

# Mesopotamia Reading

# 2

## Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations

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### 2.1 CHRONOLOGY

#### Ancient Mesopotamia

c. 10,000 BCE	Beginnings of the Agricultural Revolution
c. 3500 BCE	Appearance of Sumerian city-states in lower Mesopotamia
c. 3200 BCE	Early use of cuneiform
c. 2900 BCE	Production of bronze
2334 – 2100 BCE	Akkadian Empire
c. 2000 BCE	Gilgamesh first recorded in cuneiform
1792 – 1595 BCE	Babylonian Empire
1792 – 1750 BCE	Reign of Hammurabi
900 – 612 BCE	Assyrian Empire
626 – 539 BCE	New Babylonian Empire
605 – 562 BCE	Reign of Nebechadnezzar

#### Ancient Israel

c. 1300 – 1200 BCE	Israelites leave Egypt (following Moses)
c. 1050 – 1010 BCE	Israelites establish a kingdom
c. 1000 – 970 BCE	Reign of King David
c. 979 – 930 BCE	Reign of King Solomon
931 BCE	Israel divides into two kingdoms
586 – 539 BCE	Babylonian captivity of Israelites

#### Northeast Africa (Egypt and Nubia)

c. 7000 BCE	Beginnings of Agricultural Revolution in Northeast Africa
c. 6000 – 3500 BCE	Desiccation of the Sahara Desert pushed people towards Nile River Valley

c. 4000 BCE	Towns and villages grew along the Nile River
c. 3100 BCE	Unification of Egypt
3100 – 2600 BCE	Egyptian Archaic Period
2660 – 2160 BCE	Egyptian Old Kingdom
2400 – 1450 BCE	The Kingdom of Kerma
2040 – 1640 BCE	Egyptian Middle Kingdom
1640 – 1570 BCE	Egypt's Second Intermediate Period (Egypt under Hyksos Rule)
1530 – 1070 BCE	Egyptian New Kingdom
1350 – 1325 BCE	Amarna Period (under Pharaoh Akhenaten)
1040 – 332 BCE	Egyptian Late Period
750 – 656 BCE	The Kingdom of Kush ruled Egypt, creating the “Ethiopian Dynasty”
750 – 593 BCE	Kingdom of Kush (with capital at Napata)
656 – 639 BCE	Assyrians occupied Egypt
593 BCE	Egyptian army sacked Napata, the capital of Kush
593 BCE	The Kingdom of Kerma moved its capital to Meroe
525 BCE	Persian conquest of Egypt
323 BCE	Alexander the Great conquered Egypt/Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt
30 BCE	Roman conquest of Egypt

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION: DEFINING CIVILIZATION

The term **civilization** often elicits mostly idealized images of ancient empires, monumental architecture, and the luxurious lives of ruling classes. Civilization, however, is a tricky term. In the United States, students of history studied Western Civilization, almost exclusively, through the 1950s. In their studies, civilizations were advanced societies with urban centers, rooted in European or Middle Eastern culture. America's origins in these western civilizations was used to explain our own high level of development. However, more recent scholars have definitely broadened the geographical focus by recognizing that worldwide from 3500 to 1000 BCE at least seven independent civilizations emerged in different regions. These recent scholars also continue to debate the definition of civilization, and the current compromise amongst World Historians is to recognize characteristics that civilizations tended to share. Common characteristics of civilizations included food surpluses, higher population densities, social stratification, systems of taxation, labor specialization, regular trade, and accumulated learning (or knowledge passed down from generation to generation). The list here is not all-inclusive by any means, but it indicates the complexity of the societies that scholars have labeled civilizations.

In addition to heated debates about its exact definition, civilization is a loaded term, meaning that it can contain a value judgment. If we use the term carelessly, it seems to indicate that some societies are deemed civilized and worthy of inclusion, while others are uncivilized and thus not worth our study. In part, our sensitivity to this issue is a response to the tendency of past historians, including many of those working in Europe in the 1800s, to assume that there was a

natural progression from an uncivilized state to civilization. These historians viewed people who had values, ways of living, and religious beliefs different than theirs as uncivilized. They further believed that these allegedly uncivilized peoples were behind or needed to catch up with those who were civilized. Today, World Historians try to appreciate the great diversity of human experiences and consciously remove these sorts of value judgments. World Historians avoid assumptions that some societies in the past were better or further along than others. Therefore, many World Historians remain wary of the uncritical use of the term civilization.

For our purposes, let us leave aside any value judgments. Societies labeled as civilizations were not inherently better than any others. In fact, as we will see, civilizations demonstrated various vulnerabilities. Considering things like war, slavery, and the spread of diseases, there were sometimes advantages to living outside the nexus of civilizations. For example, in comparing societies, scholars have found that in many instances people residing in decentralized states were healthier and lived longer than did their counterparts in early civilizations. However, people living in societies with social stratification, labor specialization, and trade usually left more written records and archeological evidence, which historians can analyze to narrate our past. The available resources mean that civilizations tend to be better represented in the written historical records. As you read about past civilizations, keep in mind that historians are currently enhancing our understanding of societies that perhaps remained mobile, rejected hierarchies, or preserved their histories orally. These societies were also part of our shared past, even if they are harder to study or have received less scholarly attention.

This chapter focuses on early civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa. The civilizations in these regions left written records. They also all initially had economies based on farming and developed alongside rivers. Their locations alongside rivers allowed populations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa to grow the surplus food that they used to support urbanization, social stratification, labor specialization, and trade.

## 2.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. Explain why the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were significant for ancient Mesopotamians.
2. Describe the characteristics of civilizations that were found in ancient Mesopotamia.
3. What does the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tell scholars about Mesopotamian values, views of the environment, and conceptions of the afterlife?
4. How did the rulers of ancient Mesopotamian empires attempt to bring together and control the people within their realms?
5. Describe the legacies of the civilization in ancient Mesopotamia.
6. Explain the central beliefs of Judaism that are evident in the early written tradition.

7. How did the United Kingdom of Israel develop and who were its key leaders?
8. Describe how the Israelites and their traditions have been influential.
9. How did the Nile River and the region's climate and geography influence the development of Egyptian civilization?
10. Which characteristics of civilizations were seen in Ancient Egypt?
11. What major continuities were evident throughout Dynastic Egypt?
12. Describe Egypt's intermediate periods.
13. Explain the significance of pyramids.
14. Describe the major innovations of the New Kingdom.
15. What are the legacies of Ancient Egypt?
16. Compare the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt.
17. What were the defining features of Nubian civilization?
18. Describe Kerma and Kush's relationship with Egypt.

## 2.4 KEY TERMS

- Amarna Period
- Assyrian Empire
- Aten
- Cataract
- City-states
- Civilization
- Covenant
- Cuneiform
- Desiccation
- Divine kingships
- Empire
- Exodus
- Hammurabi's Code
- Hieroglyphics
- Kerma
- Kush
- Levant
- Meroe
- Meroitic
- Mesopotamia
- Middle Kingdom
- Monotheism
- Nebuchadnezzar II
- New Kingdom
- Nile River
- Nubia

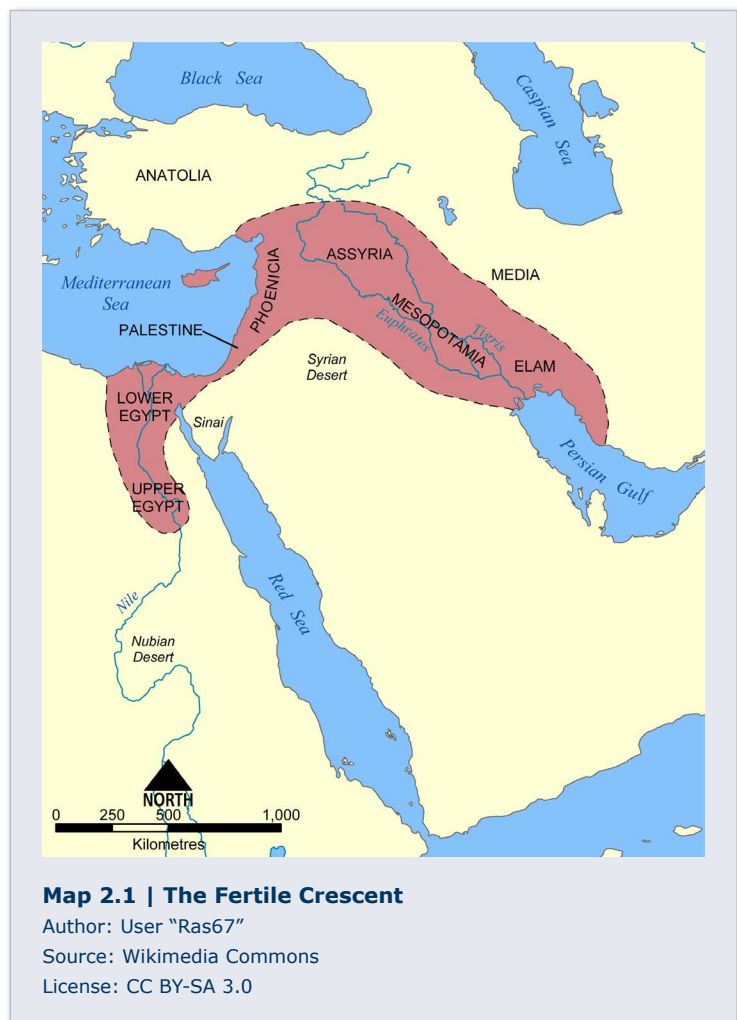
- Old Kingdom
- Ostraca
- Palette of Narmer
- Polytheistic
- Prophets
- Pyramids
- Sargon of Akkad
- Sumerian King List
- The Ten Commandments
- Valley of Kings
- Western Deffufa
- Ziggurat

## 2.5 ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia is located in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. Archeologists have found some of the earliest known sites of agricultural production in the Fertile Crescent. Although much of this region received little or irregular rainfall, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers provided large amounts of freshwater, facilitating agricultural production and the development of early civilizations. The Greeks later recognized the significance of the river systems to these ancient societies and referred to the region as “the Land between the Rivers” or **Mesopotamia**.

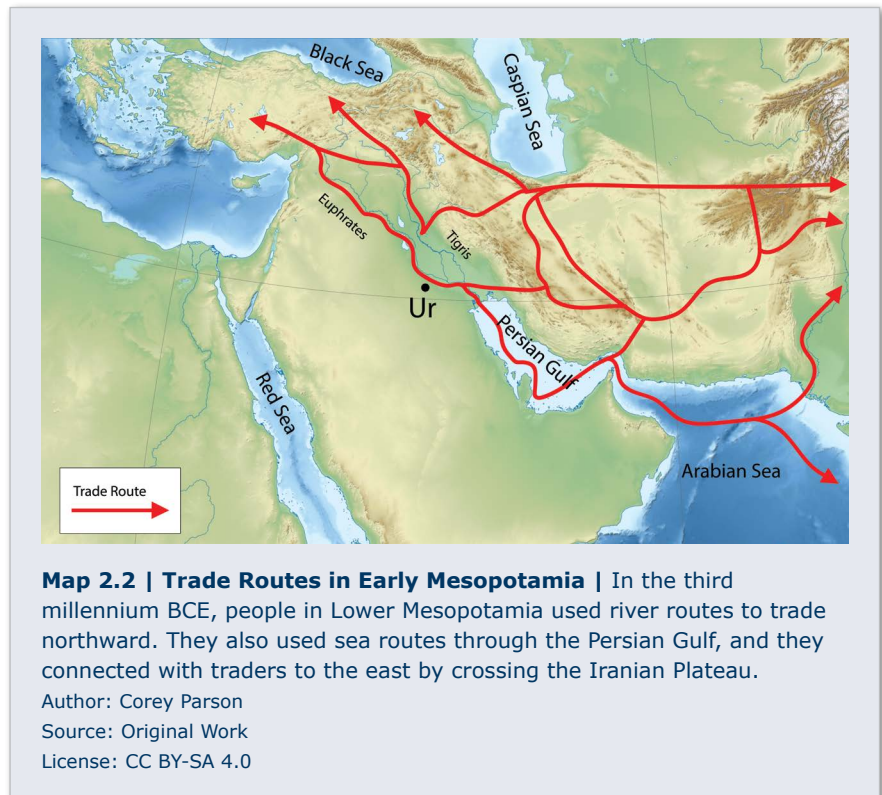
The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers both originate in the Taurus Mountains of eastern Anatolia and flow southward to empty into the Persian Gulf. The rivers carry and deposit silt downstream, enriching the soil. In general, the richer soils and availability of water in areas that in the north otherwise had little rain, or else towards the south had concentrated months of rainfall followed by long, dry spells, encouraged settlement near the rivers. The areas closer to the Persian Gulf, known as Lower Mesopotamia, in particular, were attractive to early settlers because they had extremely fertile soils. People built some of the earliest cities, including Uruk, Eridu, and Ur, in Lower Mesopotamia.

While the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers did provide water to the region, their floods were unpredictable and could even be catastrophic when they washed away entire settlements. In response, the



region's residents created irrigation canals and drainage ditches to control the flow of water. They also stored water in reservoirs to use during the dry months of the year. Additionally, in parts of Lower Mesopotamia, the courses of the rivers and their tributaries changed frequently, so people either had to move to follow the water's new path or divert a river to continue supplying water for their settlement. As regular access to water supported agricultural surpluses and population growth, people tended to fare better against the unpredictability of the floods, seasonal changes, and the rivers' changing courses when they lived in settlements capable of maintaining irrigation canals, drainage ditches, and water reservoirs.

The rivers offered another benefit to ancient Mesopotamians. Just as the rivers were definitely important to meet people's everyday needs for water and for agricultural production, so they also facilitated trade. While people made use of local resources, like mud to build their homes, in general, Lower Mesopotamia lacked other desired resources, including wood, stone, and precious metals. Traders were able to use the rivers to bring in these resources from Assyria, Anatolia, the Levant, and areas adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Early Mesopotamians also obtained



goods from as far away as what today are northern Pakistan and India. Merchants used overland routes that crossed the Iranian Plateau and sea routes, exchanging Mesopotamian products like grains and textiles for luxury goods from the east. Royal cemeteries show that by 2500 BCE Mesopotamian elites were buried with a variety of imports, including beads brought from the Indus River Valley. The rivers and the overland trade routes also facilitated communication and, with it, the sharing of ideas and technologies.

## 2.6 SUMERIAN CITY-STATES

Lower Mesopotamia, or the southern areas of Mesopotamia towards the Persian Gulf, drew settlers, who moved to take advantage of rich soils and the availability of water in the area commonly known as Sumer. The people who lived in Sumer are generally referred to as



Sumerians. Prior to 3,000 BCE, Sumerians, whose origins remain a subject of debate, founded a number of independent cities in Lower Mesopotamia. In these cities, Sumerians had organized religions, centralized governments, social hierarchies, and access to trade networks. As these cities expanded, their leaders claimed control over adjacent territories, forming at least a dozen **city-states**, which became the basic organizational structure of Sumerian civilization in the third millennium BCE. By incorporating the surrounding territories into city-states, urban centers were able to draw on more resources.

Sumerian cities had certain characteristics in common. First, a temple complex or a ziggurat was usually the visual focus of the urban landscape. Sumerians believed that their entire city belonged to its main deity, and built a massive temple, the most important building in the city, to be the dwelling place of their city's main god or goddess. A complex that comfortably housed many of the priests and priestesses who served the city's deity surrounded each temple. In addition to attending to the religious needs of the community, temples complexes also owned land, managed industries, were involved in trade, and acted as banks. Their wide-ranging roles meant that temples often had additional outbuildings, like granaries and storage sheds, in the surrounding countryside. Sumerians were **polytheistic**, meaning they worshipped multiple gods and goddesses. Because Sumerians believed each god had a family, they also built smaller shrines and temples dedicated to these divine family members. Therefore, each city would have a number of temples while many Sumerian homes had small altars dedicated to other gods. Sometimes, urban temples or ritual spaces were built atop a **ziggurat**, a solid rectangular tower made of sun-dried mud bricks.



**Figure 2.1 | The Great Ziggurat of Ur** | Located in what is today the Dhi Qar Province of Iraq, Sumerians originally built the ziggurat in the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100 BCE). It has been restored several times since, including fairly recently in the 1980s.

Author: User "GDK"  
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Archaeological evidence shows that temple complexes were expanded and rebuilt over time and, by the late third millennium BCE, temples in many of the Sumerian city-states were raised on platforms or else situated on a ziggurat. The towering architecture of the ziggurat stressed the significance of the temple to the surrounding community. The best-preserved ziggurat, the Great Ziggurat of Ur, was constructed with an estimated 720,000 baked bricks and rose to a height of about 100 feet. The people of Ur constructed this ziggurat for their patron deity, the moon goddess Nanna. They likely brought regular offerings to Nanna and also received food rations from the Great Ziggurat of Ur.

Viewing nature as unpredictable, people brought offerings to their city's temple complexes or ziggurat, hoping to

please the gods who controlled the natural forces of their world. Priests and priestesses collected and redistributed the offerings, demonstrating the vital roles they played in Sumerian society. The relatively privileged position of priests and priestesses at the temple complex also shows Sumerian social stratification (the development of a hierarchy) and how agricultural surpluses supported the specialization of labor. Some of the early leaders of Sumerian cities may have been “priest-kings,” who attained elevated positions through their association with the temples. The later rulers of city-states definitely supported the temples, claiming to be acting on behalf of the gods who brought divine favor to their followers.

Sumerian city-states had local rulers, who lived in large palaces, but most of these local rulers were not considered kings. So far, archeologists have dated the earliest known royal palaces to c. 2600 BCE and conclude that Sumerian city-states had centralized governments with secular rulers by at least that timeframe. While there does seem to have been a sense of inhabiting a shared space in Southern Mesopotamia, referred to as “the Land” in written records, city-states had distinctive identities. In part, their distinctive identities revolved around their main deity. The rulers of city-states alternately supported, competed with, and fought against one another. The **Sumerian King List** (Figure 2.2), a manuscript that listed early kings and described their reigns (with some presumably fictive and exaggerated elements), provides evidence of these alliances, competition, and war. For example, it describes En-mebarages as the second to last king of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty of Kish, “...who carried away as spoil the weapons of the land of Elam, became king, and reigned 900 years...”<sup>1</sup> Local rulers often came to power after proving themselves militarily.



**Figure 2.2 | The Sumerian King List**

Author: Taiwania Justo  
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Furthermore, the Sumerian King List recognized only rulers who had established control over multiple city-states as kings (with the title of *lugal* in the Sumerian language) belonging to distinct dynasties. While it lasted, a dynasty generally passed down the kingship through the male line. According to the Sumerian King List, the seat of power, held by hereditary kings, shifted from city-state to city-state with the rise and fall of dynasties through the third millennium BCE. Significantly, the Sumerian King List began its recorded history “when kingship came down from heaven,” legitimizing secular kings through their association with gods.<sup>2</sup> Sumerian kings, often along with more local rulers, led armies, collected taxes, organized labor for state projects, and meted out justice. At the top of the hierarchy and with control over

1 J.N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*, (London: Routledge, 1994): 28.

2 Ibid.



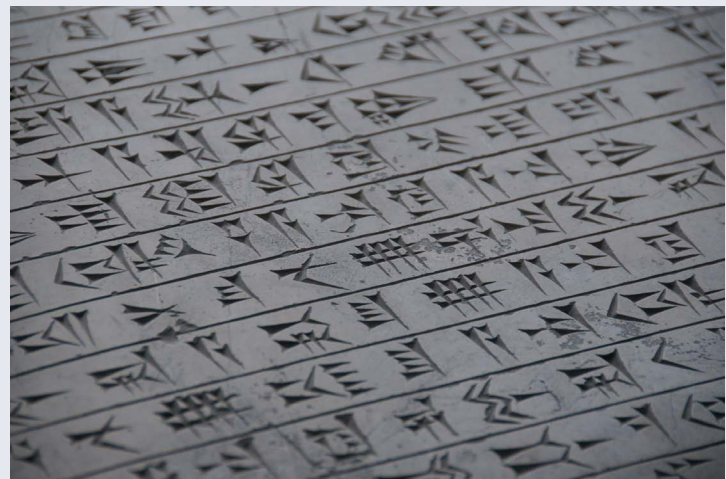
multiple city-states, kings expected obedience from local rulers and their subjects, and support from the priests and priestesses of the temples.

Kings, local rulers, priests, and priestesses held influential positions in Sumerian societies. However, farmers, taken as a whole, made up an estimated 90% of the population. Other skilled people included animal-breeders, merchants, craftspeople, fishermen, doctors, soldiers, architects, and scribes. Surplus agricultural production collected as tribute as well as wealth generated by trade supported such labor specialization. One important outcome of labor specialization was innovation in metalworking. In approximately 2900 BCE, metalworkers began producing bronze, which was stronger than copper. Stronger weapons and farming tools gave Sumerians advantages when it came to combat and agricultural production.

Social stratification is further evident as some Sumerians and even institutions, including temples, owned slaves. Slaves performed a variety of tasks like construction, weaving, agricultural and domestic labor, tending animals, and even administrative work as scribes. Some slaves were chattel slaves, meaning that society treated them as property with no rights. Usually, chattel slaves were prisoners of war or slaves bought from outside communities. They were branded by barbers or tattoo artists and forced to work at the will of their masters. If they tried to run away, the law required slaves to be returned. The more widespread type of servitude in most Sumerian societies was likely debt slavery, which was generally temporary until a debtor paid off a loan and its interest. Over the past century or so, archaeologists have added a great deal to our understanding of Sumerian social distinctions through their work at numerous excavation sites, but many gaps in our knowledge still exist.

The archaeological discovery of cuneiform tablets at these excavation sites has aided efforts to learn about this civilization. Sumerians developed **cuneiform**, a written script of wedge shaped marks, around 3200 BCE. Cuneiform was one of the earliest, if not the very first, written script in the world. The Sumerian King List, discussed above, was recorded in cuneiform. Merchants, scribes, administrators, priests, and others kept written records describing financial transactions, court proceedings, administrative decisions, and architectural plans.

They also wrote legends, epic poems, chants, and prayers. Most people were not literate, so scribes—who had been specially trained in scribal schools—generated many of the records. While in school, in addition to copying written passages, scribes learned arithmetic. The Sumerians



**Figure 2.3 | Cuneiform** | Cuneiform script on a clay tablet currently housed at the National Archaeological Museum in Tehran.

Author: A. Davey

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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system of arithmetic was based on the number 60, which we still use to divide time into hours, minutes, and seconds. Scribes used styluses made of reed to write on clay tablets that were dried and could be stored. The discovery of cuneiform tablets has greatly aided archaeologists, but only a small percentage of the tablets found to date have been translated.

Using archaeological and written evidence, scholars have pieced together what they can about everyday life for Sumerians, though some questions remain. For instance, it has been a challenge to determine the layout of urban spaces beyond the prominence of the temples and the relative grandeur of palaces. From archaeological finds, scholars suspect that Sumerian cities were divided into neighborhoods by occupation and according to kinship groups, but uncertainties about specifics linger. Legal documents and tax records show that people owned property in both the cities and the countryside. Also, evidence suggests social stratification, as some Sumerians owned fairly large chunks of land, while others had much smaller plots or presumably no land at all. Wills, court proceedings, and temple documents show that land and temple offices were usually bought or else acquired through military or other service to the state. A man inherited land, property, offices, and their attendant obligations to the state (like reoccurring military service) from his father. The eldest son seems to have frequently inherited a larger share than younger brothers and have been given control over the family home. He was tasked with performing regular rituals to honor dead ancestors, who were usually buried underneath the home. From the written documents, we also get glimpses into other aspects of Sumerian life, like marriage and divorce.

Sumerians viewed marriage as a contract between two families and, as a result, the male heads of the two families arranged a couple's marriage. Documents show that both families contributed resources to seal the union or complete the marriage contract. The man's family gave gifts or money and hosted a feast, while the woman's family amassed a dowry. Although a woman did not automatically receive an inheritance upon the death of her father, she could expect (and use the court system to make sure she got) to receive a dowry, even if it came from her father's estate after his death. Divorce was possible but sometimes led to social ostracism or even punishment if there were accusations of misconduct, such consequences being especially the case for the woman. Records indicate that polygamy was not common, but wealthier men did keep slave-girls as concubines. Overall, Sumerians considered marriage an essential institution in that it brought families together and ensured the continuation of the family lineage.

Legends, myths, poems, and literary texts tell us about Sumerians, too. For example, we can explore their values and views of the afterlife through reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates the adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary king, who may have lived around 2700 BCE. The epic has multiple versions and was told orally before it was first written down in cuneiform in about 2000 BCE. The epic follows the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu, to emphasize the importance of values such as loyalty and humility. In one section, the epic describes a very gloomy afterlife where "people see no light, they sit in darkness,"<sup>3</sup> reflecting Mesopotamian beliefs that the afterlife was miserable for all, even those who had lived virtuously. Additionally, it portrays the environment as potentially violent and hostile as in its

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3 Excerpt from: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Nancy Sandars (New York: Penguin Books, 1960), <http://web.archive.org/web/20010217041824/http://www.humanities.ccnycuny.edu/history/reader/gilgames.htm>



**Figure 2.4 | The Queen's Lyre** | The Queen's Lyre is a reconstructed musical instrument modeled after a lyre found by archaeologist Leonard Wooley in one of the graves at the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The original instrument has been dated to c. 2500 BCE. The reconstructed instrument is held at the British Museum in London.

Author: User "Fae"

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flood story, which in some ways resembles the account of Noah and the flood found in Genesis. Ultimately, Gilgamesh fails at his quest to find eternal life but learns to work for the glory of the gods and for worthwhile human achievements.

Other archaeological finds and the written documents also give some hint of the wider popular culture and artistic conventions in ancient Mesopotamia. For example, cuneiform tablets with pictures of dancers and singers, as well as instruments found in graves, suggest that Sumerians placed importance on music, using it for entertainment and ritual purposes. Trying to learn more about Sumerian music, scholars and other enthusiasts have replicated these instruments and presented their best estimation of Sumerian scales and tuning. The documentary evidence suggests that hymns from the ancient Sumerian city-states were shared with later Mesopotamian empires and even spread into the Mediterranean world.

## 2.7 MESOPOTAMIAN EMPIRES

In the second half of the third millennium BCE, Sumerian city-states fought each other, and dynasties rose and fell. Kings consolidated power over multiple city-states in the region. Then, King Sargon of Akkad enlarged the scale by conquering the Sumerian city-states and parts of Syria, Anatolia, and Elam. In doing so, he created one of the world's first empires in approximately 2334 BCE. For generations, Mesopotamian literature celebrated the Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE) that King Sargon founded. Like the Akkadian Empire, three subsequent empires, the Babylonian Empire (c. 1792 – 1595 BCE), the Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE), and the Neo-Babylonian Empire (c. 605 – 539 BCE), also ruled large parts of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent.

### 2.7.1 The Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE)

**Sargon of Akkad** founded the first empire in Mesopotamia. Legends about Sargon of Akkad stress that he rose from obscurity to become a famous, powerful king. While the legends all tend to describe him as coming from humble origins and rising to the top using his own wits, there are many variations. One much later Babylonian tablet, from the seventh century BCE, describes his background as descendent of a high priestess and an anonymous father. His mother hid her pregnancy and the birth of Sargon, secreting him away in a wicker basket on a river, where he was



**Map 2.3 | The Akkadian Empire, c. 2300 BCE**

Author: User "Nareklm"

Source: Wikipedia

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rescued and then raised by Aqqi, a water-drawer. This version of the legend links Sargon with a more elite family through his birth-mother, a high priestess, but also shows how he had to advance himself up to king after being adopted by the rather more humble figure of a water-drawer.

From his allegedly humble origins, Sargon of Akkad conquered Sumerian city-states one by one, creating an **empire**, or a large territory, encompassing numerous states, ruled by a single authority. It's quite possible that Sargon of Akkad's predecessor, who claimed to rule over the large region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, began the process of building the empire, but Sargon is remembered for accomplishing the task. One of the reasons we attribute the empire to him is his use of public monuments. He had statues, stelae (tall, upright pillars), and other monuments built throughout his realm to celebrate his military victories and to build a sense of unity within his empire. Archaeologists have not found the empire's capital city, Akkad. However, from the available information, archaeologists have estimated its location, placing it to the north of the early Mesopotamian city-states, including Ur and Sumer. It is clear that Sargon of Akkad turned the empire's capital at Akkad into one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the world. According to documentary sources, the city's splendor stood as another symbol of Sargon's greatness. The city grew into a cosmopolitan center especially because of its role in trade. Akkadian rulers seized and taxed trade goods, with trade routes extending as far as India. Sargon ruled the empire for over fifty years. His sons, grandson, and great grandson attempted to hold the empire



together. After about 200 years, attacks from neighboring peoples caused the empire to fall. After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, Hammurabi founded the next empire in the region in 1792 BCE.

### 2.7.2 The Babylonian Empire (1792 – 1595 BCE)

Hammurabi, who aspired to follow Sargon’s example, created the next empire in the region, the Babylonian Empire. With well-disciplined foot soldiers armed with copper and bronze weapons, he conquered Mesopotamian city-states, including Akkad and Sumer, to create an empire with its capital at Babylon. Although he had other achievements, Hammurabi is most famous for the law code etched into a stele that bears his name, the Stele of Hammurabi.

The Stele of Hammurabi records a comprehensive set of laws. Codes of law existed prior to Hammurabi’s famous stele, but **Hammurabi’s Code** gets a lot of attention because it is still intact and has proven very influential. As seen in Figure 2.5, the upper part of the stele depicts Hammurabi standing in front of the Babylonian god of justice, from whom Hammurabi derives his power and legitimacy. The lower portion of the stele contains the collection of 282 laws. One particularly influential principle in the code is the law of retaliation, which demands “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The code listed offenses and their punishments, which often varied by social class. While symbolizing the power of the King Hammurabi and associating him with justice, the code of law also attempted to unify people within the empire and establish common standards for acceptable behavior. An excerpt of Hammurabi’s Code appears below:

6. If anyone steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death.

8. If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold therefore; if they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death.



**Figure 2.5 | The Stele of Hammurabi**

Author: User “Mbzt”

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15. If any one receive into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the major domus, the master of the house shall be put to death.

53. If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break occurred be sold for money, and the money shall replace the corn which he has caused to be ruined.

108. If a tavern-keeper (feminine) does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.

110. If a "sister of god" open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.

127. If any one "point the finger" (slander) at a sister of a god or the wife of any one, and can not prove it, this man shall be taken before the judges and his brow shall be marked. (by cutting the skin or perhaps hair)

129. If a man's wife be surprised (in flagrante delicto) with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.

137. If a man wish to separate from a woman who has borne him children, or from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. When she has brought up her children, a portion of all that is given to the children, equal as that of one son, shall be given to her. She may then marry the man of her heart.

195. If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

196. If a man put out the eye of another man his eye shall be put out. (An eye for an eye)

197. If he break another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mina.

199. If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

205. If the slave of a freed man strike the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.<sup>4</sup>

Hammurabi also improved infrastructure, promoted trade, employed effective administrative practices, and supported productive agriculture. For example, he sponsored the building of roads and the creation of a postal service. He also maintained irrigation canals and facilitated trade all along the Persian Gulf. After Hammurabi's death, his successors lost territory. The empire declined, shrinking in size. The Hittites, from Anatolia, eventually sacked the city of Babylon in 1595 BCE, bringing about the official end of the Babylonian Empire.

### 2.7.3 The Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE)

The **Assyrian Empire**, which saw its height of power at the end of the first millennium to the seventh century BCE, was larger than any empire that preceded it.

Dominating the region, its well-equipped soldiers used their stronger iron weapons to extend the empire's control through Mesopotamia, Syria, parts of Anatolia, Palestine, and up the Nile into Egypt. They used siege warfare, along with battering rams, tunnels, and moveable towers, to get past the defenses of cities. The Assyrians had a large army (with perhaps as many as 150,000 soldiers) that utilized a core of infantry, a cavalry, as well as chariots. As part of their military strategy, the Assyrians purposefully tried to inspire fear in their enemies; they decapitated conquered kings, burnt cities to the ground, destroyed crops, and dismembered defeated enemy soldiers. One Assyrian soldier claimed:

In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword...I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some of their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.<sup>5</sup>

The Assyrians expected these methods to deter potential rebellions and used their spoils of war, like precious metals and livestock, to finance further military campaigns. After conquering an area, they conscripted men into their army, and employed resettlement and deportation as techniques to get laborers where they wanted them and deal with communities who opposed

4 "The Code of Hammurabi, c. 1780 BCE." *Ancient History Sourcebook*. Fordham University. <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hamcode.asp#text>

5 Quoted in Erika Belibtreau, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," [http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan\\_Spanier/Teaching/documents/CP6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf](http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan_Spanier/Teaching/documents/CP6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf)



**Map 2.4 | The Assyrian Empire at its height.**

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their regime. They also collected annual tributes that were apparently high enough to, at least occasionally, spur rebellions despite the Assyrians' reputation for violent retribution.

In addition to its military strength, the Assyrian empire also stands out for the size of its cities and its administrative developments. The empire's biggest cities, such as Nineveh and Assur, each had several million people living within them. Administratively, kings ruled Assyria, appointing governors to oversee provinces and delegates to keep tabs on the leaders of allied states. There were between 100 and 150 governors, delegates, and top officials entrusted by the king with ruling in his place and helping him maintain the empire. In the later centuries of the Assyrian Empire, kings chose these officials on the basis of merit and loyalty. Kings met with large groups of officials for rituals, festivals, and military campaigns. Evidence of such meetings has led some scholars to propose the possibility that the king and his officials might have worked together in something resembling a parliamentary system, though there is no scholarly consensus on the point. Ultimately, the Assyrian Empire became too large to control; rebellions occurred with more frequency and were difficult for its overextended military to quell. The empire fell after the conquest of Nineveh in 612 BCE.

### 2.7.4 The New Babylonian Empire (c. 626 – 539 BCE)

With the weakening of the Assyrian Empire, the New Babylonian Empire began to dominate Mesopotamia. Lasting for less than 100 years, the New Babylonian Empire is best known for its ruler, **Nebuchadnezzar II**, and its great architectural projects. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament), Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled from 605 – 562 BCE, was a ruthless leader. He gained notoriety for destroying the city of Jerusalem and deporting many of the city's Jews to Babylon. The captive Jews suffered in exile, as they were not allowed to return to their homeland. Nebuchadnezzar II also rebuilt Babylon with fortresses, temples, and enormous palaces. He associated the New Babylonian Empire with the glory of ancient Babylonia by reviving elements of Sumerian and Akkadian culture. For example, he had artists restore ancient artwork and celebrated the kings of old, like Hammurabi. Nebuchadnezzar is often also credited with rebuilding the city's ziggurat, *Etemanaki*, or the "Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth." When completed, the ziggurat rose several stories above the city and seemed to reach to the heavens. Some scholars claim that the Babylonian ziggurat was the famous Tower of Babel described in the Old Testament. Another one of Nebuchadnezzar's purported projects, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, was considered by the later Greek historian Herodotus to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar had the hanging gardens built for his wife. He made the desert bloom to remind her of her distant homeland; the elaborate gardens planted on rooftops and terraces were designed so that the plants' leaves would spill down high walls. Since definitive archaeological evidence of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon has not been found, scholars continue to debate its most likely location and even its very existence. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar II, outside military pressures as well as internal conflict weakened the empire until the much larger Persian Empire conquered the New Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE.

## 2.8 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MESOPOTAMIA FOR WORLD HISTORY

Mesopotamia saw the emergence of some of the first cities and the world's first empires. The city-states of the region flourished from about 3000 to 2300 BCE. Then, Sargon of Akkad and subsequent rulers built empires, expanding their control and influence over even larger territories.

There were cultural links and commonalities found in the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium BCE. With agricultural production dependent on access to water, cities initially grew in Southern Mesopotamia near rivers, namely the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and their tributaries. Sumerians tried to control their environment using irrigation, drainage ditches, water reserves, and other methods. With unpredictable floods and other environmental challenges, the Sumerians viewed nature as hostile and their expectations of the afterlife tended to be pessimistic. Their understanding of nature as unpredictable also spurred engineering innovations as Sumerians prepared for floods, water shortages, and other natural events. While farming was the mainstay of their economies, city-states were also involved in robust long-distance trade networks, which allowed them to garner the many resources not available in their region. These city-states alternately allied with, competed

against, and waged war on one another, with kingship emerging as rulers dominated multiple city-states. As evidenced by the centrality of temples and the belief that kingship came from heaven, religion was of fundamental importance to these societies. Archaeologists have also uncovered ample evidence of social stratification and labor specialization in these ancient city-states. Archeologists have been able to recognize Sumerian developments, in part, because the Sumerians left behind a wealth of information documented in cuneiform, one of the world's first written scripts. Scholars have begun to describe life in ancient Sumerian societies and appreciate the many Sumerian achievements, like those in math, where they introduced a computation system based on 60 (which we still use to divide time and in geometry as a circle has 360°). Overall, Sumerians were innovators, with some of the first cities, one of the first systems of writing, notable achievements in engineering and architecture, the creation of larger political entities, and more.

Starting with the Akkadian Empire, four empires controlled vast territories in Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. Over a period of almost 1800 years, these empires brought together diverse communities, often by military conquest and force. The empires facilitated trade, and spread ideas and culture. Their rulers developed administrative, military, and other techniques to try to ensure compliance and recognition of their authority. As intended, the rulers and the cities they built live on in legends, even though their empires eventually withered and fell.

## 2.9 THE ISRAELITES AND ANCIENT ISRAEL

The Israelites, “or children of Israel,” were Semetic-speakers who lived in Canaan and traced their descent back to Abraham through his grandson Israel. Hebrew tradition begins their history with Abraham’s departure from Ur in southern Mesopotamia (see Map 2.1). Therefore, Abraham is important in Jewish tradition, as he has been recognized as the first Jew, the patriarch from whom all Jews trace their descent, and a role model. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament, Abraham also made a covenant with God, which blessed his descendants. Jews, Christians, and Muslims of today all recognize Abraham as a significant figure, though these major monotheistic religions view him a little differently. Respect for Abraham by believers in all three of these religions is just one indication that the world’s three major monotheistic religions are connected. Examining these connections reveals the extraordinary contributions that the Israelites made to World History. The Israelites were highly influential in developing the idea of **monotheism**, or belief in one god. Furthermore, they recorded their history orally at first, until their tradition was written down in the Hebrew Scriptures (alternatively referred to as the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament of the Christian Bible). The Hebrew Scriptures has been one of the most important texts ever written.

Eventually, by the end of the second millennium BCE (likely between 1200 and 1000 BCE), the Israelites established small kingdoms in the **Levant**. The Levant refers to areas adjacent to the eastern Mediterranean; in the ancient world, it comprised roughly the area from southern Anatolia through coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean south and westward to the Egyptian delta. The Israelite kingdoms were concentrated along the Mediterranean coast in what are today Israel and the contested territory of the West Bank/Palestine.