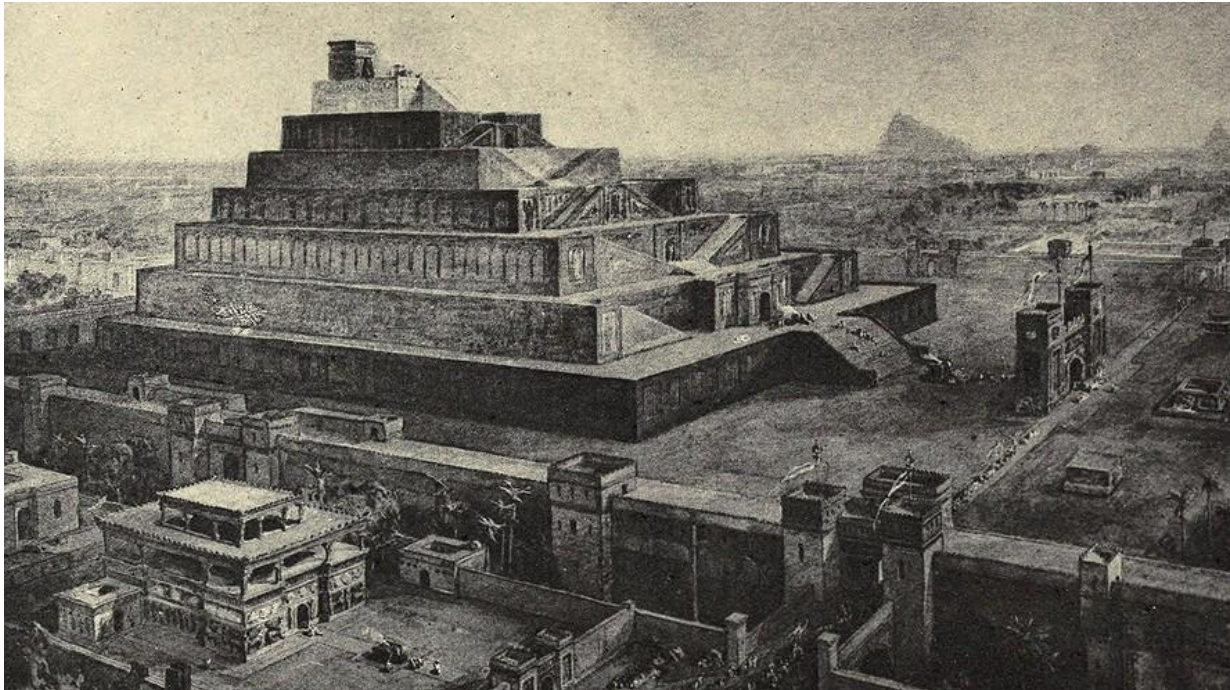


Culture and Society in Ancient Mesopotamia

By Ancient History Encyclopedia, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.25.17

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"The Walls of Babylon and the Temple of Bel (Or Babel)," by 19th-century illustrator William Simpson. Influenced by early archaeological investigations. From Wikimedia.

Mesopotamia was an ancient area in the Middle East. Today, most of it is located in the country of Iraq.

The word Mesopotamia comes from a Greek word meaning "between two rivers." Those are the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. The land was later known as the Fertile Crescent by historians, as its soil was good for farming.

The Cradle of Civilization

Ancient peoples in Egypt and Greece shared many beliefs and ideas. However, Mesopotamia had many different cultures and peoples.

Even so, Mesopotamia is known as the "cradle of civilization." That is mostly because of two things that happened in the Mesopotamian region of Sumer around 3000 B.C.– the first city, and the invention of writing.

Those were not their only inventions. Mesopotamian people are also said to have invented the wheel, the farming of animals, farming, tools, weapons, the chariot, wine, beer and sailboats.

Archaeologists have found settlements from 10,000 B.C. in Mesopotamia. These show that the fertile land allowed people to settle in and start farming. Trade soon followed and settlements grew into the first cities. It is generally thought that writing was invented due to trade. It also helped people send messages far away and helped them keep track of money.

Learning and religion

Mesopotamia was a place of learning. There were as many schools as temples. They taught reading, writing, religion, law and medicine.

There were more than 1,000 gods in the Mesopotamian cultures and many stories about them. The Mesopotamians believed that they worked with the gods. To them, the land was full of spirits.

The world began, they believed, when the gods defeated the forces of chaos and disorder. But, even though the gods had won, this did not mean chaos could not come again. The people of Mesopotamia wanted to keep the gods happy so the world would stay balanced. To do this, they followed daily routines, said prayers, and made sure to bury the dead properly. They were taught to respect the gods in the work they did every day.

Jobs

Men and women both worked in Mesopotamia, and most were involved in farming. Others were healers, weavers, potters, shoemakers, teachers and priests or priestesses. The highest positions in society were kings and military officers.

Women had almost the same rights as men. They could own land, choose to divorce, own their own businesses, and make deals in trade. Women were among the first people to make beer and wine. They were also healers in the community. These jobs were later taken over by men, it seems, who saw that women were making so much money.

The work someone did, was also seen as giving back to other people, and for making the gods happy. This could keep the world at peace.

Buildings and government

Mesopotamia gave birth to the world's first cities. The land did not have trees. So, buildings were mostly made of soil, which was dried in the sun and turned into bricks. With the bricks, the Mesopotamians created the world's first columns, arches and roofs.

A temple was usually at the center of every Mesopotamian city. Cities and temples were famous for their ziggurats. These were pyramids built in layers of steps.

The gods were thought to be watching over any building project. It was important to carefully say prayers to the right gods to make sure building was successful.

The first king came into power at some point after 3600 B.C. The king worked directly with the people and made the laws himself.

Before the first kings, priests were rulers. They were believed to have gotten messages from the gods to make laws. Soon, the king was also believed to be speaking with the gods, and able to know their wishes.

Rebel king

King Hammurabi of Babylon was a Mesopotamian king who made the earliest written set of laws known to us today. These laws were said to come from the gods. Akkadia was another Mesopotamian kingdom, and the Akkadian King Naram-Sin even said he was a god himself.

The king was responsible for the happiness and growth of his kingdom. If a king ruled according to a god's wishes, it was said he would be rewarded with a rich, booming kingdom. Still, even a very good ruler had to deal with constant rebellion by groups who claimed he was not the true king.

Mesopotamia had so many different peoples and ideas. A single ruler would have trouble trying to please everyone — people would disagree with him often.

Legacy

The influence of Mesopotamia lives on today. The idea of 60 seconds being in a minute, and 60 minutes in an hour, was invented by Mesopotamians.

Priests were always watching for special events happening in nature. These were seen as signs from the gods — they said if a community was doing good or bad.

The Sumerians, an old Mesopotamian group, believed that each god was represented by a number. The number 60 was sacred to the god An. This number was used often back then.

Sumerians became experts in farming and water control. This allowed them to farm huge amounts of food and save it for times when crops were not growing as well. This helped large cities to grow and sustained many people.

The cities and great palaces of Mesopotamia are long gone, but its people gave the world many important ideas that live on today.

Quiz

1 Read the section "The Cradle of Civilization."

Select the paragraph that explains HOW the first cities in Mesopotamia developed.

2 Read the section titled "Rebel king."

Which sentence shows WHY it was hard for kings to keep their power?

- (A) King Hammurabi of Babylon was a Mesopotamian king who made the earliest written set of laws known to us today.
- (B) Akkadia was another Mesopotamian kingdom, and the Akkadian King Naram-Sin even said he was a god himself.
- (C) If a king ruled according to a god's wishes, it was said he would be rewarded with a rich, booming kingdom.
- (D) Still, even a very good ruler had to deal with constant rebellion by groups who claimed he was not the true king.

3 Read the sentence from the section "Buildings and government."

It was important to carefully say prayers to the right gods to make sure building was successful.

HOW does the sentence above support a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) by explaining that it was challenging to build Mesopotamian cities
- (B) by showing that many people in Mesopotamia were fearful
- (C) by explaining that Mesopotamian people were good builders
- (D) by showing that respect for gods was part of Mesopotamian life

4 One MAIN idea of the article is that there were many different jobs for people in Mesopotamian civilization.

What is another MAIN idea about Mesopotamian civilization?

- (A) It invented many things still in use today.
- (B) It made sure to bury the dead properly.
- (C) It built temples of soil instead of trees.
- (D) It allowed women to choose to get divorced.