

THE BRITANNICA GUIDE TO ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

# MESOPOTAMIA

THE WORLD'S EARLIEST CIVILIZATION

EDITED BY KATHLEEN KUIPER



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Educational Publishing

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**On the cover:** *The reconstructed Ishtar Gate, an enormous burnt-brick entryway located over the main thoroughfare in the ancient city of Babylon. Ishtar is the goddess of war and sexual love in the Sumerian tradition.* Nico Tondini/Robert Harding World Imagery/Getty Images

**Pp. 17, 40, 66, 78, 115, 133, 150:** *Panel from a bronze door showing the storming of the Syrian city of Hazazu.* DEA/G. Dagli Orti/Getty Images

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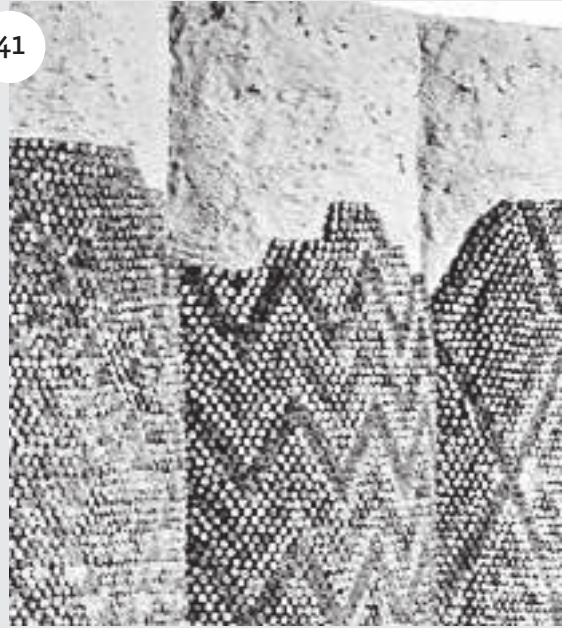
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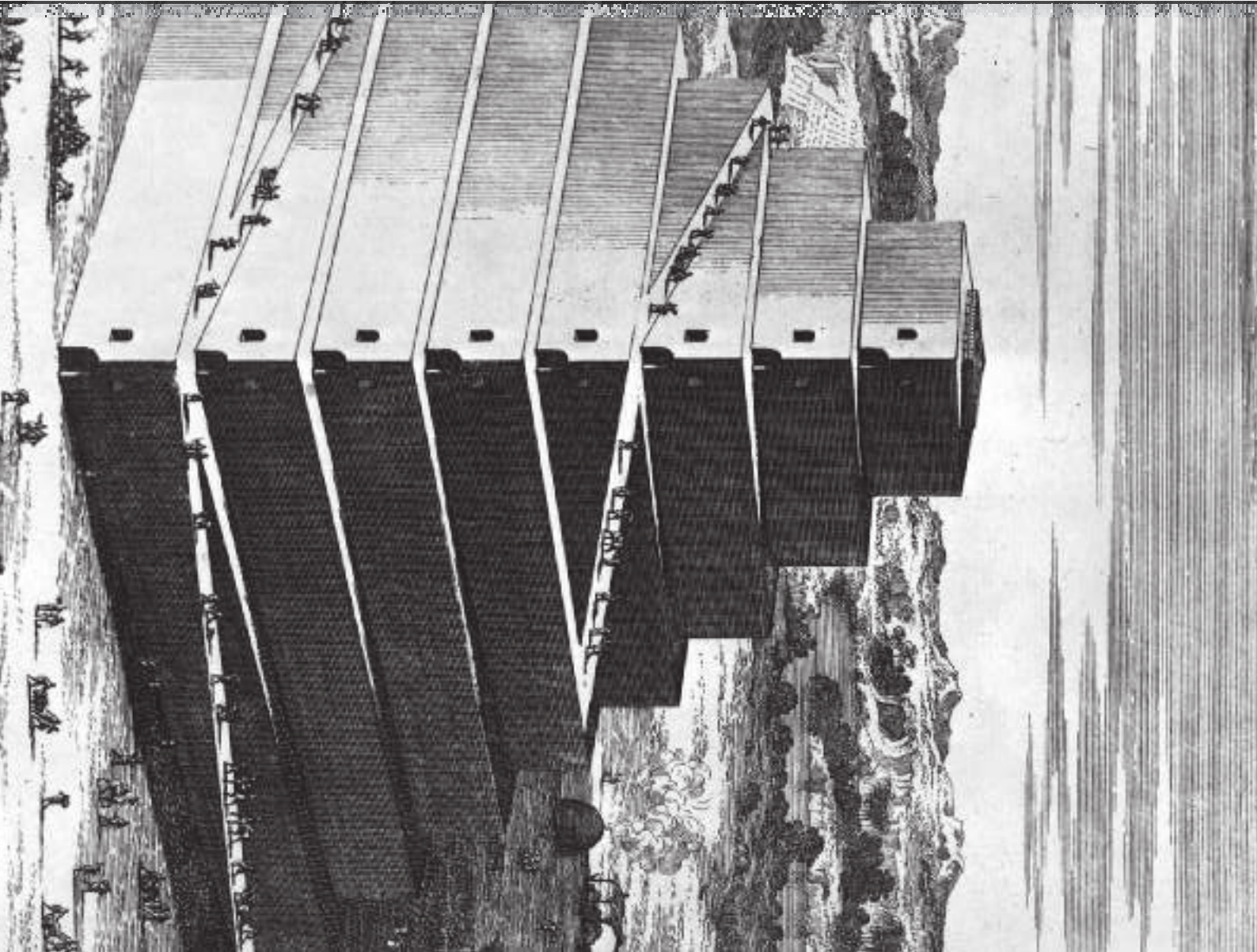
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# INTRODUCTION



Fantastic and massive human-headed, winged bulls and a curious wedge-shaped writing system are the best-known legacies of the place known as Mesopotamia. Although these objects give some sense of the grandeur and mystery of an ancient culture, the influence of the region and its people extends far beyond them. Long described as the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia is clearly one of the earliest civilizations in the world. Its many contributions include the development of written language, as well as several advances in science, economics, law, and religion. Mesopotamian astronomers, for example, devised a 12-month lunar calendar and divided the year into two seasons. Mesopotamian mathematics is a sexagesimal, or base 60, system, which survives to this day in 60-minute hours and 24-hour days. The Sumerian calendar was divided into seven-day weeks. Many of these remarkable contributions are discussed in the pages of this volume.

When contemporary historians use the term *Mesopotamia*, they typically mean the region in southwest Asia that includes modern-day Iraq, as well as portions of Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Originally, however, the Hellenistic Greeks used the name *Meso-potamos*, “the land between the rivers,” to refer specifically to the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These rivers provided the fertile soil and water needed to support a

sedentary, agrarian way of life, allowing humankind to abandon a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Largely because of this feature, Mesopotamia was one of several regions in which agriculture was born.

For nearly 2,000 years, information about Mesopotamia was limited. The Hebrew Bible provided some insight into the history and culture of the region. The Greek historian Herodotus first reported on the region in the 5th century BC. Some 100 years later, the Greek mercenary, historian, and philosopher Xenophon wrote in *Anabasis* (“Upcountry March”) about his experiences as part of an expedition that crossed Anatolia and traveled along both the Tigris and the Euphrates. Although extant in fragments only, the writings of Berosus—a Chaldean priest of Bel who immigrated to Greece—provide some of the most thorough and reliable accounts of the region.

Writing at the beginning of the 3rd century BC, while living on the island of Cos, Berosus produced the *Babyloniaka*, which consisted of three books. The first of these described the land of Babylonia and the Babylonian creation myth. It also described and a half man-half fish known as Oannes, who taught early humans about things such as law, the arts, and agriculture, thus bringing civilization from the sea. The second and third books contained the chronology and history of

*Artist’s depiction of the biblical Tower of Babel. The story of the tower may have been inspired by the Babylonian tower temple Bab-ilu (“Gate of God”), or in Hebrew Babel or Bavel, located north of the Marduk temple. Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

Babylonia and of later Assyria, from pre-history to King Nabonassar (Nabu-nasir; 747-734 BC) down to Berosus's own time.

Urban areas of considerable size began to emerge in ancient Mesopotamia during the early sixth millennium BC. The region supported important settlements such as Uruk, Nineveh, and Babylon. These centres of social and cultural life possessed one or more shrines to major deities as well as extensive granaries that served as a focal point for smaller settlements.

The central structure in any ancient Mesopotamian city was the ziggurat, or temple complex. These massive step pyramids, as the name suggests, had receding tiers and were each topped with a shrine. Each shrine was dedicated to a single god or goddess, and each city had its own patron deity. So close was the link between city and god that wars between cities were frequently considered to reflect wars between the gods and goddesses.

The other principal structure in a Mesopotamian city was the ruler's palace, a large compound containing private residences, sanctuaries, courtyards, and storehouses. Both the ziggurat and the palace were adorned with bas-reliefs and inscriptions that depicted cultic practices and civic and military accomplishments. Gates and important passageways were flanked by massive sculptures of mythological guardian figures, usually possessing a human head on the body of a winged bull or lion.

The region's geography was such that Mesopotamian cities were separated

from one another by vast stretches of desert or swamp. This circumstance led to the development of city-states, autonomous entities whose territory consisted of a single city and the surrounding area. Tensions often developed between neighbouring city-states, leading to armed conflicts over land and dominion. The first successful forced unification of city-states came in 2331 BC, when Sumer was conquered by what would become known as the Akkadian empire—which would, itself, be conquered several generations later by the Babylonian empire. As such, there is no unified Mesopotamian culture, but rather, a patchwork of cultures formed as conquering civilizations either adopted, co-opted, or superseded the traditions and beliefs of vanquished city-states.

With each successive conquest, Mesopotamia's political centre moved from one city-state to another. This can best be illustrated in the Sumerian King List, an ancient document that provides a record of the kings of Sumer, wherein each dynasty is listed according to the location of the "official" seat of power. The veracity of some claims in the King List has been called into question, notably where the regnal periods of individual monarchs have spanned hundreds, even thousands, of years. Still, when understood as being part official record and part embellishment, the list provides an interesting and useful window into Mesopotamian history. Beyond a simple chronology of rulers, it gives an intriguing glimpse into the nature of war, justice,

and religion as practiced by the people of the various city-states.

The King List survives by means of logograms, which are pictures or symbols intended to represent a whole word. By refining logograms and adding phonetic signs, the Sumerians created cuneiform, one of the earliest forms of written language. Their scribes used blunt reeds to imprint the wedge-shaped symbols of cuneiform script on wet clay tablets. Tablets unearthed by archaeological excavation make it clear that cuneiform spread quickly from Sumer throughout the region and that the language evolved as it moved. The arrival of the Akkadians, a Semitic tribe that entered Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC, further expanded the Sumerian pictorial and phonetic “vocabulary.” Several variants of Old Akkadian cuneiform have been discovered in Babylon and northern Mesopotamia.

A written language allowed the civilizations of Mesopotamia to document the receipt of commodities imported and exported through trade and laws. These commercial documents were catalogued and housed primarily—but not always—within temples. One noteworthy exception to the general rule was a treasure trove of cuneiform writings that were discovered at Nineveh in the library of the palace built by the Babylonian ruler Ashurbanipal.

Cuneiform also provided an early example of transformation of the oral tradition to the literary. Also discovered in

the Nineveh palace library were an incomplete set of tablets containing *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient odyssey story and one of the earliest known works of literature.

In addition to cuneiform, Mesopotamian art and architecture reveal much about the region’s history. The excavation and examination of ruins over the decades has led experts to postulate that the temples of this time were characterized by buttresses and recessed walls with interior mosaics. Temples were built either at ground level or on a raised platform, with the latter being the more popular and common mode. Secular buildings were of simpler design and construction—chiefly flat roofs upheld by the trunks of palm trees or columns of brick made from dried riverbank clay.

Artwork consisted primarily of wood carvings, metal sculpture, and decorative clay pottery. Cylinder seals, which acted like identifying stamps, moved beyond their utilitarian purpose to become some of the greatest examples of art to come out of the region. Rather than being adorned with the visages of gods and goddess, the remains of temple sculptures more commonly depict supplicants, revealing the physical characteristics of a given city-states’ inhabitants; bearded men and women with upswept hair.

Stone was difficult to come by in Mesopotamia, and was considered an extravagance for building. Yet examples of ornate stone decoration and sculptures abound among the ruins of temples. This

speaks directly to the importance places of worship within the region. Religion was a central aspect of life in Mesopotamia. The focus of Mesopotamian worship was a pantheon of gods, around which were built elaborate myths to explain natural occurrences (such as floods and drought) and the creation of universe itself. Religion and politics frequently meshed. Kings were crowned during sacred festivals, and they oversaw the administration of temples within their domain.

Many achievements in the realms of economics, law, and government also are attributed to Mesopotamian civilizations. The earliest known system of economics was developed by the Babylonians. Early laws created by the ancient Mesopotamians included the Code of Ur-Nammu, the Laws of Eshnunna, and, perhaps best known of all, the Code of Hammurabi. As the first king of the Babylonian empire (c. 1728-1686 BC), Hammurabi composed more



*Statuettes found at Tall al-Asmar, Early Dynastic II (c. 2775–c. 2650 BC). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, the University of Chicago*

than 200 laws that cover a wide variety of subjects, including family, commercial, and criminal law. Many of the Code's criminal laws follow the familiar "an eye for an eye" approach; however, its commercial laws are something else entirely. The Code of Hammurabi firmly codified the newly created economic system with a series of commercial laws. The Code addressed things such as property rights, inheritance laws, fair trade, taxation, statutory wages, and debt management.

Despite the region's cultural significance, very little was known about it before the first excavations in the mid-19th century. Over the centuries, between the decline of the Roman Empire and the European Renaissance, Europeans made occasional forays into the region. Among these visitors was the Spanish rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who traveled in the Middle East between 1160 and 1173 AD. It was the Italian Pietro della Valle, however, who in the early part of the 17th century rediscovered the ruins of Babylon in Iraq (roughly 60 miles south of present-day Baghdad). Della Valle was

responsible for bringing the very first specimens of cuneiform writing back to Europe. From that point on, European interest in Mesopotamia grew, and its visitors included the German traveler Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), the British business agent and proto-archaeologist Claudius James Rich (1787-1820), and the English painter and traveler Sir Robert Ker Porter (1777-1842).

The era of modern archaeological research in Mesopotamia began with the French excavations at Nineveh (1842) and Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad; 1843-55), as well as English expeditions to Nineveh (1846-55) and Calah (modern Nimrud; 1845). Excavations of other important cities, among them Babylon, Ashur, Erech (Uruk), and Ur, soon followed. A second phase of research focusing on "provinces" and outlying areas, as well as capital cities, began in 1925 when American archaeologists began excavations at Nuzu (modern Yorgan Tepe; about 140 miles north of Baghdad).

Each of these excavations contributed to what we now know about the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations.





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# CHAPTER 1

## THE ORIGINS OF MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY

Mesopotamia is the region in southwestern Asia where the world's earliest civilization developed. The name "Mesopotamia" comes from a Greek word meaning "between rivers," referring to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but the region can be broadly defined to include the area that is now eastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and most of Iraq. This region was the centre of a culture whose influence extended throughout the Middle East and as far as the Indus Valley in the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. This book covers the history of Mesopotamia from the prehistoric period up to the Arab conquest in the seventh century AD.

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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In the narrow sense, Mesopotamia is the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, north or northwest of the bottleneck at Baghdad, in modern Iraq; it is Al-Jazīrah ("The Island") of the Arabs. South of this lies Babylonia, named after the city of Babylon. However, in the broader sense, the name "Mesopotamia" has come to be used for the area bounded on the northeast by the Zagros Mountains and on the southwest by the edge of the Arabian Plateau and stretching from the Persian Gulf in the southeast to the spurs of the



Anti-Taurus Mountains in the northwest. Only from the latitude of Baghdad do the Euphrates and Tigris truly become twin rivers, the *rāfidān* of the Arabs, which have constantly changed their courses over the millennia. The low-lying plain of the Kārūn River in Persia has always been closely related to Mesopotamia, but it is not considered part of Mesopotamia as it forms its own river system.

Mesopotamia, south of Al-Ramādī (about 70 miles, or 110 kilometres, west of Baghdad) on the Euphrates and the bend of the Tigris below Sāmarrā' (about 70 miles north-northwest of Baghdad), is flat alluvial land. Between Baghdad and the mouth of the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab (the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, where it empties into the Persian Gulf) there is a difference in height of only about 100 feet (30 metres). As a result of the slow flow of the water, there are heavy deposits of silt, and the riverbeds are raised. Consequently, the rivers often overflow their banks (and may even change their course) when they are not protected by high dikes. In recent times they have been regulated above Baghdad by the use of escape channels with overflow reservoirs. The extreme south is a region of extensive marshes and reed swamps, *hawrs*, which, probably since early times, have served as an area of refuge for oppressed and displaced peoples.

The supply of water in the area is not regular. As a result of the high average temperatures and a very low annual rainfall, the ground of the plain of latitude 35°

N is hard and dry and unsuitable for plant cultivation for at least eight months in the year. Consequently, agriculture without risk of crop failure, which seems to have begun in the higher rainfall zones and in the hilly borders of Mesopotamia in the 10th millennium BC, began in Mesopotamia itself, the real heart of the civilization, only after artificial irrigation had been invented, bringing water to large stretches of territory through a widely branching network of canals. Since the ground is extremely fertile and, with irrigation and the necessary drainage, will produce in abundance, southern Mesopotamia became a land of plenty that could support a considerable population. The cultural superiority of north Mesopotamia, which may have lasted until about 4000 BC, was finally overtaken by the south when the people there had responded to the challenge of their situation.

The present climatic conditions are fairly similar to those of 8,000 years ago. An English survey of ruined settlements in the area 30 miles (48 km) around ancient Hatra (180 miles [290 km] northwest of Baghdad) has shown that the southern limits of the zone in which agriculture is possible without artificial irrigation has remained unchanged since the first settlement of Al-Jazīrah.

The availability of raw materials is a historical factor of great importance, as is the dependence on those materials that had to be imported. In Mesopotamia, agricultural products and those from

## TIGRIS-EUPHRATES RIVER SYSTEM

*The great river system of Southwest Asia comprises the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which have their sources within 50 miles (80 km) of each other in eastern Turkey. They travel southeast through northern Syria and Iraq to the head of the Persian Gulf. They are the rivers that define the region and provide the name for Mesopotamia, one of the cradles of civilization. The total length of the Euphrates (called in Sumerian: Buranun; Akkadian: Purattu; biblical: Perath; Arabic: Al-Furāt; Turkish: Fırat) is about 1,740 miles (2,800 km). The Tigris (Sumerian: Idigna; Akkadian: Idiklat; biblical: Hiddekel; Arabic: Dijlah; Turkish: Dicle) has a length of about 1,180 miles (1,900 km).*

*Having risen in close proximity, the Tigris and Euphrates diverge sharply in their upper courses, to a maximum distance of some 250 miles (400 km) apart near the Turkish-Syrian border. Their middle courses gradually approach each other, bounding a triangle of mainly barren limestone desert known as Al-Jazīrah (Arabic: “The Island”). There the rivers have cut deep and permanent beds in the rock, so their courses have undergone only minor changes since prehistoric times. Along the northeastern edge of Al-Jazīrah, the Tigris drains the rain-fed heart of ancient Assyria, while along the southwestern limit the Euphrates crosses true desert.*

*On the alluvial plain, south of Sāmarrā’ and Al-Ramādī, both rivers have undergone major shifts throughout the millennia, some as a consequence of human intervention. The 7,000 years of irrigation farming on the alluvium have created a complex landscape of natural levees, fossil meanders, abandoned canal systems, and thousands of ancient settlement sites. The location of tells, or raised mounds—under which are found the ruins of towns and cities of ancient Babylonia and Sumeria—often bears no relation to modern watercourses. In the vicinity of Al-Fallūjah and the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, the distance separating the rivers is some 30 miles (48 km), so small that, prior to its damming, floodwaters from the Euphrates often reached the capital on the Tigris. During the Sāsānian period (third century AD), an elaborate feat of engineering linked the two rivers along this narrow neck by five navigable canals (the Īsā, Şarşar, Malik, Kūthā, and Shaṭṭ al-Nīl canals), allowing Euphrates water to empty into the Tigris.*

*South of Baghdad the rivers exhibit strongly contrasting characteristics. The Tigris, especially after its confluence with the silt-laden Diyālā, carries a greater volume than the Euphrates; cuts into the alluvium; forms tortuous meanders; and, even in modern times, has been subject to great floods and consequent natural levee building. Only below Al-Kūt does the Tigris ride high enough over the plain to permit tapping for flow irrigation. The Euphrates, by contrast, builds its bed at a level considerably above the alluvial plain and has been used throughout history as the main source of Mesopotamian irrigation.*

*The Gharrāf River, now a branch of the Tigris but in ancient times the main bed of that river, joins the Euphrates below Al-Nāşiriyyah. In the southern alluvial plain, both rivers flow through marshes, and the Euphrates flows through Lake Al-Ḥammār, an open stretch of water. Finally, the Euphrates and Tigris join and flow as the Shaṭṭ al-‘Arab to the Persian Gulf.*

stock breeding, fisheries, date palm cultivation, and reed industries—in short, grain, vegetables, meat, leather, wool, horn, fish, dates, and reed and plant-fibre products—were available in plenty and could easily be produced in excess of home requirements to be exported. There are bitumen springs at Hīt (90 miles [145 km] northwest of Baghdad) on the Euphrates (the Is of Herodotus). On the other hand, wood, stone, and metal were rare or even entirely absent. The date palm—virtually the national tree of Iraq—yields a wood suitable only for rough beams and not for finer work. Stone is mostly lacking in southern Mesopotamia, although limestone is quarried in the desert about 35 miles (56 km) to the west and “Mosul marble” is found not far from the Tigris in its middle reaches. Metal can only be obtained in the mountains, and the same is true of precious and semiprecious stones. Consequently, southern Mesopotamia in particular was destined to be a land of trade from the start. Only rarely could “empires” extending over a wider area guarantee themselves imports by plundering or by subjecting neighbouring regions.

The raw material that epitomizes Mesopotamian civilization is clay: in the almost exclusively mud-brick architecture and in the number and variety of clay figurines and pottery artifacts, Mesopotamia bears the stamp of clay as does no other civilization, and nowhere in the world but in Mesopotamia and the regions over which its influence was diffused was clay used as the vehicle for

writing. Such phrases as cuneiform civilization, cuneiform literature, and cuneiform law can apply only where people had had the idea of using soft clay not only for bricks and jars and for the jar stoppers on which a seal could be impressed as a mark of ownership but also as the vehicle for impressed signs to which established meanings were assigned—an intellectual achievement that amounted to nothing less than the invention of writing.

### **THE CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA**

Questions as to what ancient Mesopotamian civilization did and did not accomplish, how it influenced its neighbours and successors, and what its legacy has transmitted are posed from the standpoint of 20th-century civilization and are in part coloured by ethical overtones, so that the answers can only be relative. Modern scholars assume the ability to assess the sum total of an “ancient Mesopotamian civilization”; but, since the publication of an article by the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger on “Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt” (1926; “The Distinctive Conceptuality of the Babylonian World”), it has become almost a commonplace to call attention to the necessity of viewing ancient Mesopotamia and its civilization as an independent entity.

Ancient Mesopotamia had many languages and cultures, and its history is broken up into many periods and eras.

## CUNEIFORM

*The system of writing used in the ancient Middle East is called cuneiform. The name, a coinage from Latin and Middle French roots meaning “wedge-shaped,” has been the modern designation from the early 18th century onward. Cuneiform was the most widespread and historically significant writing system in the ancient Middle East. Its overall significance as an international graphic medium of civilization is second only to that of the Phoenician-Greek-Latin alphabet.*

*The origins of cuneiform may be traced back approximately to the end of the fourth millennium BC. At that time the Sumerians, a people of unknown ethnic and linguistic affinities, inhabited southern Mesopotamia and the region west of the mouth of the Euphrates known as Chaldea. It is to them that the first attested traces of cuneiform writing are conclusively assigned. The earliest written records in the Sumerian language are pictographic tablets from Erech (Uruk), evidently lists or ledgers of commodities identified by drawings of the objects and accompanied by numerals and personal names.*

*The Sumerian writing system was adopted by the Akkadians, Semitic invaders who established themselves in Mesopotamia about the middle of the third millennium. In adapting the script to their wholly different language, the Akkadians retained the Sumerian format for more complex notions, but pronounced them as the corresponding Akkadian words. They also kept the phonetic values, but extended them far beyond the original Sumerian inventory of simple types.*

*The expansion of cuneiform writing outside Mesopotamia began in the third millennium, when the country of Elam in southwestern Iran was in contact with Mesopotamian culture and adopted the system of writing. In the second millennium the Akkadian of Babylonia became a lingua franca in the entire Middle East, and cuneiform writing thus became a universal medium of written communication. Even after the fall of the Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, when Aramaic had become the general popular language, varieties of Late Babylonian and Assyrian survived as written languages in cuneiform almost down to the time of Christ.*

The area had no real geographic unity and, above all, no permanent capital city, so that by its very variety it stands out from other civilizations with greater uniformity, particularly that of Egypt. The script and the religious pantheon constitute the unifying factors, but in these also Mesopotamia shows its predilection for multiplicity and variety. Written

documents were turned out in quantities, and there are often many copies of a single text. The pantheon consisted of more than 1,000 deities, even though many divine names may apply to different manifestations of a single god.

During Mesopotamia's 3,000 years of existence, each century brought a rebirth to the area. Thus classical Sumerian

civilization influenced that of the Akkadians, and the Ur III empire, which itself represented a Sumer-Akkadian synthesis, exercised its influence on the first quarter of the second millennium BC. With the Hittites, large areas of Anatolia were infused with the culture of Mesopotamia from 1700 BC onward. Contacts, via Mari, with Ebla in Syria, some 30 miles (48 km) south of Aleppo, go back to the 24th century BC, so that links between Syrian and Palestinian scribal schools and Babylonian civilization during the Amarna period (14th century BC) may have had much older predecessors. At any rate, the similarity of certain themes in cuneiform literature and the Hebrew Bible, such as the story of the Flood or the motif of the righteous sufferer, is due to such early contacts and not to direct borrowing.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

The world of mathematics and astronomy owes much to the Babylonians—for instance, the sexagesimal system for the calculation of time and angles, which is still practical because of the multiple divisibility of the number 60; the Greek day of 12 “double-hours”; and the zodiac and its signs. In many cases, however, the origins and routes of borrowings are obscure, as in the problem of the survival of ancient Mesopotamian legal theory.

The achievement of the civilization itself may be expressed in terms of its best points—moral, aesthetic, scientific,

and, not least, literary. Legal theory flourished and was sophisticated early on, being expressed in several collections of legal decisions, the so-called codes, of which the best-known is the Code of Hammurabi. Throughout these codes recurs the concern of the ruler for the weak, the widow, and the orphan—even if, sometimes, the phrases were regrettably only literary clichés.

The aesthetics of art are too much governed by subjective values to be assessed in absolute terms, yet certain peaks stand out above the rest, notably the art of Uruk IV, the seal engraving of the Akkad period, and the relief sculpture of Ashurbanipal. Nonetheless, there is nothing in Mesopotamia to match the sophistication of Egyptian art.

Science the Mesopotamians had, of a kind, though not in the sense of Greek science. From its beginnings in Sumer before the middle of the third millennium BC, Mesopotamian science was characterized by endless, meticulous enumeration and ordering into columns and series, with the ultimate ideal of including all things in the world, but without the wish or ability to synthesize and reduce the material to a system. Not a single general scientific law has been found, and only rarely has the use of analogy been found. Nevertheless, it remains a highly commendable achievement that Pythagoras’s law (that the sum of the squares on the two shorter sides of a right-angled triangle equals the square on the longest side), even though it was never formulated, was being applied as early as the 18th century BC.



*Northeastern facade (the ascents partly restored) of the ziggurat at Ur, southern Iraq. Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Munich*

Technical accomplishments were perfected in the building of the ziggurats (temple towers resembling pyramids), with their huge bulk, and in irrigation, both in practical execution and in theoretical calculations. At the beginning of the third millennium BC, an artificial stone often regarded as a forerunner of concrete was in use at Erech (Uruk; 160 miles [257 km] south-southeast of modern Baghdad), but the secret of its manufacture apparently was lost in subsequent years.

Writing pervaded all aspects of life and gave rise to a highly developed bureaucracy—one of the most tenacious legacies of the ancient Middle East.

Remarkable organizing ability was required to administer huge estates, in which, under the third dynasty of Ur, for example, it was not unusual to prepare accounts for thousands of cattle or tens of thousands of bundles of reeds. Similar figures are attested at Ebla, three centuries earlier.

Above all, the literature of Mesopotamia is one of its finest cultural achievements. Though there are many modern anthologies and chrestomathies (compilations of useful learning), with translations and paraphrases of Mesopotamian literature, as well as attempts to write its history, it cannot



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