



Mesopotamia:

“The Cradle of Civilization”

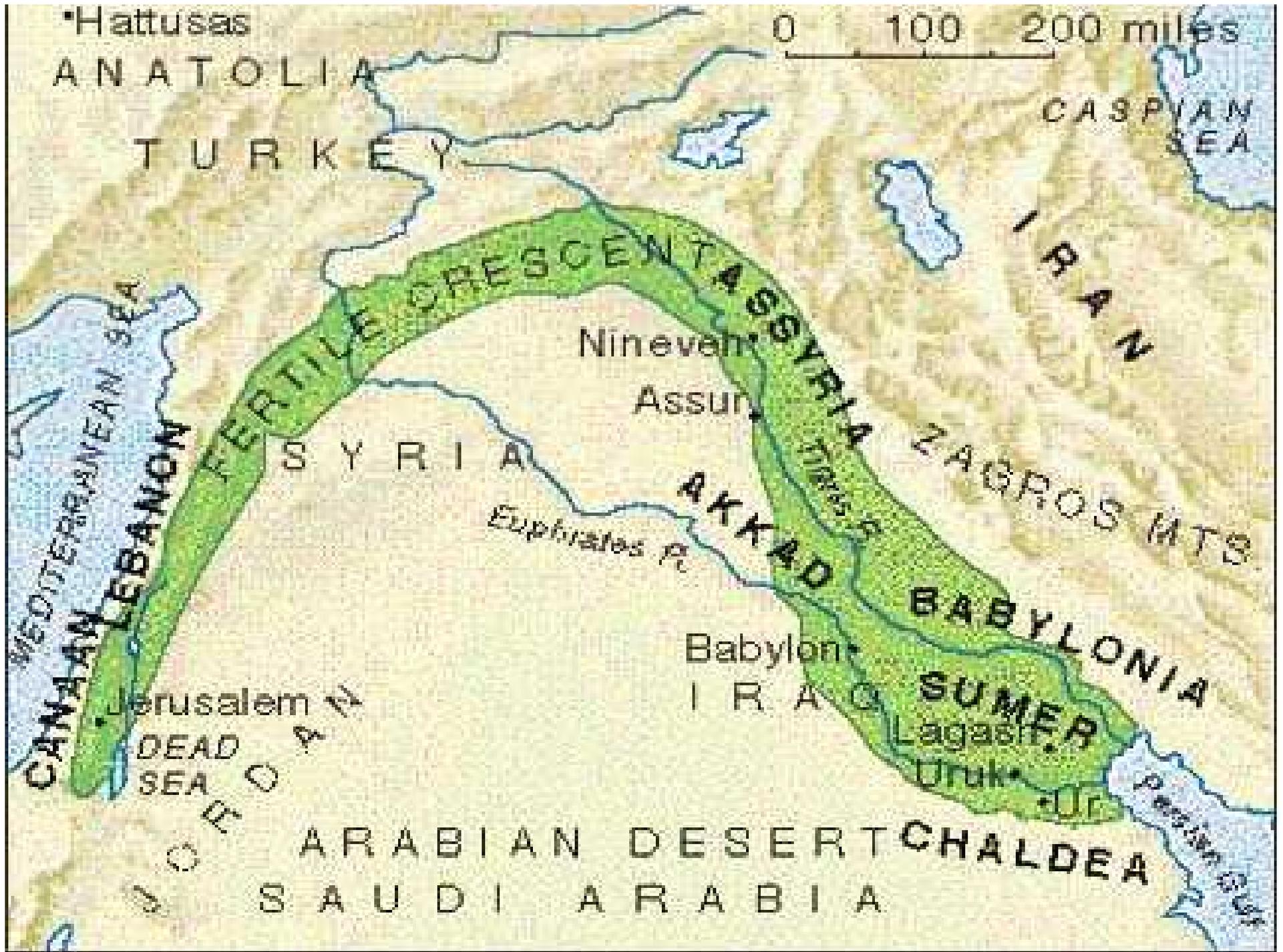
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Earliest Civilization: the Fertile Crescent

- Earliest of all civilizations as people formed permanent settlements
- Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means “**between the rivers**”, specifically, the area between the **Tigris River and Euphrates River** (present day Iraq)
- Lasted for approximately 3000 years
- Its peoples were the first to irrigate fields, devised a system of writing, developed mathematics, invented the wheel and learned to work with metal

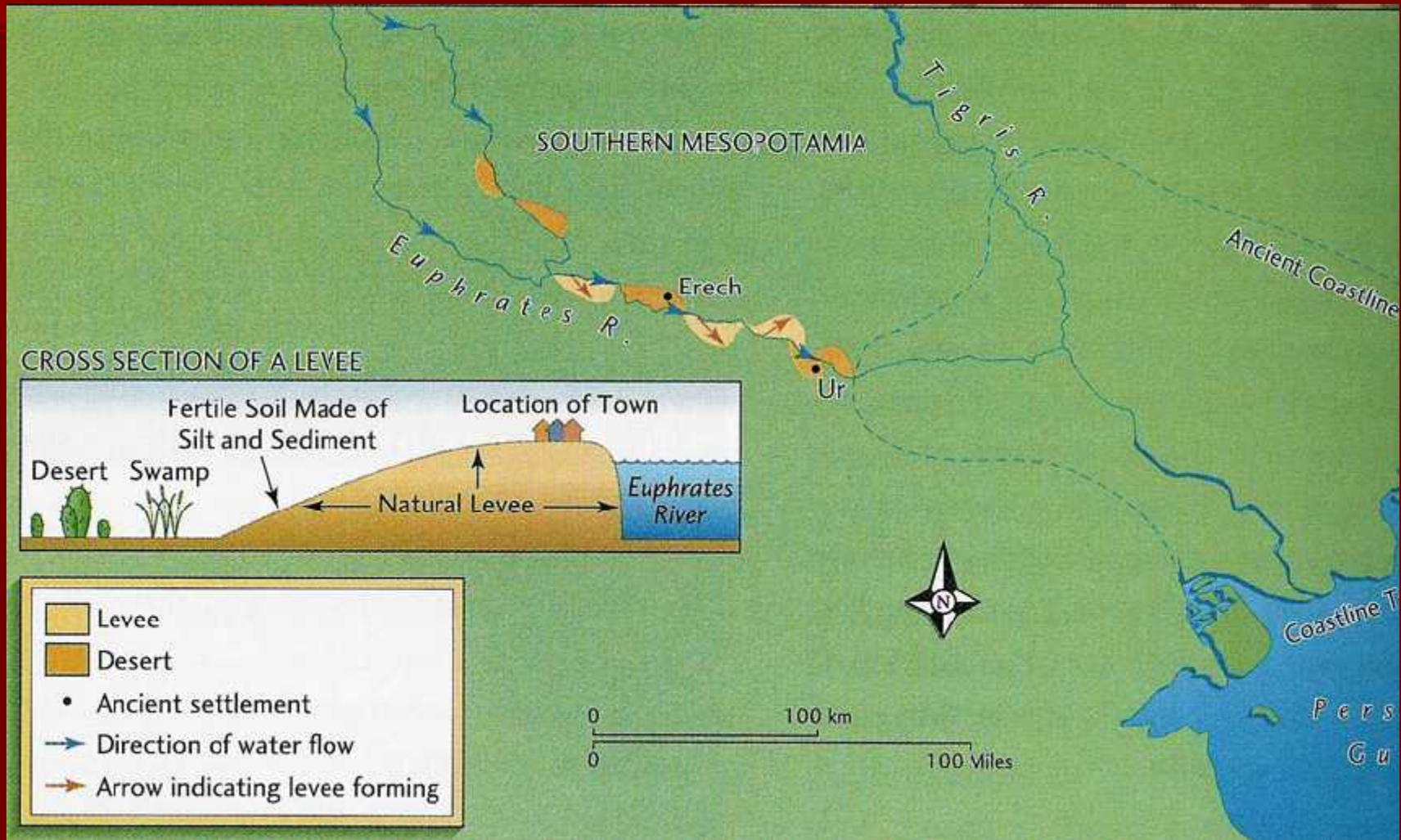


Geographic Conditions

- Little rainfall
- Hot and dry climate
- windstorms leaving muddy river valleys in winter
- catastrophic flooding of the rivers in spring
- Arid soil containing little minerals
- No stone or timber resources

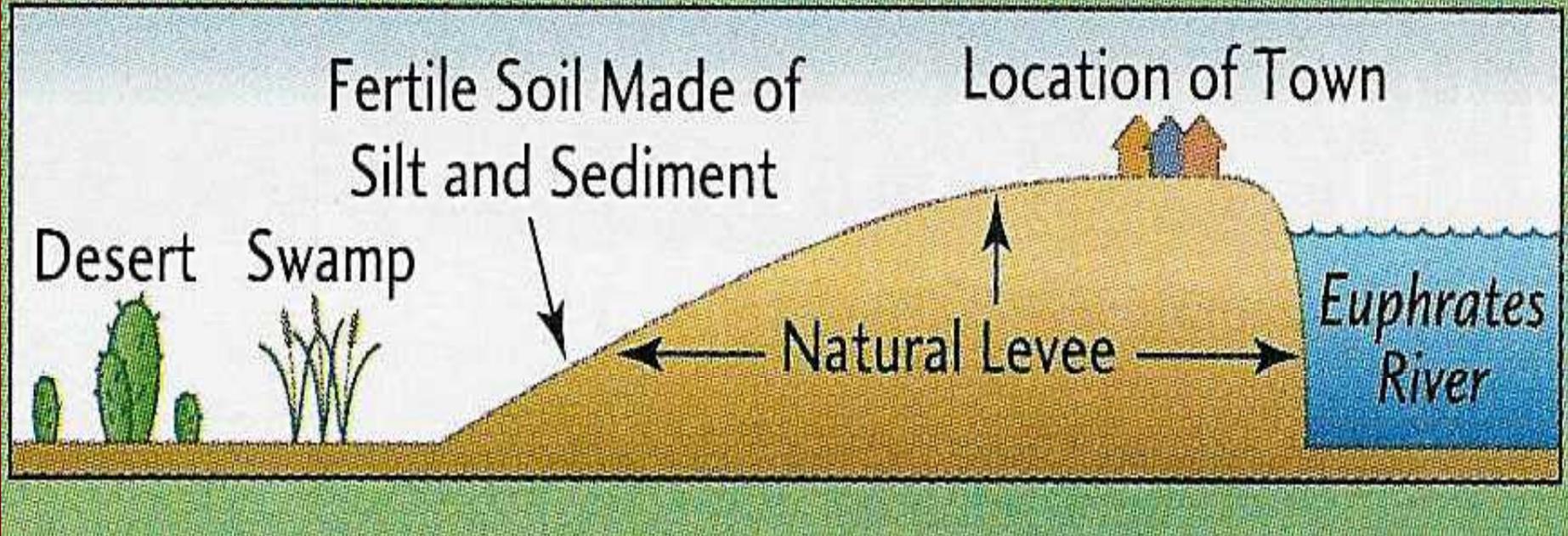
Then why live in Mesopotamia?

NATURAL LEVEES: embankments produced by build-up of sediment over thousands of years of flooding



Natural Levee

CROSS SECTION OF A LEVEE



- create a high and safe flood plain
- make irrigation and canal construction easy
- provide protection
- the surrounding swamps were full of fish & waterfowl
- reeds provided food for sheep / goats
- reeds also were used as building resources

History of Mesopotamia

- Over the centuries, many different people lived in this area creating a collection of independent states
- **Sumer**- southern part (3500-2000 BCE)
- **Akkad**- northern part (2340 – 2180 BCE)
- **Babylonia**- these two regions were unified (1830-1500 BCE and 650-500 BCE)
- **Assyria**- Assyrian Empire (1100 -612 BCE)

Religion



gods were worshipped at huge temples called ziggurats

➤ Polytheistic religion consisting of over 3600 gods and demigods

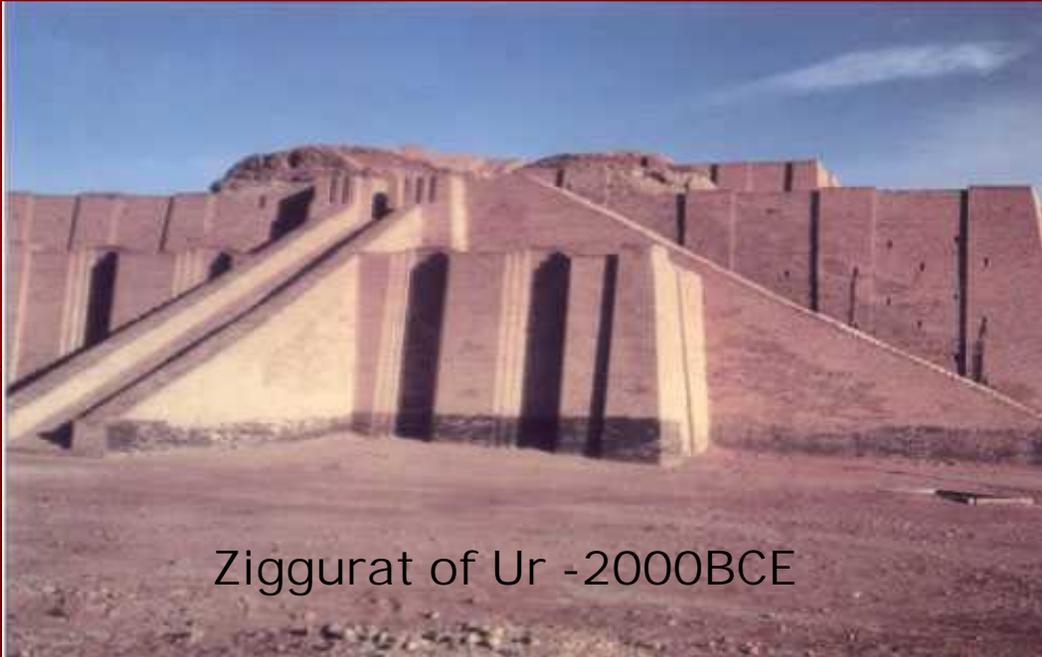
Prominent Mesopotamian gods

- Enlil (supreme god & god of air)
- Ishtar (goddess of fertility & life)
- An (god of heaven)
- Enki (god of water & underworld)
- Shamash (god of sun and giver of law)



- Position of King was enhanced and supported by religion
- Kingship believed to be created by gods and the king's power was divinely ordained
- Belief that gods lived on the distant mountaintops
- Each god had control of certain things and each city was ruled by a different god
- Kings and priests acted as interpreters as they told the people what the god wanted them to do (ie. by examining the liver or lungs of a slain sheep)





Ziggurat of Ur - 2000BCE

Ziggurats

- Large temples dedicated to the god of the city
- Made of layer upon layer of mud bricks in the shape of a pyramid in many tiers (due to constant flooding and from belief that gods resided on mountaintops)
- Temple on top served as the god's home and was beautifully decorated
- Inside was a room for offerings of food and goods
- Temples evolved to **ziggurats**- a stack of 1-7 platforms decreasing in size from bottom to top
- Famous ziggurat was **Tower of Babel** (over 100m above ground and 91m base)



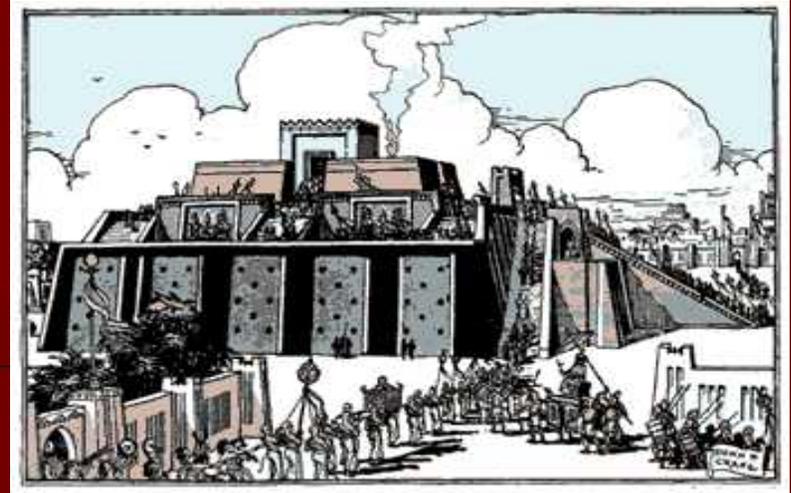
Government

- Political structure an early form of democracy
- Frequent wars led to the emergence of warriors as leaders
- Eventually rise of monarchial system
- co-operation was the basis of government
- Followed leadership of god of the city which was interpreted by a council of leading citizens > or > priests > or leader of the city (ie. king)



Sumerians

- social, economic and intellectual basis
- Irrigated fields and produced 3 main crops (barley, dates and sesame seeds)
- built canals, dikes, dams and drainage systems
- develop cuneiform writing
- invented the wheel
- Abundance of food led to steady increase of population (farm, towns, cities)
- first city of the world
- Developed a trade system with bartering: mainly barley but also wool and cloth for stone, metals, timber, copper, pearls and ivory
- Individuals could only rent land from priests (who controlled land on behalf of gods); most of profits of trade went to temple
- However, the Sumerians were not successful in uniting lower Mesopotamia



Akkadians

- Leader: Sargon the Great
- Sargon unified lower Mesopotamia (after conquering Sumerians in 2331 BCE)
- Established capital at Akkad
- Spread Mesopotamian culture
- However, short-lived dynasty as Akkadians were conquered by the invading barbarians by 2200 BCE



Babylonians



- Babylonians reunited Mesopotamia in 1830 BCE
- central location dominated trade and secured control
- **YET AGAIN, Mesopotamia was not unified for long...**

KING HAMMURABI'S BABYLON

- (6th Amorite king) who conquered Akkad and Assyria (north and south)
- He build new walls to protect the city and new canals and dikes to improve crops
- Economy based on agriculture and wool / cloth
- individuals could own land around cities
- Artisans and merchants could keep most profits and even formed guilds / associations
- **Grain** used as the medium of exchange > emergence of measurement of **currency**: shekel = 180 grains of barley; mina = 60 shekels
- Mina was eventually represented by metals which was one of first uses of money (but it was still based on grain)
- Hammurabi's Legacy: law code

Code of Hammurabi

- To enforce his rule, Hammurabi collected all the laws of Babylon in a code that would apply everywhere in the land
- Most extensive law code from the ancient world (c. 1800 BCE)
- Code of 282 laws inscribed on a stone pillar placed in the public hall for all to see
- Hammurabi Stone depicts Hammurabi as receiving his authority from god Shamash
- Set of divinely inspired laws; as well as societal laws
- Punishments were designed to fit the crimes as people must be responsible for own actions
- Hammurabi Code was an origin to the concept of "eye for an eye..." ie. If a son struck his father, the son's hand would be cut off
- Consequences for crimes depended on rank in society (ie. only fines for nobility)



Assyria

- 10th century BCE, Assyria emerged as dominant force in the north
- City of **Assur**- became important trading and political centre
- After Hammurabi's death, Babylon fell apart and kings of Assur controlled more of surrounding area and came to dominate
- Made conquered lands pay **taxes** (food, animals, metals or timber)
- Rule by fear as kings were first to have a **permanent** army made up of professional soldiers (estimated 200 000 men)
- Made superior weapons of bronze and **iron**
- iron changed lifestyles in Mesopotamia in weapons and in daily life ie. replaced wooden wheels and applied to horse drawn chariots



- Assyrian reunited Mesopotamia and established the first true empire
- However, states began to revolt and ONCE AGAIN, Assyrian Empire collapsed by late 7th century BCE
- By 539 BCE, Mesopotamia part of the vast Persian Empire (led by Cyrus the Great)
- Persian Empire dominated for 800 years until Alexander the Great

A photograph of a rectangular clay tablet with rounded corners, covered in ancient cuneiform script. The text is arranged in several vertical columns. The tablet is light brown and shows signs of age and wear. Overlaid on the tablet is the text 'Development Of WRITING' in a bright cyan color. The word 'Development' is at the top, 'Of' is in the middle, and 'WRITING' is at the bottom in a larger, all-caps font.

Development

Of

WRITING

Development of Writing

- Click [here](#) to see the development of writing from pictograms to cuneiform

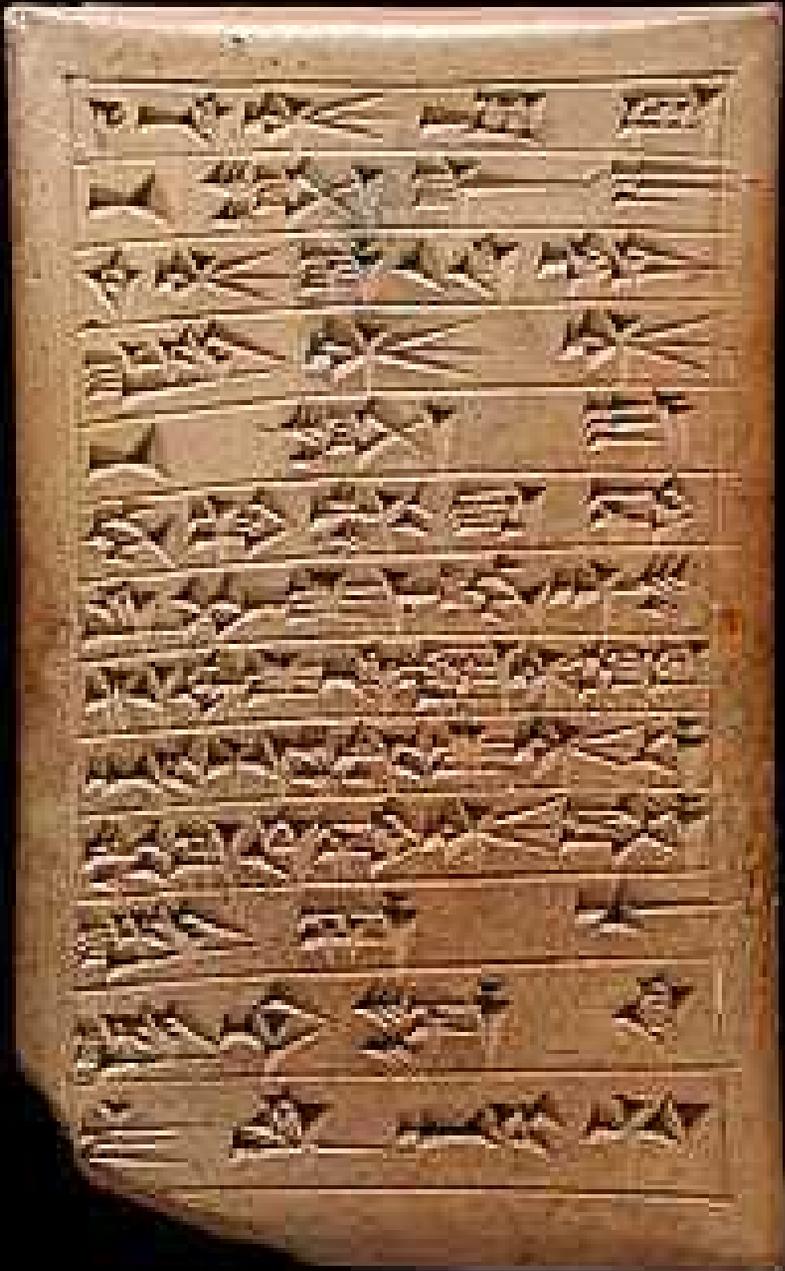


- Pictograms: picture to show meaning
- Ideograms: signs to represent words / ideas
- Phonetics: signs to represent sounds

*Phonetics are the basis of most writing systems

Writing

- Greatest contribution of Mesopotamia to western civilization was the invention of writing
- allowed the transmission of knowledge, the codification of laws, records to facilitate trade / farming
- Sumerians wrote on wet clay tablets with the point of a reed > then dried in the sun to make a tablet
- Scribes were only ones who could read and write and served as priests, record keepers and accountants
- As society evolved, the first form of writing was developed called CUNEIFORM (meaning "wedge shaped"), dating to 3500 BCE
- Cuneiform spread to Persia and Egypt and became the vehicle for the growth and spread of civilization and the exchange of ideas among cultures



Gilgamesh



- Gilgamesh is an ancient story or epic written in Mesopotamia more than 4000 thousand years ago
- Gilgamesh is the first known work of great literature and epic poem
- Epic mentions a **great flood**
- Gilgamesh parallels **the Nippur Tablet**, a six-columned tablet telling the story of the creation of humans and animals, the cities and their rulers, and the great flood

ANALYSIS

- Gilgamesh and the Nippur tablet both parallel the story of **Noah and the Ark** (great flood) in the **Old Testament** of the Jewish and Christian holy books
- Modern science argues an increase in the sea levels about 6,000 years ago (end of ice age)
- the melting ice drained to the oceans causing the sea level to rise more than ten feet in one century



Royal Tombs of Ur



- From 1922 to 1934, excavation of the ancient Sumerian city of Ur
- City famed in Bible as the home of patriarch Abraham
- discoveries such as extravagant jewelry of gold, cups of gold and silver, bowls of alabaster, and extraordinary objects of art and culture
- opened the world's eyes to the full glory of ancient Sumerian culture

Great Death Pit

- mass grave containing the bodies of 6 guards and 68 servants
- grave was a great funeral procession
- drank poison, choosing to accompany the kings and queens in the afterlife



Interesting Facts!

- Mesopotamia, specifically Babylon used a mathematical system based on sixty as all their numbers were expressed as parts of or multiples of sixty
- Some parts of the 'base-sixty' system still remain today: 360 degrees in a circle, 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in 1 hour
- Devised a calendar base on cycles of the moon (number of days between the appearance of two new moons was set as a month; 12 cycles made up a year)

Who was the best?

Sumer

- Closely tied to environment
- Irrigation techniques for farming
- wheel
- Trade- bartering
- Writing- cuneiform
- Religion tied to government as priests and kings made decision for gods
- ziggurats

Babylon

- Production of food through farming
- Private ownership of land vs ownership by the gods
- Developed mathematics and calendar system and system of units for currency
- Hammurabi's law code

Assyria

- Kings conquered lands to create empire of Assyria
- Cooler climate could produce crops with little irrigation
- Deposits of ore allowed for development and use of iron
- Assyrian army became most effective military force

Legacies of Mesopotamia

Revolutionary innovations emerged in Mesopotamia such as:

- codified laws
- ziggurats
- Cuneiform
- Irrigation
- Metal working, tools
- Trade
- transportation
- wheel
- Writing
- mathematics
- prosperous living based on large scale agriculture

Suggested Books

- Civilization: The West and the Rest

by Niall Ferguson

- Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization

by Paul Kriwaczek

- Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City

by Gwendolyn Leick

- Early Mesopotamia

Society and Economy at the Dawn of History

by Nicholas Postgate

- Ancient Mesopotamia

by Susan Pollock

- Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia

by Jeremy Black