

I. River Valley Civilization, Part 2: Mesopotamia

1. The term “Mesopotamia” means “the land between two rivers”. The two rivers in question are the Tigris and Euphrates. (Many historical events from Ancient history do not happen literally between the two rivers, but the term Mesopotamia is still the term used for the history of the general area.)
2. Before the rivers were dammed, they flowed more quickly and flooded regularly in the spring, much like the Nile.
3. The people of Mesopotamia did not create lasting stone monuments the way the Egyptians did. Mesopotamian structures were made from mud brick, which is far more fragile.
4. The various empires of Mesopotamia and Persia did build impressive structures called “ziggurats.” They served as religious temples, but were not tombs. (No complete ziggurat remains, so historians are not sure of their exact, shape, size and purpose.)

J. Earliest Kingdoms: Sumer, Akkad and Babylon

1. Ancient cuneiform records indicate the presence of two groups of cities in Mesopotamia, named Sumer and Akkad. Their history stretches back nearly as far as Egypt’s.
2. At the earliest point in Mesopotamian history that is considered valid, a ruler called Sargon of Akkad unified the whole area, forging the Akkadian Empire c. 2250 BC.
3. This makes Sargon of Akkad a similar figure in Mesopotamian history to Menes-Narmer in Egyptian history. He is a great unifier at the beginning of history.
4. However, Sargon’s empire did not last. Nomads destroyed it, and delayed the real start of Mesopotamian history for another 400 years, until the rise of the Babylonian Empire.



Mesopotamia today (left), and at the beginning, c.2250 BC (right).

5. The reunification of Mesopotamia was accomplished by a ruler named Hammurabi. His capital was the city of Babylon.
6. Hammurabi managed to reestablish centralized control over a large territory, and his famous code of laws reflects his desire to establish order after the chaos of war.
7. The Code of Hammurabi (c.1700 BC)
 - a) It is one of the first written law codes in all of history, and a great example of early **benevolent despotism**. (*Hammurabi's said that he wanted to create a set of laws that would help "orphan and widow," i.e. the weak, who would otherwise fall prey to the strong.*)
 - b) The basic idea of these laws is often stated as "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," i.e. the punishment is equal to the crime.
 - c) The actual laws of the code reveal that the conquering lords of Babylonia were given preferential treatment, with commoners treated more harshly, and slaves the harshest of all.
 - d) Death was a common penalty, imposed for wide range of crimes from kidnapping to theft. Even the receipt of stolen goods resulted in death.
 - e) The lords/nobles received only fines for crimes committed against those beneath them in the the hierarchy of Babylonian society.

K. The Succession of Empires

1. The Babylonian Empire was destroyed by a mysterious people known as the Kassites. Then came yet another "dark age," and a series of empires.
2. The most important empire in this early stage of history was the Assyrian Empire. This empire conquered the Hebrew kingdom of Israel, and thus became a part of Jewish and Christian lore. In particular, Assyria deported Jewish people to other parts of the empire, beginning a long tragic story of the Jewish people being torn from their homeland and flung to the far corners of the world.
3. Because of its connection to the people of the Christian Bible, Assyria was the most well known empire of Mesopotamian history to Europeans when the study of Mesopotamia's archaic past began. Thus the subject of Mesopotamian history became known as "Assyriology."
4. Assyria was also the first Mesopotamian empire to conquer Egypt.
5. Assyria was then itself conquered by an alliance of people known as the Medes (from part of Persia) and Babylon (who are known as the "Neo-Babylonians," because they were a *new* Babylonian empire.)
6. The Neo-Babylonians were famous for their architecture in ancient times. Their ziggurat of Babylon inspired the fable of the Tower of Babel. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

G. The Climax of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: The Persian Empire

1. The Neo-Babylonians were conquered by the Persians, who built the greatest empire of this ancient cultural block.
2. The most original feature of this empire was that it allowed conquered peoples to maintain their local religions. In this way the founder of the empire, Cyrus “the Great,” hoped to prevent rebellions because these people would have one less reason to rebel. (For this reason, Cyrus is viewed as a hero by the Jewish people. He allowed them to return home from Babylon and helped them rebuild their temples.)
3. Cyrus's heir, Cambyses, continued to rule in the same way. Cambyses conquered Egypt, and he applied Cyrus’s idea of religion toleration in a particular way. He became the Pharaoh of Egypt and thus the leader of the Egyptian religion—an approach that Alexander “the Great” later copied.
4. The third of the most accomplished Persian emperors was Darius “the Great,” whose rule was celebrated in the Behistun Inscription.
5. To keep Persia’s conquered territories better organized, Darius divided the empire into provinces known as “satrapies.” Each one was ruled by a Persian nobleman, whose title was “satrap.” It was the satrap’s job to maintain local order.
6. The Persian Empire was the greatest of the archaic empires—but we can all be thankful that it could not snuff out the first spark of human freedom that we turn to next in the story of ancient Greece.