

Mesopotamia - Study Guide

I. Vocabulary

scribe - a professional writer

Fertile Crescent - a region in Southwest Asia that spreads out from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf; site of the first civilizations

city-state - a city that is also a separate, independent state

polytheism - the belief in many gods

myth - a traditional story; in some cultures, a legend that explains people's beliefs

empire - many territories and peoples controlled by one government

Babylon - the capital city of Babylonia; a center of trade; a city of great wealth and luxury

caravan - a group of travelers journeying together

bazaar - a market selling different kinds of goods

Zoroastrianism - a religion that developed in ancient Persia

II. Mesopotamia

Land Between Rivers

Welcome to Mesopotamia, or, the "land between rivers." It is here roughly 7000 years ago that the world's first great civilization emerged, Sumer. It is also here that writing and the wheel were first invented.

Mesopotamia is Greek for "land between rivers." The two rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates. These two rivers seasonally flooded and provided rich soil. They also created a danger for people because the floods did not always occur at the same time each year.

The rivers provided rich soil for crops; fish; clay for building; and tall, strong reeds used to make boats.

The land spreads from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Many kings ruled over the Fertile Crescent after the fall of Sumer.

We will study five great ancient civilizations that developed and ruled this region: Sumer; Babylonia; Assyria; New Babylonia; and Persia.

The Legacy of Mesopotamia

The two most important contributions of the people of Mesopotamia are Hammurabi's Code and the art of writing.

Hammurabi's Code

Hammurabi's Code was a set of rules for everyone in his empire to follow.

The code told people how to settle conflicts in all areas of life including trade, labor, property, and family. It also had laws for adopting children, practicing medicine, hiring wagons or boats, and controlling dangerous animals.

An Eye for an Eye

Punishment for a crime should be similar to the crime committed.

The code did not apply equally to all people.

The higher the class of the victim, the greater the penalty was.

Laws for Everyone

Hammurabi's Code is important to us here today because they were written down.

Hammurabi's Code is the first set of laws that are organized and written down that we have found.

The Art of Writing

It took a long time for writing to develop.

Ancient Scribes

Writing first developed around 3100 B.C.E.

Sumerians needed to keep records. Writing is a valuable tool for keeping records.

The earliest written documents by the Sumerians are records of farm animals.

III. Sumer

The First Cities

Sumer was located in Mesopotamia.

By 3500 B.C., some of the earliest known cities arose in the southern region of Sumer, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Independent Cities Form

Cities in Sumer shared a common culture and language.

Cities did not unite under a single ruler.

Cities remained politically independent city-states.

Each city acted as an independent state, with its own special god or goddess, its own government, its own army, and, its own king.

A Brief Tour of a Sumerian City

Public squares

Marketplaces

Musicians, acrobats, beggars, water sellers

Scribes wrote letters for a fee.

Families ate and played in courtyards.

Sumerian Religion

Ziggurat, Sumerian temple, was the heart of the city.

Sumerian Temples

Religious, social, and economic activities all took place in the temples.

Some ziggurats were more than seven stories high.

At the top of each temple was a shrine.

Sumerians believed that their gods descended to Earth using the ziggurat as a stairway.

Ancient Religious Beliefs

They worshiped many gods. This is called polytheism.

Their myths were stories about the gods that warned people the gods would punish any one who angered them.

The stories promised rewards for those who served the gods well.

Honoring the Gods

The Sumerians honored their gods in religious ceremonies.

Priests washed the statues of the gods before and after meals.

Music played and incense burned while huge plates of food were laid before the statues.

These ceremonies show us what was important to the Sumerian people.

They also expressed what they valued in poetry.

The Fall of Sumer

Sumerian city-states fought each other over land and water rights.

In 2300 B.C. Sumer was conquered by Akkad and their king Sargon and united. This improved their government and military.

After 2000 B.C. Sumer was no longer a major power.

In the 1700s B.C. Sumer was conquered by Babylonia.

IV. Babylonia

The Babylonia Empire

Hammurabi created the Babylonia Empire in 1787 B.C. by conquering cities in Sumer.

Babylon was the capital city.

They built roads throughout the empire.

Babylon became a center of trade.

The empire gradually shrank and was finally destroyed in the early 1500s B.C.

V. Assyria

The Empire of the Assyrians

Assyria lay in open land making it easy to attack.

They became skilled warriors so that they could defend themselves.

Around 1365 B.C. they gradually started to expand their empire.

By 650 B.C. the Assyrian Empire was large, stretching from the Nile River to the Persian Gulf.

Assyria's Contributions

They invented the battering ram.

Warriors used slings.

Archers wore protective helmets and armor.

They had armed chariots.

Nineveh became a great city of learning with a remarkable library that held thousands of clay tablets with writings about Sumer and Babylon.

Assyria Overthrown

Two groups, the Medes and the Chaldeans, joined together to defeat the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.

VI. New Babylonia

Babylonia Rises Again

Under the Chaldeans, Babylon rose to even greater splendor and it became the center of the New Babylonian Empire.

The New Babylonian Empire controlled the entire Fertile Crescent.

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon

King Nebuchadnezzar II rebuilt the city of Babylon.

He built a huge royal palace with beautiful gardens and dedicated it to his wife.

Advances in Learning

Under the Chaldeans Babylon became a center of learning and science.

Astronomers charted the paths of stars.

Measured the length of a year.

They raised honey bees.

In 539 B.C., the Persians led by Cyrus the Great conquered the New Babylonian Empire. The city of Babylon was spared.

VII. Persia

The Persian Empire

Persia is located in present day Iraq.

In 539 B.C. the Persians conquered Babylon.

The Persians built a huge empire that, by 490 B.C., stretched from Greece to India.

A rich and Tolerant Culture

Zoroastrianism was the ancient Persian religion.

Zoroastrians worshiped one god.

The Persians developed a complex structure of government offices to rule their empire.

The built a huge network of roads across their empire to make trade with neighbors easier.

They tolerated peoples with different cultures.

They freed the Jews who had been held captive in Babylon.

They supported Babylonian science and math.

Lasting Influence

Through conquest and trade the Persians spread their religion, system of bureaucracy, and Babylonian science (including to the Greeks).

The Persian culture helped shape our modern world.