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Mesopotamian Civilization Before the Ancient Dark Ages

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Sumerian Civilization

Sumer was an ancient civilization in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages. Although the historical records in the region do not go back much further than ca. 2900 BCE, modern historians believe that Sumer was first settled between ca. 4500 and 4000 BCE by people who may or may not have spoken the Sumerian language. These people, now called the "Ubaidians," were the first to drain the marshes for agriculture; develop trade; and establish industries including weaving, leatherwork, metalwork, masonry, and pottery.

The Sumerian city of Eridu, which at that time bordered the Persian Gulf, is believed to be the world's first city. Here, three separate cultures fused — the peasant Ubaidian farmers, the nomadic Semitic-speaking pastoralists (farmers who raise livestock), and fisher folk. The surplus of storable food created by this economy allowed the region's population to settle in one place, instead of migrating as hunter-gatherers. It also allowed for a much greater population density, which required an extensive labor force and a division of labor with many specialized arts and crafts. (10)

Cuneiform

An early form of wedge-shaped writing called cuneiform developed in the early Sumerian period. During this time, cuneiform and pictograms suggest the abundance of pottery and other artistic traditions. In addition to the production of vessels, clay was also used to make tablets for inscribing written documents. Metal also served various purposes during the early Sumerian period. Smiths used a form of casting to create the blades for daggers. On the other hand, softer metals like copper and gold could be hammered into the forms of plates, necklaces, and collars. (10)

Ziggurats

By the late fourth millennium BCE, Sumer was divided into about a dozen independent city-states delineated by canals and other boundary makers. At each city center stood a temple dedicated to the particular patron god or goddess of the city. Priestly governors ruled over these temples and were intimately tied to the city's religious rites.(10)

Figure 2-2: Ziggurats Mesopothemia by unknown from [Wikispaces.com](http://Wikispaces.com) is licensed under  [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

One of the most remarkable achievements of Mesopotamian architecture was the development of the ziggurat, a massive structure taking the form of a terraced step pyramid of successively receding stories or levels, with a shrine or temple at the summit. Like pyramids, ziggurats were built by stacking and piling. Ziggurats were not places of worship for the general public. Rather, only priests or other authorized religious officials were allowed inside to tend to cult statues and make offerings. The first surviving ziggurats date to the Sumerian culture in the fourth millennium BCE, but they continued to be a popular architectural form in the late third and early second millennium BCE as well. (11)

Figure 2-3:  [Great Ziggurat of Ur](https://www.worldhistory.org/image/197/great-ziggurat-of-ur/)  by Hardnfast is licensed under  [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/)

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Figure 2-4:  [Part of Tablet V, the Epic of Gilgamesh](https://www.worldhistory.org/image/3061/part-of-tablet-v-the-epic-of-gilgamesh/)  by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin is licensed under  [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/)

Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic King of Uruk best known from The Epic of Gilgamesh (written c. 2150-1400 BCE) the great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work which pre-dates Homer's writing by 1500 years and, therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic western literature. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, the great king is thought to be too proud and arrogant by the gods and so they decide to teach him a lesson by sending the wild man, Enkidu, to humble him. Enkidu and Gilgamesh, after a fierce battle in which neither are bested, become friends and embark on adventures together. When Enkidu is struck with death, Gilgamesh falls into a deep grief and, recognizing his own mortality through the death of his friend, questions the meaning of life and the value of human accomplishment in the face of ultimate extinction. Casting away all of his old vanity and pride, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest to find the meaning of life and, finally, some way of defeating death. In doing so, he becomes the first epic hero in world literature. The grief of Gilgamesh, and the questions his friend's death evoke, resonate with every human being who has wrestled with the meaning of life in the face of death. Although Gilgamesh ultimately fails to win immortality in the story, his deeds live on through the written word and, so, does he. (12)

Uruk Civilization

By the time of the Uruk period (ca. 4100–2900 BCE), the volume of trade goods transported along the canals and rivers of southern Mesopotamia facilitated the rise of many large, stratified, temple-centered cities where centralized administrations employed specialized workers. Artifacts of the Uruk civilization have been found over a wide area—from the Taurus Mountains in Turkey, to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and as far east as Central Iran. The Uruk civilization, exported by Sumerian traders and colonists, had an effect on all surrounding peoples, who gradually developed their own comparable, competing economies and cultures.

Sumerian cities during the Uruk period were probably theocratic and likely headed by priest-kings (ensis), assisted by a council of elders, including both men and women. The later Sumerian pantheon (gods and goddesses) was likely modeled upon this political structure. There is little evidence of institutionalized violence or professional soldiers during the Uruk period. Towns generally lacked fortified walls, suggesting little, if any, need for defense. During this period, Uruk became the most urbanized city in the world, surpassing for the first time 50,000 inhabitants. (10)

Akkadian Civilization

The Akkadian Empire was the first political entity to make extensive and efficient use of bureaucracy and administration on a large scale and set the standard for future rulers and kingdoms. His story was long known throughout Mesopotamia where, in time, he came to be considered the greatest man who had ever lived, celebrated in glorious tales down through the Persian Empire, along with his grand-son Naram-Sin. The historian Paul Kriwaczek sums up the impact Sargon had on later generations in Mesopotamia, writing, "for at least 1,500 years after his death, Sargon the Great, founder of the Akkadian Empire, was regarded as a semi-sacred figure, the patron saint of all subsequent empires in the Mesopotamian realm" (111). Even so, where he came from and even his actual name are unknown.

`Sargon'—whose name means "True King" or Legitimate King"— was not the name given him at birth but the throne name he chose for himself. It is a Semitic, not Sumerian, name and so it is generally accepted that he was a Semite. Nothing certain is known of Sargon's birth or younger years. In fact, although his name was among the most famous in antiquity, he was unknown to the modern world until 1870 CE when the archaeologist Sir Henry Rawlinson published the Legend of Sargon which he had found in the library of Ashurbanipal while excavating Nineveh in 1867 CE.

The Legend of Sargon reads:My mother was a changeling, my father I knew not, The brother of my father loved the hills, My home was in the highlands, where the herbs grow. My mother conceived me in secret, she gave birth to me in concealment. She set me in a basket of rushes, She sealed the lid with tar. She cast me into the river, but it did not rise over me, The water carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. He lifted me out as he dipped his jar into the river, He took me as his son, he raised me, He made me his gardener (Bauer, 95).

After conquering Sumer, he either built a new city or renovated an older one, Akkad (also known as Agade) on the banks of the Euphrates River. This was a complete break with precedent in that, previously, the king of an existing city conquered another for the glory of the home city and the resources which would now be available. Sargon, on the other hand, conquered for no city, only for himself and, once he had control of the area, then built his own city to enjoy the benefits of conquest.

Forming an empire is one thing; but keeping it operating is quite another. Still, in administration, Sargon proved himself as capable as he was in military conquest. The Akkadian Empire created the first postal system where clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform Akkadian script were wrapped in outer clay envelopes marked with the name and address of the recipient and the seal of the sender. These letters could not be opened except by the person they were intended for because there was no way to open the clay envelope save by breaking it, thus ensuring privacy in correspondence. Sargon also standardized weights and measures for use in trade and daily commerce, initiated a system of taxation which was fair to all social classes, and engaged in numerous building projects such as the restoration of Babylon (which, according to some sources, he founded - though this is not generally accepted as true). He also created, trained, and equipped a full-time army — at least in the city of Akkad — where, as an inscription reads, 5400 soldiers "ate bread daily" with the king.

After Sargon's death, the empire passed to his son Rimush, who was forced to endure what his father had and put down the rebellions which contested his legitimacy. Rimush reigned for nine years and, when he died, the kingship passed to Sargon's other son, Manishtusu who ruled for the next fifteen years. Though both sons ruled well, the height of the Akkadian Empire was realized under Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin. During his reign, the empire grew and flourished beyond the boundaries even Sargon had attained. After his death, his son Shar-Kali-Sharri became ruler and, at this time, the empire began to unravel as city-states broke away to form their own independent kingdoms. (13)(14)

Babylonian Civilization

Babylon was founded at some point prior to the reign of Sargon of Akkad (also known as Sargon the Great) who ruled from 2334-2279 BCE and claimed to have built temples at Babylon (other ancient sources seem to indicate that Sargon himself founded the city). At that time, Babylon seems to have been a minor city or perhaps a large port town on the Euphrates River at the point where it runs closest to the river Tigris.

The known history of Babylon, then, begins with its most famous king: Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE). This obscure Amorite prince ascended to the throne upon the abdication of his father, King Sin-Muballit, and fairly quickly transformed the city into one of the most powerful and influential in all of Mesopotamia. So successful was he in both diplomacy and war that, by 1755 BCE, he had united all of Mesopotamia under the rule of Babylon that, at this time, was the largest city in the world, and named his realm Babylonia. (15)

Figure 2-5: Code of Hammurabi by an unknown artist from Louvre Museum is licensed under  [CC BY 2.5](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/)

The Code of Hammurabi is one of the oldest deciphered writings of length in the world, and features a code of law from ancient Babylon in Mesopotamia. Written in about 1754 BCE by the sixth king of Babylon, Hammurabi, the Code was written on stone stele and clay tablets. It consisted of 282 laws, with punishments that varied based on social status (slaves, free men, and property owners). It is most famous for the "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (lex talionis) form of punishment. Other forms of codes of law had been in existence in the region around this time, including the Code of Ur-Nammu, king of Ur (c. 2050 BCE), the Laws of Eshnunna (c. 1930 BCE) and the codex of Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (c. 1870 BCE).

The laws were arranged in groups, so that citizens could easily read what was required of them. Some have seen the Code as an early form of constitutional government, and as an early form of the presumption of innocence, and the ability to present evidence in one's case. Intent was often recognized and affected punishment, with neglect severely punished. Some of the provisions may have been codification of Hammurabi's decisions, for the purpose of self-glorification. Nevertheless, the Code was studied, copied, and used as a model for legal reasoning for at least 1500 years after.

The prologue of the Code features Hammurabi stating that he wants "to make justice visible in the land, to destroy the wicked person and the evil-doer, that the strong might not injure the weak." Major laws covered in the Code include slander, trade, slavery, the duties of workers, theft, liability, and divorce. Nearly half of the code focused on contracts, such as wages to be paid, terms of transactions, and liability in case of property damage. A third of the code focused on household and family issues, including inheritance, divorce, paternity and sexual behavior. One section establishes that a judge who incorrectly decides an issue may be removed from his position permanently. A few sections address military service.

One of the most well-known sections of the Code was law #196: "If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone. If one destroy the eye of a freeman or break the bone of a freeman he shall pay one gold mina. If one destroy the eye of a man's slave or break a bone of a man's slave he shall pay one-half his price." (16)

The Social Classes

Under Hammurabi's reign, there were three social classes. The amelu was originally an elite person with full civil rights, whose birth, marriage and death were recorded. Although he had certain privileges, he also was liable for harsher punishment and higher fines. The king and his court, high officials, professionals and craftsmen belonged to this group. The mushkenu was a free man who may have been landless. He was required to accept monetary compensation, paid smaller fines and lived in a separate section of the city. The ardu was a slave whose master paid for his upkeep, but also took his compensation. Ardu could own property and other slaves, and could purchase his own freedom. (16)