Mesopotamia

Ancient Mesopotamian City-States and Empires

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The Mesopotamian city

Often termed as the "**Cradle of Civilization**", the Mesopotamian Civilization is credited with the creation of several key developments in human history.

The most important of these developments was the building of cities and the creation of empires.

Cities in Mesopotamia had large protective walls and many buildings. Every structure within a city was built from strong, durable mud brick.

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City inhabitants

Mesopotamian cities grew from small **agricultural communities** into huge settlements that housed thousands of people.

Archaeologists have discovered evidence that shows a highly developed **urban** life in Mesopotamia.

The people of Mesopotamia had clear roles in urban society. There were craftspeople, priests and many officials to organize the workings of farming and trade in day to day life.

What role do you think women had in Mesopotamian city life?

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Temples and city life

Ancient Mesopotamians were **polytheistic**, which means that they worshiped many different gods and goddesses. Each **deity** was responsible for different aspects of life.

To signify the importance of their gods and goddesses, Mesopotamians built huge temple towers, called **ziggurats**, in the center of every city.

As well as their religious function, ziggurats were also key governmental buildings from which land, farming and food-storage were managed.

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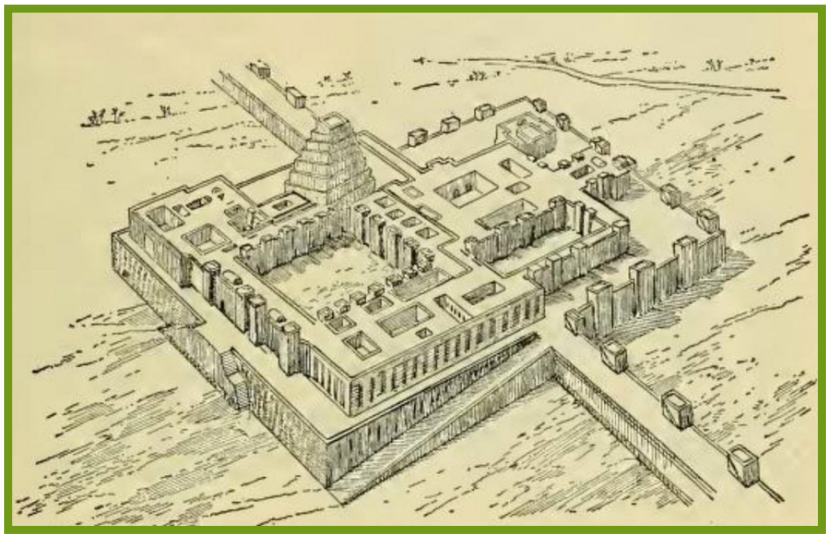
Mesopotamian palaces

After 3600 BC, Mesopotamia was ruled by a long succession of kings and **dynasties**. Kings were believed to represent the gods and actively create laws on their behalf.



As a demonstration of a king's power and his relationship with the gods, grand palaces were built within cities.

From the palace, the king would run his empire, perform religious rituals and receive foreign visitors and noble guests.

How would you build your own grand palace?

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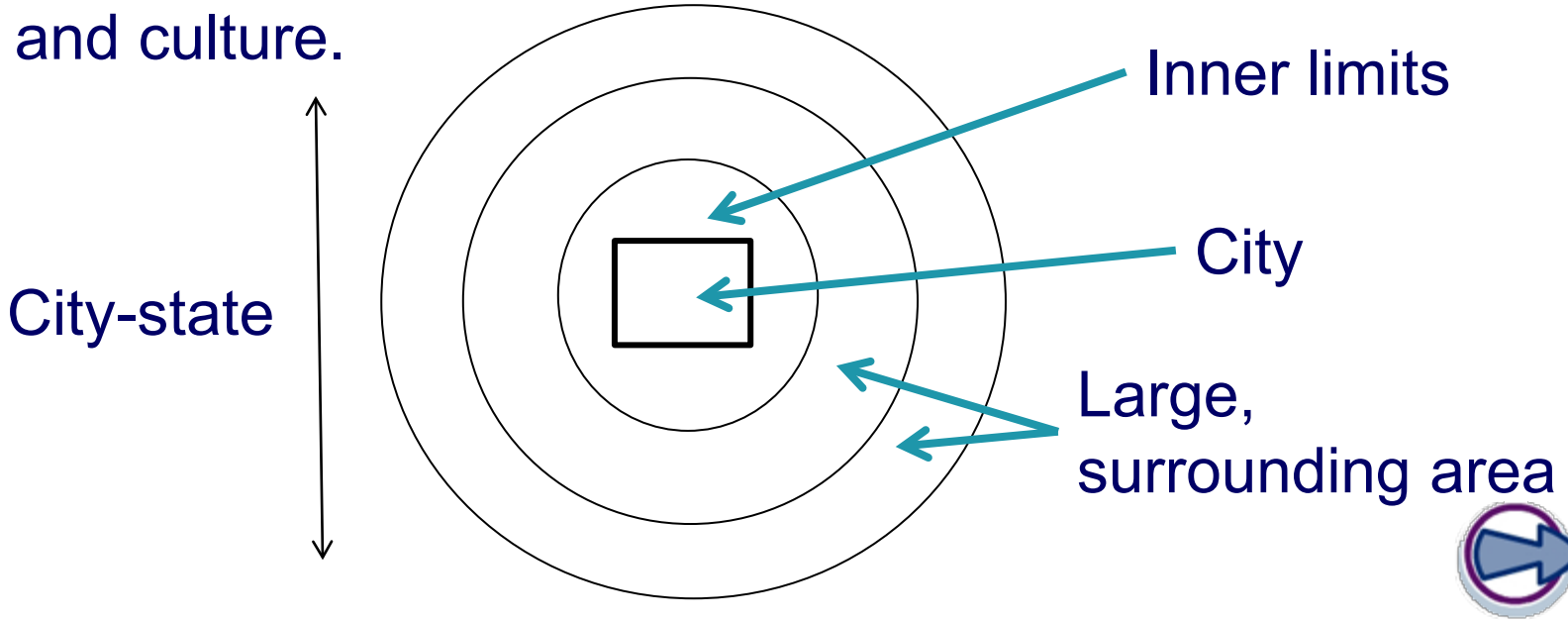
The creation of city-states

As the population of Mesopotamia grew, so did the size and power of the cities they inhabited.

Small villages and towns in the surrounding areas fell under the rule of the closest city, turning the area into a **city-state**.

Until 3100 BC Mesopotamia was made up of these independent city-states which shared a common language, religion and culture.



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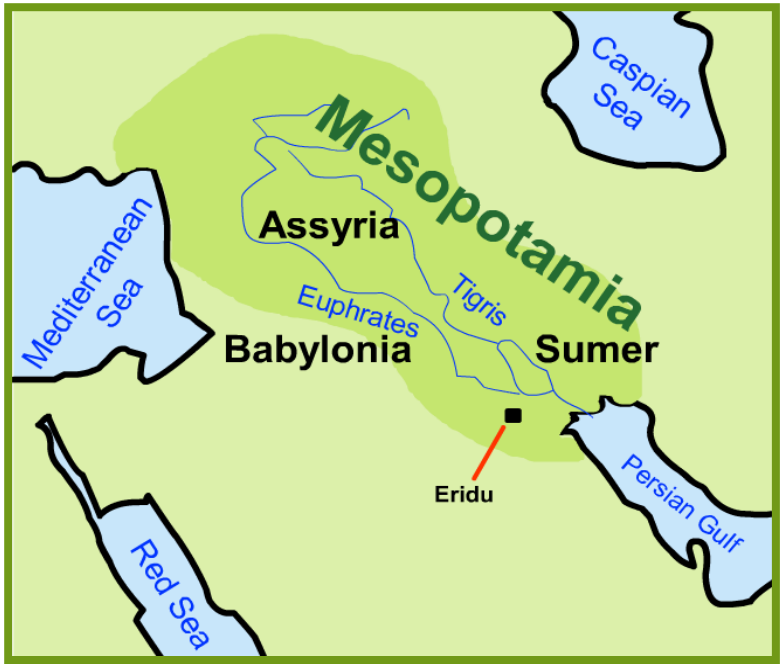
Sumer

The land of Sumer was located in the southernmost region of Mesopotamia.

Sumer contained the city of **Eridu**. This city was believed by the Mesopotamians to be the very first city gifted to humanity by the gods in 5400 BC.



From 5000 to 2500 BC the land of Sumer was ruled by various “priest-kings”. However, in 2500 BC, ruling power was secured by King **Eannutum**.

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Mesopotamian cities

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City-states at war

During the **Early Dynastic Period**, 2900–2350 BC, there were many conflicts between the Sumerian city-states.

Some city-states grew more powerful than others and during 2426 BC, King Eannutum's city of Lagash became the dominant city in Sumer.

Lagash became the center of a small empire that controlled all of Sumer.

City-states would often fight one another. What do you think they fought about?

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Sargon of Akkad

In 2334 BC, the rule of the **First Lagash Dynasty** came to an end.

The throne of the Lagash empire was seized by Sargon of Akkad. It was claimed that Sargon was the gardener of Lugal-Zage, the last Lagash king.

After securing his position as king, Sargon built the **Akkadian Empire** which ruled over all of Mesopotamia between 2334 and 2154 BC.

Archaeologists believe that Sargon built his empire on the model set by King Eannutum.

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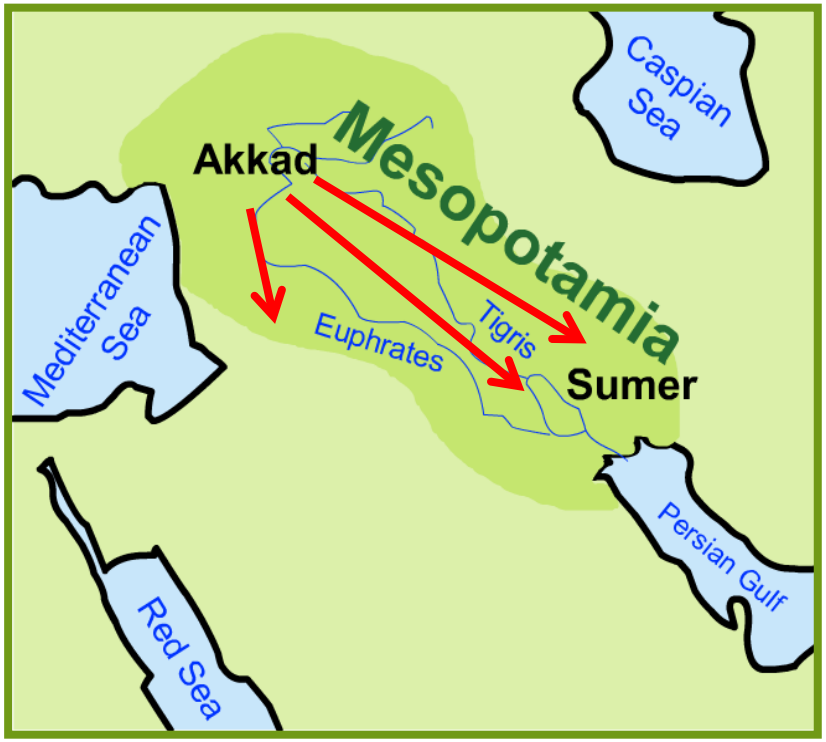
The Akkadian Empire

The Akkadian Empire conquered all of the city-states within Mesopotamia and placed them under the control of King Sargon and his family.

Archaeologists believe that the Akkadian Empire was the first **multinational** empire to exist in the world.

The **unification** of the lands of Akkad and Sumer under Sargon saw both cultures mix together.

Akkadian replaced Sumerian as the dominant spoken language.



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Fall of the Akkadian Empire

The Sargon Dynasty successfully ruled the Akkadian Empire for 180 years. However, upon the death of King Shar-Kali-Sharri, Sargon's fourth great-grandson, multiple contenders for the throne came forward.

This period of political instability severely weakened the empire and prompted a large, destructive invasion by a **nomadic** people called the **Gutians**.

In 2154 BC, the Akkadian Empire collapsed and a short "**Dark Age**" period followed, which affected all of Mesopotamia.

The expansion and later collapse of an empire or dynasty is a defining historical trait within Mesopotamian history.

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Babylon

Babylon is one of the most famous Mesopotamian cities.

Archaeologists believe that the city was founded before the reign of Sargon of Akkad and established itself during the Akkadian Empire as an important port on the Euphrates River.

After the fall of the **Third Ur Dynasty** in 2004 BC, wars were once again fought between the city-states of Mesopotamia.

This turmoil ended in 1792 BC when a Babylonian prince called Hammurabi ascended to the throne.

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Hammurabi's Babylon

The ascension of Hammurabi to the throne quickly transformed Babylon into the most important and powerful city in all of Mesopotamia.

Hammurabi was a skilful military leader and **diplomat**. He was so successful that by 1755 BC, all of Mesopotamia had become united under Babylon.

During his reign, King Hammurabi worked to improve Babylon and the lives of those under his rule.

Babylon's walls were strengthened, canals and temples were built and a **code of law** was established across his territories.

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The rise of Assyria

King Hammurabi died in 1750 BC. After his death, what do you think happened to Babylon and the Babylonian Empire?

The Babylonian Empire crumbled and the city was taken over first by the **Hittites**, followed by the **Kassites** and then the **Assyrians**.

The Assyrians were a **Semitic** people from northeastern Mesopotamia who founded the city of Ashur.

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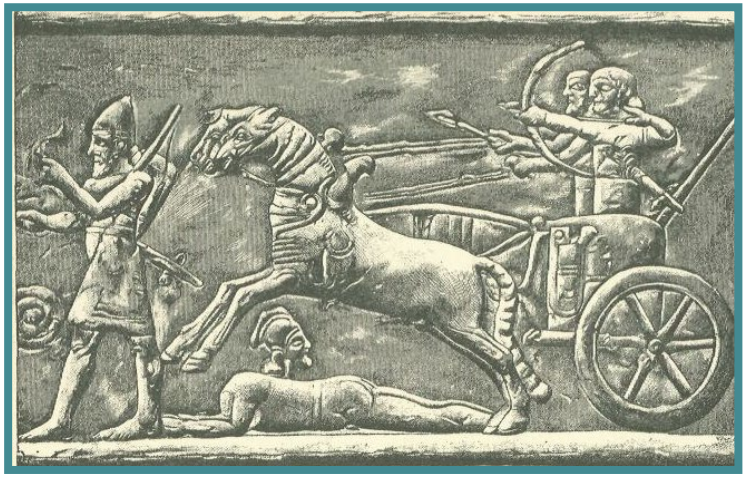
The Assyrian Empire

Over the 500 years following the fall of the Babylonian Empire, the Assyrians fought continuous wars against neighboring cities in north Mesopotamia.



Assyrian expansion continued until midway through the **first millennium BC** in a period termed by historians as the **Late Empire**.

Under the rule of various powerful kings such as **Adad Nirari II** and **Tiglath Pileser III**, the Assyrians were the first people to successfully hold complete and unchallenged control over all of Mesopotamia.

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War and the Assyrians

Before the expansion into southern Mesopotamia and beyond, the Assyrians had spent half a millennium fighting to secure their survival. This made their military incredibly experienced and strong.

The Assyrian military developed and became superior in three major aspects of warfare:

- the deployment of large armies
- the use of **iron**, instead of bronze, in the creation of stronger swords and armor
- the mastery of **siege warfare**, using specialist roles such as miners.

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Neo-Babylonia

The Assyrians dominated and ruled Mesopotamia for around 600 years. However, in 612 BC, a joint force of Babylonians and **Persians** destroyed the great Assyrian cities of Ashur and Nineveh.

The city of Babylon once again rose to dominance after the fall of the Assyrian Empire.

Through careful diplomacy and alliances, a **Neo-Babylonian Empire** was formed by King Nabopolassar and continued by his son, Nebuchadnezzar II.

Once again, this empire did not last long. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was eventually taken over by the Persians in 539 BC.

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Keywords

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