

## Ancient Mesopotamia - The Sumerians The World's first Great Civilization

### Ancient Mesopotamia and the Sumerians

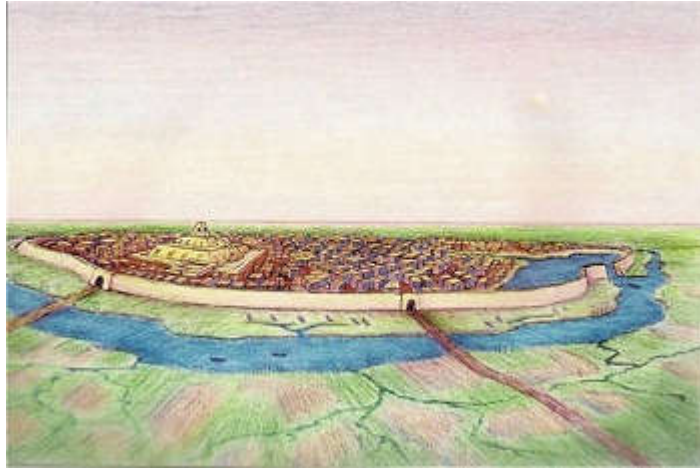
The word Mesopotamia comes from Greek words meaning "land between the rivers." The rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates. The first settlers to this region did not speak Greek, it was only thousands of years later that the Greek-speaking Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia, conquered this land and carried with him his culture.



Lower Mesopotamia is located the modern country of Iraq, while Upper Mesopotamia is in Syria and Turkey.

Mesopotamia is considered the cradle, or beginning, of civilization. Here large cities lined the rivers and many advances took place. Mesopotamia at first glance does not look like an ideal place for a civilization to [flourish](#). It is hot and very dry. There is very little rainfall in Lower Mesopotamia. However, snow, melting in the mountains at the source of these two rivers, created an annual flooding. The flooding deposited silt, which is [fertile](#), rich, soil, on the banks of the rivers every year. This is why Mesopotamia is part of the fertile crescent, an area of land in the Middle East that is rich in fertile soil and crescent-shaped.

The Sumerians were the first people to [migrate](#) to Mesopotamia, they created a great civilization. Beginning around 5,500 years ago, the Sumerians built cities along the rivers in Lower Mesopotamia, specialized, cooperated, and made many advances in technology. The wheel, plow, and writing (a system which we call cuneiform) are examples of their achievements. The farmers in Sumer created [levees](#) to hold back the floods from their fields and cut canals to channel river water to the fields. The use of levees and canals is called irrigation, another Sumerian invention. (You can play an irrigation simulation game at the British Museum Mesopotamia website by opening the link at the bottom of this page.)



A typical Sumerian city-state, notice the ziggurat, the tallest building in the city.

The Sumerians had a common language and believed in the same gods and goddesses. The belief in more than one god is called [polytheism](#). There were seven great city-states, each with its own king and a building called a ziggurat, a large pyramid-shaped building with a temple at the top, dedicated to a Sumerian [deity](#). Although the Sumerian city-states had much in common, they fought for control of the river water, a valuable [resource](#). Each city-state needed an army to protect itself from its neighbors.

Watch the video clip below from Discovery Education, as Nissaba, a young Sumerian girl, talks about her people's accomplishments. (This clip is no longer available)

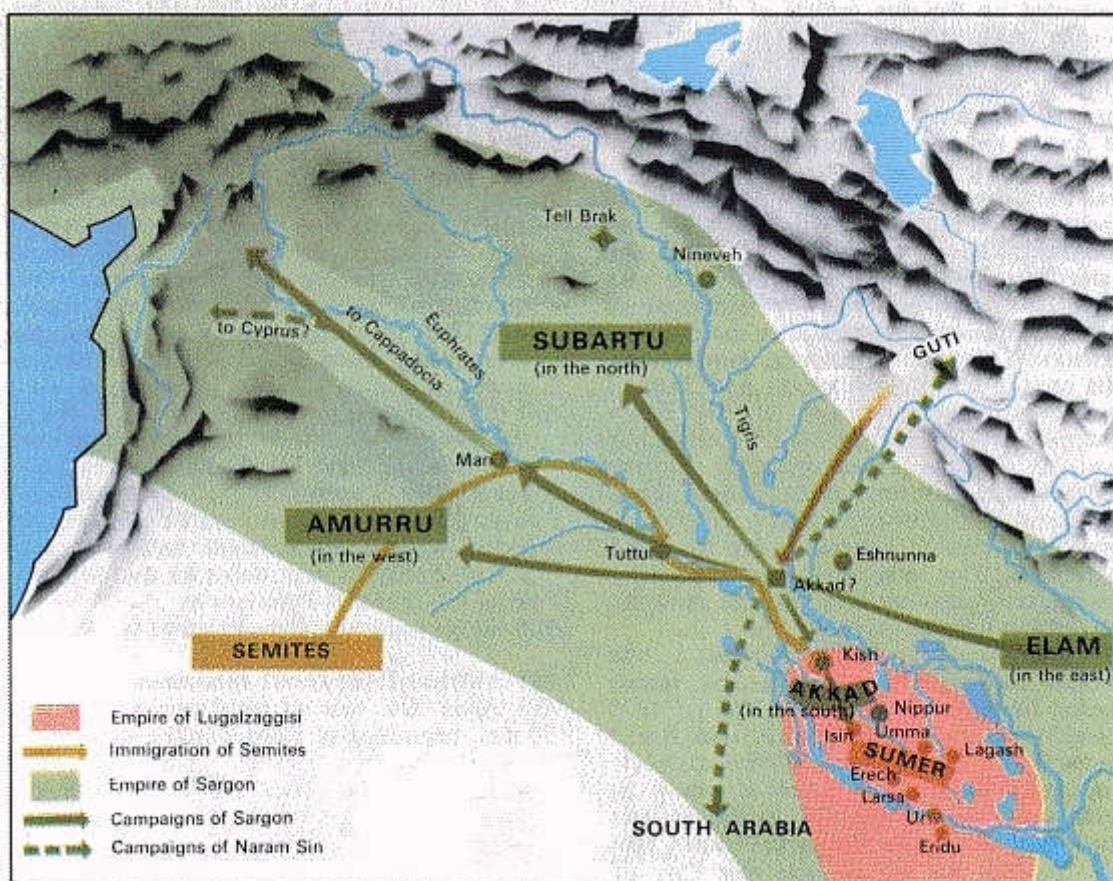
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In 1922, English archaeologist, C. Leonard Woolley went to Southern Iraq in hopes of finding the Sumerian city-state of Ur. Woolley learned archaeology from some of the best of his day, and now he was ready to strike off on his own. Many people felt that Ur was only a myth, but Woolley, the son of a [clergyman](#), was fascinated by the stories his father told about Ur, which, according to the Bible, was the birth place of Abraham. Abraham is a central [figure](#) of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, three [monotheistic](#) religions.

Woolley decided to excavate near the ruins of a ziggurat and began to dig two trenches. Here, Woolley confirmed that the site was the ancient Sumerian city-state of Ur. Woolley's discovery of Ur along with the artifacts and burials there give us a glimpse of life in Sumer 4,500 years ago. Woolley discovered graves of common people, but also royal graves, including that of a Sumerian queen named Pu-Abi.

Around 2,300 BC, the independent city-states of Sumer were conquered by a man called Sargon the Great of Akkad, who had once ruled the city-state of Kish. Sargon was an Akkadian, a [Semitic](#) group of desert nomads who eventually settled in Mesopotamia just north of Sumer. The Sumerian king, Lugal-Zaggisi, tried to form a [coalition](#) of Sumerian city-states against Sargon, but he was defeated by the Akkadian. Sargon is considered the first [empire](#) builder. Sargon made Agade the capital city of his empire.

Sargon's daughter, Enheduanna, was first world's first credited author because she signed her name to a set of poems she wrote about her gods and goddesses. Sargon's son and grandson ruled after him, but eventually the Akkadian Empire fell, and was replaced by the Old Babylonian Empire. We will learn more about the Babylonians in the next chapter.



**Sargon's Akkadian Empire**

The Akkadian Empire stretched across all of Mesopotamia. You can see the military [campaigns](#) of both Sargon, and his grandson, Naram Si

### **Ancient Babylon and the Amorites**

After the fall of the Akkadian [Empire](#), the Amorites were the next people to [dominate](#) Mesopotamia. The Amorites were a [Semitic](#) tribe that moved into central Mesopotamia. King Hammurabi of the city of Babylon is the most famous of the Amorite rulers. Hammurabi founded an empire known as the Babylonian Empire, which was named after his capital city. Hammurabi ruled from about 1792-1750 BC. The beginning of Hammurabi's reign was peaceful. As a defensive measure, Hammurabi had the walls around Babylon improved, and through [diplomacy](#), made allies with many of the cities north of Babylon. In the last ten years of his [reign](#), Hammurabi conquered Lower Mesopotamia. He used the Euphrates river to his advantage. Hammurabi held back the waters of the Euphrates, ruining the crops of lower cities, then he released the water and flooded his enemies. In this way Hammurabi ruled most of Mesopotamia.



## The Babylonian Empire, About 1750 B.C.E.



The Babylonian Empire. Notice the location of Babylon, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers run close to one another. You can see that the city-state of Ur is now under control of the Babylonians. The Zagros Mountains are where the ancient Mesopotamians believed their gods lived.

Hammurabi is best known for a set of laws he gave to his empire known as the [Code of Hammurabi](#). The laws were carved on 8 foot stones, called [steles](#), and placed in the cities of his empire. In this way the laws could not be changed and were posted for all to see, though few people could read. Hammurabi wanted to be known as a fair and [just](#) ruler.

You can read some of the laws from the Code of Hammurabi, which I found listed online; what do you think about these laws?

- If someone cuts down a tree on someone else's land, he will pay for it.
- If someone is careless when watering his fields, and he floods someone else's by accident, he will pay for the grain he has ruined.

- If a man wants to throw his son out of the house, he has to go before a judge and say, "I don't want my son to live in my house any more." The judge will find out the reasons. If the reasons are not good, the man can't throw his son out.
- If the son has done some great evil to his father, his father must forgive him the first time. But if he has done something evil twice, his father can throw him out.

After the reign of Hammurabi, the Babylonians were attacked and weakened by the Hittites, a group of people from Asia Minor. The capital city of Babylon was [sacked](#). Eventually, the Assyrians would conquer Babylon and Mesopotamia, but the lasting achievements of Babylon included advances in mathematics, [astronomy](#) and trade