

## MESOPOTAMIA—PART 2

<b>Mesopotamia: Who's Rules?</b>
<b>Sumerians (3500 B.C.E.—2370 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>Akkadians (2370 B.C.E.—2230 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>First Babylonian Empire (1792 B.C.E.—1595 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>Hittites (1450 B.C.E.—1200 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>Assyrian Empire (1305 B.C.E.—609 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>Second Babylonian Empire (626 B.C.E.—559 B.C.E.)</b>
<b>Persian Empire (559 B.C.E.—330 B.C.E.)</b>

### Unit Overview

Although prosperous, the Sumerian city-states were weakened by years of fighting among themselves. They were easily conquered by a series of invading armies led by strong rulers. The lands within the Fertile Crescent were pulled into large, powerful empires. Although this often resulted in bloody conflicts, these empires carried Sumerian accomplishments along with their own achievements to new places. This encouraged the spread of learning and culture far beyond Mesopotamia. Let's see how it all happened.

### Building an Empire

The Sumerian city-states, located in southern Mesopotamia, had grown rich and prosperous. At the same time, they also continued to use their resources to fight each other. These facts did not go unnoticed by their neighbors. They watched and waited for the opportunity to attack Sumer. **Akkad**,

a region of Mesopotamia located north of Sumer, did just that in 2370 B.C.E. The Akkadians easily invaded and conquered the city-states. Their leader, **Sargon**, combined the territories that he defeated into the world's first **empire**. An empire is a group of states or regions controlled by one ruler.

**An Akkadian Bronze Head  
Thought to be a Likeness  
of Sargon**



Governing people of so many different nationalities and cultures was no easy task. To encourage unity, Sargon formed a standing army of over 5,000 men from every part of the empire. He also required that the same standards for weights and measures be used everywhere. This made trade and record-keeping much easier. Although Sargon tried to build a strong foundation for his empire, it collapsed shortly after his death. The Sumerian city-states regained their independence but only for a short time. Mesopotamia was about to experience a long line of invaders and empire-builders. Each one would leave its mark on the region and the world.

## **The First Babylonian Empire**

About 2000 B.C.E., a group of nomads called the **Amorites** invaded Mesopotamia. They defeated the Sumerians and established the city of **Babylon** as their capital. In 1792 B.C.E., **Hammurabi**, a very successful general, became the ruler and pulled almost all of Mesopotamia into his empire. Like Sargon, he organized a well-trained army with men from all parts of the empire. Hammurabi also realized that a stable food supply depended on irrigation and made sure that the system was in good, working condition. Under his rule, Babylon became a busy trading center. Its population grew

quickly and included people, such as traders, from other places. In many respects, this was a good thing, but it did create some problems. Disagreements, disputes and crime increased.

**A Stone Carving of Hammurabi  
Standing before One of the Gods**



Hammurabi believed that a unified code of laws would benefit all of the people within his empire. Over time, this set of laws, known as the **Code of Hammurabi**, would prove to be his most lasting achievement. The laws themselves were not new. Most of them had been in place since Sumerian times. What made the Code of Hammurabi unique was that the laws were published for everyone to see. Of course, Hammurabi could not print them in the newspaper or post them on the Internet. He had to find another way to make them public. Hammurabi employed skilled carvers to put nearly 300 laws on a stone pillar so that everyone could read them. He also explained what he hoped to accomplish by doing this. The graphic lists the purpose of the Code of Hammurabi and some of its laws. The punishments in this set of laws seem very cruel to us today. Nevertheless, it prevented people from taking the law into their own hands and kept order within the empire.

### Laws from the Code of Hammurabi

The gods Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince...to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I could enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind.

200. If a man knocks out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.

201. If he knocks out the teeth of a freed man, he shall pay one-third of a gold mina (a unit used to measure gold).

202. If anyone strikes the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strikes the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

205. If the slave of a freed man strikes the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.

229. If a builder builds a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built fall in and kill its owner, then that builder shall be put to death.

230. If it kills the son of the owner the son of that builder shall be put to death.

231. If it kills a slave of the owner, then he shall pay slave for slave to the owner of the house.

*The Code of Hammurabi*  
(Adapted)

## The Hittites

The first Babylonian Empire began to fall apart after Hammurabi's death. It completely collapsed around 1400 B.C.E. when the **Hittites** arrived. This fierce, nomadic tribe swept in from their homeland in **Anatolia**, or what is known today as Turkey. They overwhelmed the city of Babylon and took control of much of Mesopotamia. In many ways, they were not as advanced as the Mesopotamians, but they had made one very important discovery that gave them a big advantage.

**The Ruins of the Lions Gate in the City Wall of Hattusa, the Hittite capital.**



At this time, the Mesopotamians made most of their weapons from **bronze**, a combination of tin and copper. Because tin was hard to find, the number of weapons that they could produce was limited. On the other hand, **iron** was readily available and much stronger, but there was a problem. It was extremely difficult to separate the iron from the **ore**, or the material surrounding it. The Hittites had learned the process of heating iron ore, plunging it in cold water, and hammering out the impurities. In comparison to everyone else, this discovery enabled them to have stronger, sharper weapons and more of them. The Hittites were determined to keep this new technology a closely guarded secret. However, better weapons was not enough to save their empire. They were forced out of Mesopotamia and took their iron-making skills with them. This migration spread the ability to use iron throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. For this reason, historians often refer to this era as the **Iron Age**. To learn more about the Hittites, click on the graphic below.

Hittite Empire



## The Assyrians

The **Assyrians** lived along the upper banks of the Tigris River. They began to build their empire around 1300 B.C.E. To accomplish this goal, the Assyrians organized the most efficient and deadliest fighting force the ancient world had ever seen. They were among the first to learn about iron production from the Hittites. Their leaders used this technology to equip the army. They supplied their soldiers with carefully designed helmets, boots, spears, shields, and swords. The Assyrians were also the first to build **armories**, or store houses for weapons and military gear. Construction workers moved in advance of the army. They built storage buildings for grain and food. These supplies not only fed the soldiers but also their horses, which were an essential part of their battle plan.

## Assyrian King Assurbanipal on Horseback Hunting Lions



The Assyrians had little mercy for the people that they conquered. Thousands were put to death or forced into slavery. Although this was very cruel, slavery resulted in an involuntary migration that spread technology, culture, and learning across the Middle East. From their defeated enemies, the Assyrians took everything that they believed had value. These riches paid for splendid palaces, such as the ones in their capital city of **Nineveh**. **King Assurbanipal** ordered the army to bring back clay tablets from all over Mesopotamia. This collection became one of the world's first libraries. It continues to provide modern researchers with a vast amount of information about ancient times.

By 671 B.C.E., the Assyrians ruled a vast empire that included most of the known world. You can see just how much land they had acquired by looking at the dark green and light green areas on the map in the graphic below. However, bigger proved not to be better. Their holdings simply became too large to manage successfully. Their treatment of conquered people also made them unpopular rulers. Parts of the empire began to work together to overthrow the Assyrians.

## Map of the Assyrian Empire



## The Second Babylonian Empire

The **Chaldeans** spearheaded the revolt against the Assyrians and led the forces that destroyed Nineveh. Their king, **Nebuchadnezzar**, announced his plans to rebuild the city of Babylon. He restored walls, canals, temples, streets, and palaces throughout the city. Skilled workers learned how to glaze bricks and tiles. This process gave these building blocks the vibrant colors that you see pictured here. By 600 B.C.E., Babylon was the capital of the Second Babylonian Empire, also known as the **Neo-Babylonia**. It stretched across the Fertile Crescent from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.

## A Reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate In Ancient Babylonia



Ancient stories tell us that Nebuchadnezzar's most challenging building project was the construction of the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon**. He ordered the structure to be built as a gift for his wife. Legend has it that she missed the mountains, flowers, and green plants of her homeland. Providing water to irrigate the plants on every level would have been a remarkable feat of engineering. Although no evidence has been found that this garden actually existed in Babylon, historians consider it one of the **Seven Wonders of the Ancient World**. The picture below is an artist's idea of what the garden may have looked like.

## What Did the Hanging Gardens Look Like? Here Are Two Ideas.



Babylon's tallest building was a ziggurat that rose to 300 feet. Priests watched the stars and planets from its top level. They recorded their positions in the night sky. They also traced the movements of the constellations and followed the four phases of the moon. From these observations, early astronomers concluded that each month was divided into four weeks. This knowledge was later used to develop theories about the Earth, Sun, planets, and stars.

## Here Come the Persians

According to legend, the walls that Nebuchadnezzar built to protect Babylon were so thick that one could drive a chariot on top of them. Nevertheless, they could not protect the Babylonians from the next conqueror to invade Mesopotamia. **Cyrus the Great** led his Persian army from the region that is now modern **Iran** into the Fertile Crescent and made it part of an empire. It was even larger than the one built by the Assyrians. For the most part, however, the Persians were less ruthless. They permitted those whom they conquered to follow their own customs and traditions, as long as they did not rebel.

Map of the Persian Empire



Other Persian leaders built on the successes of Cyrus the Great. In 522 B.C.E., **Darius** became the ruler of the Persian Empire. He hoped to avoid some of the problems that previous governments experienced when managing a large area. The new leader looked for ways to hold his empire together. First, Darius divided the lands into twenty **provinces**. A governor, a tax collector, and an army leader were assigned to each province. To make sure that these officials remained loyal and honest, they were frequently visited by Darius' inspectors. Next, Darius built a network of roads to connect all of the parts of the vast empire. The most famous road constructed as part of this project was known as the **Royal Road**. It rolled on for 1,677 miles.



The Persian emperor established a **postal system** to improve communication among the provinces. Messengers waited at stations that were placed one-day's ride from one another. When he arrived at the station, the first rider would hand the message to the next one. This was similar to the pony express system that was once used in the American West. To increase trade and to make it more efficient, Darius encouraged the use of coins throughout the empire. This was not a new idea. The **Lydians**, a group of people who once lived in the ancient Middle East, were actually the first to manufacture metal coins. Persia, however, was the first large empire to adopt them. In spite of these accomplishments, the Persians would also eventually meet their downfall when they encountered the Greeks.

In this unit, you have studied several different groups of people that developed a variety of products and practices. These discoveries continue to influence our lives today. Which ones do you think have had the greatest impact? Click on the graphic below. Print the worksheets and record your thoughts.



## Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 12, take a few minutes to review the names and terms found in Unit 11. Be sure that you can answer the "Can I" questions with a loud "yes".

## Can I

...explain how fighting among the Sumerian city-states led to their downfall?

...give examples of the enduring influence of the Akkadians, Amorites, Hittites, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Persians on Mesopotamia and the world?

...describe the problems of ruling large empires?

...list ways in which leaders of large empires made their governments more efficient?



## Additional Activities and Resources

[Unit 11 Organizer](#)

[Seven Wonders of the Ancient World Activity](#)