

Aspects of Mesopotamian Culture Notes

Geography

- Mesopotamia comes from the Greek language and means, “the land between two rivers”.
- Located in present-day Syria, Turkey, and Iraq
- Bordered by the Taurus Mountains in the north, Persian Gulf in the south, Zagros Mountains in the east, and the Syrian Desert in the west.
- The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers run through this area, and helped to give it the name, “**Fertile Crescent**” (Show picture).
- Northern Mesopotamia was a plateau with a mild climate.
- Southern Mesopotamia was a plain where summers were long and hot.
- The annual flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers refertilized the land with rich silt and provided water for irrigation.

Government

- Mesopotamia is not a country, but a term to describe a region.
- Each **city-state** (a city and the surrounding lands it controls) was originally independent and ruled by a council of “Elders” and priests.
 - Example: Champaign was the main city-state and it controlled the surrounding lands of Urbana, Savoy, Tolono, Mahomet, and Rantoul.
- In times of conflict and crisis a “Big Man” or general was given complete power to make decisions. These individuals eventually developed into kings who became all powerful rulers of the city-states.
- Kings eventually created **codes of law** (a set of laws) to keep peace and stability in the city-states.

-Most famous was Hammurabi of Babylon (See handout #1)

- Kings of different city-states eventually began fighting each other to gain:

Power

Resources

Land/Control Trade

- This fighting led to the development of **empires** (a nation and all of the land it has conquered; under the control of one authority, in this case a king).

Empire
Akkad

King
Sargon

How it Developed
Fierce Warrior/First known empire

Assyria
Babylonia

Shamshi Adad
Hammurabi

Control of Trade Network
Strong Army/Code of Laws

Economy/Trade

-City-states of Mesopotamia lacked many natural resources, but through the construction of irrigations systems, produced a surplus of wheat and barley that could be traded.

-People living in the Zagros and Tarsus Mountains lacked food, but had surpluses of timber (wood), stone, gold, silver, copper, and tin that they trade with Mesopotamian city-states for wheat and barley.

Cuneiform

-First known written language

-The name means “wedge-shaped”.

-Scribes (professional writers and record keepers) used styluses (tools made of reed, bone, and wood) to carve symbols into wet clay and then the clay was baked in the sun.

-Learning cuneiform guaranteed individuals a job within the government or at the ziggurat.

Daily Life

-Three categories: Aristocracy, Working Class, and Slaves

-Aristocracy: the rich and powerful families (King, priests, counselors, generals). homes were often two stories.

-Working Class: Architects, scribes, merchants, farmers; single story homes.

-Slaves: prisoners of war, sold into slavery to pay off personal debts.

Art

-In the form of statues, jewelry, helmets, bas-reliefs

-Men pictured with bald heads and wearing kilts.

-Women pictured in long gowns and wearing headdresses.

-Eyes of statues were shown wide-open and facing forward.

-Mesopotamians specialized in creating fine wool cloth and cylinder seals (round stones carved with cuneiform writing).

Achievements and Inventions

- Created the first written language (cuneiform)
- Created the wheel, arch, chisel, saw, lever, pulley, plow, and sailboat.
- Created first calendar that broke down the year into weeks.
- Created the first clock (sundial) and developed the concepts of hours, minutes, and seconds.
- First to develop organized government with written laws.
- Developed a new metal Bronze (mixture of tin and copper).

Religion

- Polytheistic (believed in many different gods).
- Believed in 4 – 10 main gods that controlled aspects of nature and watched over specific city-states.
- Believed in 3000 + lesser gods who controlled everyday objects such as axes, ovens, bricks, etc.
- Each city-state would have a main Ziggurat or temple devoted to the city's main god.
- The Ziggurat was often the main landowner in a city, and the main employer of people (priests, scribes, teachers, etc.)