

Living
HISTORY

Life in Ancient Mesopotamia

Don Nardo



Contents

Foreword	6
Important Events of Ancient Mesopotamia	8
Introduction	10
Lives Dependent on the Rivers	
Chapter One	14
City-States and Their Residents	
Chapter Two	29
Home, Family, and Children	
Chapter Three	43
Writing, Literature, and the Arts	
Chapter Four	57
Gods and Religious Beliefs	
Chapter Five	71
Science, Technology, and Travel	
Source Notes	86
For Further Research	89
Index	91
Picture Credits	95
About the Author	96

Important Events of



BC ca. 9000

Agriculture begins in the Fertile Crescent, the well-watered region stretching across Mesopotamia's northern rim.

ca. 3500–3000

The Sumerians oversee widespread application of the wheel, build the first wagons, and erect the first true cities.

ca. 5000–3500

The Ubaidians, the direct predecessors of the Sumerians, establish numerous villages in Mesopotamia.

ca. 3000

The earliest known medical text is written in the Sumerian city of Nippur.

BC 6000

5000

4000

3000

2000

ca. 5500

The first waves of settlers from the Fertile Crescent move into the Tigris-Euphrates river valley.



ca. 3100

The world's first writing system appears in some of the Sumerian cities.

ca. 2340–2200

The approximate dates for the rise and fall of the first empire, founded by the Akkadian king Sargon the Great.



sumed, the types of building materials they used to erect their houses and cities, the kinds of professions they held, the nature of their myths, and many more critical aspects of their lives. So interconnected were they with the *Idiglat* and the *Buranun*—their names for the Tigris and Euphrates—that outsiders automatically associated them with those rivers. Indeed, the chief term that posterity came to use for the region, *Mesopotamia*, is Greek for “the land between the rivers.”

Composed not long after 2000 BC, it marks the fall of the last of the Sumerian empire, dubbed the Third Dynasty of Ur, or Ur-III, by modern scholars. The part of the lament that follows sounds like an actual eyewitness account of the dreadful aftermath of wartime slaughter:

On that day did the storm [of war] leave the country. The people mourn. Its people's corpses, not potsherds, littered the approaches. The walls were gaping. The high gates, the roads, were piled with dead. In the wide streets, where feasting crowds once gathered, jumbled they lay. In all the streets and roadways bodies lay. In open fields that used to fill with dancers, the people lay in heaps.³⁵

Letters

The ancient Mesopotamian libraries also contained many personal letters, including ones written by one ruler to another. When an ordinary, illiterate person wanted to send someone a letter, he hired a scribe and dictated the message to him. In addition to those letters carved onto clay

Within the magnificent capital of Nineveh (pictured) existed a huge library of twenty thousand cuneiform tablets. This archive represented the works collected by Assyria's King Ashurbanipal, a former scribe.



Inventing the Gods

These complex and appealing religious concepts that so heavily influenced later faiths did not appear suddenly and fully formed in Mesopotamia. Rather, views of the nature of the divine changed considerably over time in the region. Furthermore, it took centuries for the Sumerian religious faith to evolve into its mature form.

Before and throughout most of the Ubaidian period (circa 5000–3500 BC), it appears that the prevailing beliefs in the area were animistic. Animism is a religious system that holds that large numbers of invisible spirits, some of them good, others evil, exist everywhere in nature. An animist thinks that these spirits, which tend to be more like forces than beings with concrete personalities, inhabit mountains, rocks, trees, rivers, and even the sky.

Sumerians bring a gilded statue to their temple. Temples had a prominent place in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia, and religious observances grew out of a rich mix of myth and ritual.



For Further Research

Books

Joan Aruz et al., eds., *Cultures in Contact: From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013.

Paul Kriwaczek, *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2012.

Allison Lassieur, *Ancient Mesopotamia*. New York: Children's Press, 2012.

Gwendolyn Leick, *The A to Z of Mesopotamia*. New York: Scarecrow, 2010.

Christine Mayfield and Kristine M. Quinn, *Mesopotamia: World Cultures Through Time*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Materials, 2008.

James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Martha E.H. Rustad, *The Babylonians: Life in Ancient Babylon*. Minneapolis: Millbrook, 2009.

Websites

Ancient Mesopotamia: Archaeology (<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/ED/TRC/MESO/archaeology.html>). This site, run by the famed Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, has several links to brief but informative articles about ancient Mesopotamia.

Assyria: A General Introduction (www.livius.org/as-at/assyria/assyria.html). A valuable overview of this important ancient Mesopotamian people.

Index

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

abum, defined, 36

adoption, 41, 42

afterlife beliefs, 66–67

agriculture, **20**

first appearance of, 10, 11

New Year's festival and, 69

techniques, 17–19, 72

workers

children as, 41

farmers as, 16

serfs as, 25

slaves as, 24

women as, 38

Akiti/Akitu, **69**, 69–70

Akkadian-speaking peoples. *See* Assyrians; Babylonians

alluvial, defined, 12

Ammi-saduqa (Babylonian king), 74

amulet, defined, 41

angels, 62

animals, 17, 18, 19

animism, 58–59

Anunnaki (helper gods), 62

apprentice system, 22

arch, development of, 81

architecture, 16, 80–82, **83**

archives, 49–50, 51

art/artists, 53–56, **55**

artisan, defined, 21

ashipu, 78

Ashurbanipal (king of Assyria), 46, 49–50

Assyrians

absorption of Sumerian ways by, 28

conquest of, 85

divination by, 61

and position of women, 35

astronomy/astrology, 71, 72–74, **73**

asu, 78

Babylonia

and Babylon, **17**

conquest of, 85

penalty for adultery in, 39

Babylonians

absorption of Sumerian ways by, 28

conception of heaven and Earth by, **73**, 74, 76

epic poetry of, 48

palaces of, 33

proverbs of, 50

religion of, 15, 48, 60

time divisions of, 76

See also Hammurabi, legal code of

Balasi, 51

barley, 17

bathrooms, 33

beds, 33

Bertman, Stephen

on invention of civilization, 16

on marriage, 29

on occupations of craftspeople, 21–22

on rules of order, 62, 64

on sky observers, 73

on themes of epic poetry, 48

bitum, 30

bitumen, 81

boats, 82, 84

bricks and mortar, 80–81

bull-men, 53, 56

Buranun (Euphrates River), 13

burials, 66

calendar, 74, 76

carts, 79

Casson, Lionel, 79

chariot, lightweight, 71–72, 82–84

children

adoption of, 41–42

as apprentices, 22

education of, **40**

and importance of sons, 36, 39, 40, 42

and infant mortality, 40–41

jobs of, 19

toys of, 41

Choga Mami, 14

cities

architectural advances and, 80–82, **83**

development of civilization and, 16

first, 15

houses in, **31**

bathrooms in, 33

construction materials used in, 29–30

layout of, 23

social class and, 30–31, 33

personal gods for, 66