

# Ancient Mesopotamia

## The Land Between Two Rivers

### From Communities to Civilization

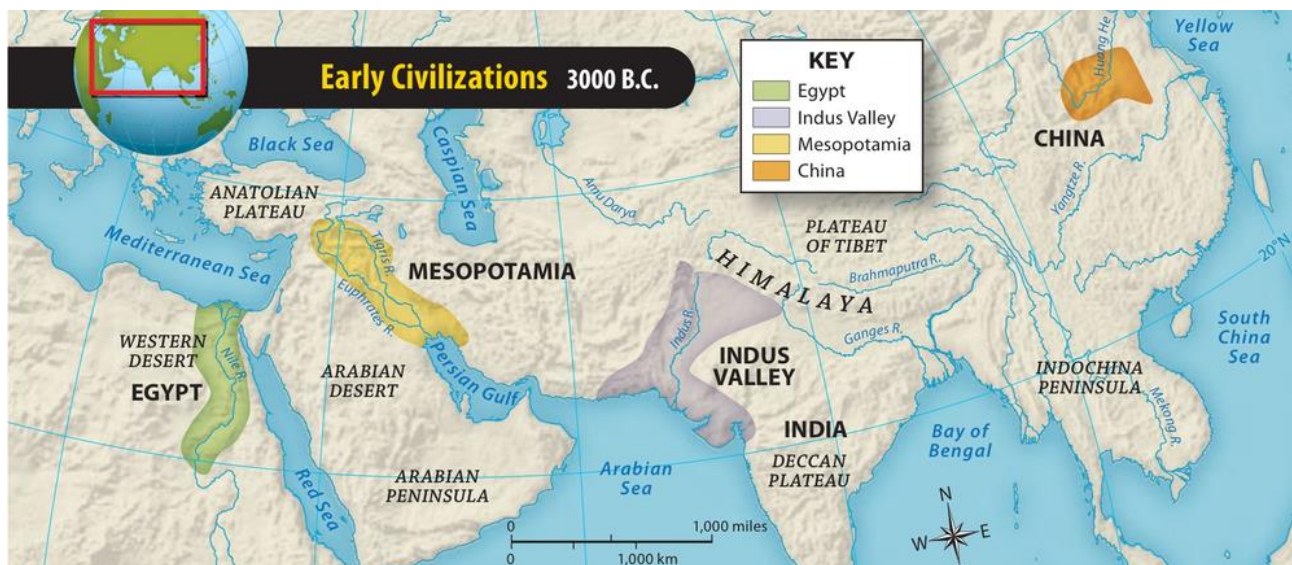
The Neolithic Revolution brought about two new kinds of societies: **pastoral herders** and **agricultural societies**. Both grew in ways that previous hunter gatherer societies were not capable of growing. The introduction of consistent food supplies allowed humans to progress in all areas of life at an imaginably fast rate. In a span of less than 10,000 years, humanity went from huddling around a camp fire in the winter to being capable of destroying the entire planet with a few swipes of a finger.

### The River Valley Civilizations

Shortly after the Neolithic Revolution, the first human civilizations began to develop independently around four river valleys.

1. The *Tigris* and *Euphrates* Rivers in the Middle East.
2. The *Nile* River in North Eastern Africa; Modern day Egypt
3. The *Indus* River in modern Pakistan
4. The *Huang He* (Yellow River) in Northern China.

The river valley civilizations shared a few similar characteristics, and many of these ancient civilizations even engaged in trade with each other meaning they often shared knowledge. Despite these loose connections, each civilization developed unique characteristics in terms of culture, government, social structure, and economy. Most of these distinctions came because of the environments they were created in.



*The earliest civilizations were dependent on the rivers they were built around.*

## Mesopotamia: Geography

- Mesopotamia was located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which are in the Middle East. Specifically, in modern day Iraq.
- In Greek, Mesopotamia means *land between two rivers* (meso- middle, potamos-rivers).
- Mesopotamia was part of a region known as the **Fertile Crescent**, due to the vast expanses of good soil for farming wheat. The Nile River Valley was also in a part of this region.
- Mesopotamia is often considered the “**cradle of civilization**” due to the massive amounts of contributions it made to humanity.
- The Tigris and Euphrates are infamous for their unpredictable nature. They often flood without warning and the current is always strong in comparison to other river systems.



## Sumer – The First Civilization

Large scale agriculture in Mesopotamia began around 5000 BC. The region was populated by small communities that had difficulty growing due to the unpredictable flooding of the rivers which would often destroy them. Eventually, the people of Mesopotamia began to build canals to exert some control over the river and they started building their settlements uphill. **Irrigation** made up for a lack of rain in the region.

These settlements eventually grew into **city-states** (cities that with the surrounding territory make up an independent state). While the city-states were independent politically, they were all united by culture, technology, and trade.

Trade networks allowed technology and culture advance at an accelerated pace and by 3000 BC city-states like Ur, Kish, and Erech became major centers of Mesopotamia. These city-states formed the first major Mesopotamian civilization known as **Sumer**.

### **Advances in Technology**

Various metals were used to produce stronger and more durable tools. Metal was usually more durable and easier to shape when heated up than stone. For a time, copper (strong but not very durable) was used. At around 3300 BC, the metal **alloy** known as **bronze** was developed by mixing copper with tin. Bronze was much stronger and more durable than other metal and stone tools and facilitated the construction of larger structures. Bronze also affected agriculture and military.

### **The Gift of Writing**

The first known system of writing, **cuneiform**, emerged in Sumer around 3500 BC. The writing was a form of **pictograph** which means it consisted of symbols that represented words instead of representing sounds like most writing systems utilize today.



It was a complicated system, designed mostly for record keeping in government and trade. Even still, cuneiform spread across trade routes and was even used to write some of the first known works of literature.

*Trivia!*

*The word cuneiform means “wedge-shaped”*

### **Sumer – Claims to Fame**

The impact of Sumerian civilization can still be felt today. The fingerprints of Sumer can be seen in everything from modern governments to mathematics.

- First known writing system – *history begins with Sumer!*
- First use of official “documents” like treaties and laws.
- Inventors of the twelve-month calendar.
- Developed the sexagesimal system, a number system based on the number 60, which still sees some use in math (360 degrees in a circle) and tracking time (60 seconds in a minute).
- Original creators of the American system of measuring distances (12 inches in a foot, 3 feet to a yard).

### **Sumerian Government**

Sumer was made up of roughly 20 city-states, meaning there was no true **centralized government**. This means that Sumer loosely controlled a large region and that war would often break out between city-states in disputes over territory or water rights. Most city-states were governed by a **monarch** who was aided by a class of priests.

## Religion in Sumer

A major aspect of religion is to explain why things happen. Sumer was **polytheistic** which meant they worshipped many *deities*. A major part of Sumer religion was the belief that bad things happened when the gods were unhappy. Bad things often happened – devastating floods and invasion – and the priests tried to please the gods in vain.

One way that the Sumerians tried to please their gods was by building temples where they could hold ceremonies and perform all manner of sacrifices. Can you try and imagine the lengths some priests would go to please their almost unpleasable gods? These temples are known as **ziggurats** and many still stand in ruins to this day.



## The First Empire

Sumer eventually fell to a northern city-state called **Akkad**. Led by its monarch known as **The Sargon of Akkad**, the Akkadians chose to conquer Sumer city-states one at a time. Around early 2300 BC, the Sargon of Akkad successfully unified the Sumerian and Akkadian city-states under a single ruler. Despite being conquered, Sumer culture continued to thrive. The Sargon of Akkad saw the value of many of the advances made by Sumer and chose to allow these two cultures to coexist.

The Sargon of Akkad became known as the ruler of both Sumer and Akkad. Though scholars continue to debate this topic, many would argue that Akkad was the world's first empire. It lasted a little over 200 years and fell to another powerful city-state **Babylon**.