

Mesopotamia

Ancient Mesopotamian Beliefs



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Mesopotamia's various religions were heavily influenced by its **geography**.

The area lies between two major rivers: the **Tigris** and the **Euphrates**. When there was a deadly flood or a very dry year, people believed that the gods were responsible.



The river flood patterns were unpredictable. Mesopotamian people believed that this was because of the changeable and unpredictable nature of the gods who caused them.

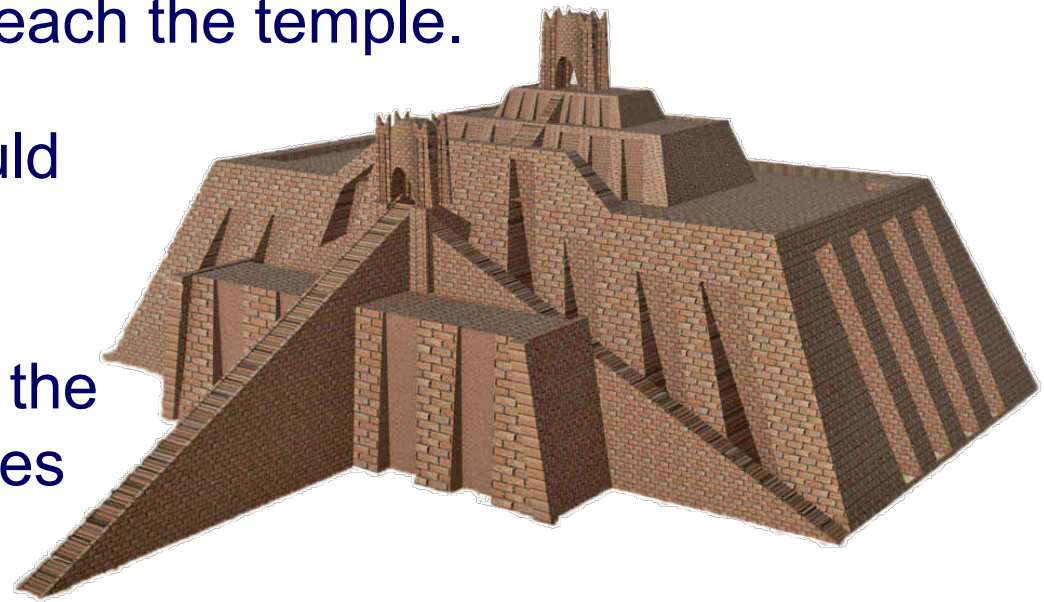




Most Mesopotamian religion was focused on pleasing their powerful and unpredictable gods. By 4000 BC, temples were being built to honor and serve them.

Early temples were built on raised mud-brick platforms, so that they stood taller than other buildings. People climbed a set of decorated steps to reach the temple.

Eventually, the temple would begin to crumble and was rebuilt, with the old bricks forming the foundations of the new one. Over time, temples became larger and taller.



These new temples were called **ziggurats**.





Ziggurats were much bigger than ordinary temples. They were built on **stepped foundations**, which meant they could be taller than earlier sacred buildings.

The first ziggurats were built in **Ur**, a Sumerian city-state. At the top was a **shrine** dedicated to a god or goddess, where people could leave offerings of food or money.

Shards of blue, **glazed bricks** have been found in ziggurat excavations, suggesting that the shrine was decorated with tiles or mosaic.

Ziggurats usually had small holes left in their outer walls. Why do you think this was?



Gods and goddesses



Priests were very important in Mesopotamian society, as they were responsible for maintaining the temple and were believed to be able to communicate directly with the gods.



It was believed that the gods slept in the shrine of their temple or ziggurat. A **statue** of the god or goddess of the temple was kept there. Some archaeologists believe that only priests were allowed to enter the shrine of a ziggurat.

On special occasions, priests would take the statue outside so that it could have a change of scenery. Often statues were taken to the temples of neighboring cities so that the gods could visit each other!

Ordinary people would probably come to the ziggurat to pray and leave offerings to the gods.

Worship statues were small stone figures, often with their hands clasped in prayer. They were placed in temples to worship the gods constantly on behalf of their owners.

Other forms of worship included festivals, such as the twelve-day Babylonian New Year festivities. During this time, the temple statue of the god Marduk was carried out of the city in a religious **procession**.



As well as gods and goddesses, Mesopotamians also believed in **demons**. Like the gods, these demons were changeable: they weren't always seen as evil.

The demon **Pazuzu** had a monster's face, with a human body, an eagle's claws and feet, and a scorpion's tail. People believed he would protect them from evil forces, because he would scare off other demons.

Mesopotamians carried amulets for spiritual protection against demons. In Assyria, huge stone winged bulls or lions, called **lamassu**, were carved from stone to guard the entrance to cities and palaces.





Early in Mesopotamian history, the gods were powerful figures who affected humans but were separate from them. However, as time went on, kings began to claim that they were **divine** in order to strengthen their own power.

King Hammurabi of Babylon was often called the “shepherd king”, and was portrayed as a wise, fatherly **demigod** after his death.

Ancient Mesopotamian kings thought that if they were seen as gods, their people would be less likely to revolt against them.



Why do you think this was?



The creation story



For the Mesopotamians, death was not the ultimate end of life, because the soul would continue to exist in the **afterlife**. There were different words for the soul:

- the Sumerians called it *gidim*
- the Akkadians called it *eṭemmu*.

It was believed that after death, the person's soul had to make the journey to the afterlife itself. It was important that the correct **funeral rites** were performed to allow the soul to reach the afterlife.

Mesopotamians buried their dead with **grave goods**, including weapons, gold and jewels, toys and games, and even musical instruments.

Why do you think they did this?

The dead person's family also had important responsibilities. They had to continue to honor the dead by giving them **offerings** of food and drink.

People believed that there was no food in the afterlife, so the dead relied on them to provide it. If they failed to do this, the ghosts might become angry and haunt the living.

In life, it was important to have a large family, so that they could make many offerings to the dead. This meant that the dead would be content and have a high **social status** in the afterlife.



What might this tell us about the afterlife?

Ancient Mesopotamian medicine was closely linked to their religious beliefs. They believed that when the gods were angry, they sent evil spirits to cause illness.

Both men and women could train as doctors. Doctors would use herbs and basic medical knowledge to heal sick people, as well as spells and incantations.

Mesopotamian **surgery** was advanced for its time. For example, doctors knew that surgery performed with clean hands was more likely to be successful.



However, they were not always correct – they believed that the liver was the most important organ in the body.

How is this different to medicine today?

Ancient Mesopotamians also believed in the effectiveness of **divination** as a way of knowing the future. They thought that the future had been decided by the gods.

There were a range of different types of divination, including:

- the examination of the sun, moon, and stars
- the observation of the behavior of animals, such as birds
- the interpretation of dreams
- the examination of oil dropped into a bowl of water.

When a person fell ill, they would often turn to magic to help heal them. Spells, incantations and **rituals** were used to banish the demon or evil spirit that was causing the illness.



