeking to become independent. Some of the cultures that have existed in this area are Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, and Iraq.



### THE SUMERIANS AND THE AKKADIANS

The first group of people to inhabit Mesopotamia were the **Sumerians**. They originally lived in the mountains, but moved to the Plain of Shinar near the Persian Gulf to take advantage of the fertile soil. First, they drained the marshes and then controlled the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers by building levees and irrigation canals. As a result, the Sumerians had a stable food supply, and not everyone was needed to farm, hunt, or fish. Some Sumerians became tradesmen, merchants, soldiers, priests, government officials, and artisans. Their country was called **Sumer**.

The Sumerians are given credit for many inventions. One of the most important was the invention of a written language. Writing was invented so the Sumerians could keep records. Their writing was, of course, very simple. It was composed of pictures called **pictographs**. **Scribes**, who were professional writers, drew the pictures on clay tablets using a wedge-shaped instrument, or **stylus**. Over a period of time, the writing became more sophisticated. The pictures were replaced with shapes and lines. This type of writing

#### SUMERIAN CIVILIZATION AT A GLANCE

**WHERE:** In the Middle East, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

**WHEN:** 3500 B.C.–2000 B.C.

#### ACHIEVEMENTS:

- The world's first civilization where people lived together in a city-state
- Invented a written language
- Developed science and mathematics to a high degree; were able to divide the year and the circle into 360 parts
- Developed a twelve-month calendar based on lunar cycles
- Used the wheel and made vehicles
- Invented the plow and the sailboat

is called **cuneiform**. Other inventions include the wheel, which was developed for making pottery, but was later used to make vehicles. They also invented the water clock, the twelve-month calendar, the plow, and the sailboat.

The Sumerians had a numbering system based on the number 60. We still use the Sumerian system today when measuring time. For example, sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. Also, a circle has 360 degrees.

Between 3500 and 2000 B.C., the Sumerians were living in large villages. Eventually they became prosperous, and the villages developed into self-governing city-states. The buildings in these city-states were made of sun-dried mud bricks. The Sumerians used these mud bricks as building materials because there was no building stone and very little timber in Sumer, and the rivers were a great source for mud.

The buildings in Sumer were different from other civilizations, such as the Egyptians. Sumerians learned how to use a keystone to make arches. A **keystone** is a wedge-shaped stone in an arch that causes the arch to lock together. The doorways, gates, and other openings in buildings in the Sumerian cities had arches. Similar openings in Egyptian buildings were square.

Priests, wealthy citizens, and merchants had two-story houses. These houses had an open courtyard that all the rooms of the house opened into. There were smaller homes for others, also.

Religion was important to the Sumerians. At the center of each city-state was a temple that was surrounded by courts and public buildings. These temples were called **ziggurats**. Ziggurats were originally built on platforms, but eventually became temple-towers brightly decorated with glazed bricks. They were like huge pyramids with terraced sides that were flat on the top.

The Sumerians had many gods. They believed the gods spoke to them through their priests. Since the priests were representatives of the gods, they had a great deal of power in Sumer. When a priest commanded that something be done, the people believed the command was actually coming from one of their gods, and they obeyed. The ability to make important decisions and have people obey them elevated the status of priests. They became priest-kings and ruled large areas.

While Mesopotamia offered many advantages for settlement, such as rich soil, water, and game, there was one great disadvantage. The land did not provide any natural protection from invaders. Enemies could easily march into Sumer from almost any direction. This made Sumerians vulnerable to attack, not only from foreign armies, but from other Sumerian cities as well. Wars between Sumerian cities were common.

The importance of natural protection cannot be overstated. Compare the location of Egypt with Sumer, for example. Egypt is protected by a desert on both sides of the Nile River, which is difficult to navigate in some spots. Nations wanting to conquer Egypt would have a difficult time overcoming these natural barriers to launch an attack. Consequently, Egypt's culture grew rapidly. Sumer, on the other hand, did not have natural barriers. Sumerians not only had to worry about invading armies, but also about other groups of people who wanted to share the fertile soil of Mesopotamia.

One of the groups that moved into Sumeria was the **Akkadians**, who had been living on the Arabian peninsula. The Akkadians were a Semitic people. This means they spoke a **Semitic** language related to languages similar to Arabic and Hebrew. The Akkadians formed their own country where the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers were close together. Their country was called **Akkad**. The Akkadians adopted much of the Sumerian culture. After many clashes between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, more Semites invaded Sumeria. The Sumerian culture was eventually absorbed by the invaders. This combined civilization lasted until about 1950 B.C. when the Amorites and the Elamites captured Ur, Mesopotamia's most important city.