Mesopotamia (from the Greek word meaning "between two rivers") was an ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean. Most of it is located today in the country Iraq. But it also included Kuwait, the eastern parts of Syria, southeastern Turkey, and regions along the Turkish-Syrian and Iran-Iraq borders.

The "two rivers" of the name referred to the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. The land was known as "Al-Jazirah," Al Jazeera or "the island," by the Arabs referencing what historians later called the Fertile Crescent, where Mesopotamian civilization began.
The Cradle of Civilization

The civilizations of Egypt or Greece were fairly unified in their culture and beliefs. However, Mesopotamia was a collection of varied cultures whose only real bonds were their use of writing, their gods and their attitudes toward women. As a result of this, Mesopotamia should be more properly understood as a region that produced multiple empires and civilizations rather than any single civilization.

Even so, Mesopotamia is known as the “cradle of civilization” primarily because of two developments that occurred there, in the region of Sumer, in the fourth millennium B.C. – the rise of the city, as we know it today and the invention of writing.

The invention of the wheel is also credited to the Mesopotamians. In 1922, the archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley discovered “the remains of two four-wheeled wagons, [at the site of the ancient city of Ur] the oldest wheeled vehicles in history ever found, along with their leather tires,” historian Stephen Bertman says.

Other important developments or inventions credited to the Mesopotamians include domestication of animals, agriculture, basic tools, sophisticated weaponry and warfare, the chariot, wine, beer, the sail (sailboats), and irrigation.

Starting in the 1840s, archaeologists have found human settlements dating to 10,000 B.C. in Mesopotamia. These indicate that the fertile conditions of the land between two rivers allowed an ancient hunter-gatherer people to settle in the land, domesticate animals, and turn their attention to agriculture. Trade soon followed, and with prosperity came urbanization and the birth of the city. It is generally thought that writing was invented due to trade, out of the necessity for long-distance communication, and for keeping more careful track of accounts.

Learning and religion

Mesopotamia was known in ancient times as a place of learning, and it is believed that Thales of Miletus—known as the "first philosopher"—studied there.

Intellectual pursuits were highly valued across the region. Schools, devoted primarily to educating priests, were said to be as numerous as temples. They taught reading, writing, religion, law, medicine and astrology.
There were more than 1,000 gods in the Mesopotamian cultures and many stories about them. It is generally accepted that biblical tales such as the "Fall of Man" and the "Flood of Noah" first were part of Mesopotamian lore. They first appear in Mesopotamian works such as "The Myth of Adapa" and the "Epic of Gilgamesh," the oldest written story in the world. The Mesopotamians believed that they were co-workers with the gods and that the land was infused with spirits and demons.

The beginning of the world, they believed, was a victory by the gods over the forces of chaos. However, even though the gods had won, this did not mean chaos could not come again. Through daily rituals, attention to the deities, proper funeral practices, and simple civic duty, the people of Mesopotamia felt they could maintain balance in the world and keep the forces of chaos and destruction at bay. Along with expectations that one would honor one’s elders and treat people with respect, the citizens of the land were also to honor the gods through the jobs they performed every day.

Jobs

Men and women both worked, and because ancient Mesopotamia was fundamentally a farming society, "the principal occupations were growing crops and raising livestock," Bertman said. Other occupations included those of the scribe, the healer, artisan, weaver, potter, shoemaker, fisherman, teacher, and priest or priestess. The highest positions in society were kings and military officers.

Women enjoyed nearly equal rights and could own land, file for divorce, own their own businesses, and make contracts in trade. The early brewers of beer and wine, as well as the healers in the community, were initially women. These trades were later taken over by men, it seems, when it became apparent they were making a considerable amount of money. The work one did, however, was never considered simply a "job" but one’s contribution to the community and thus to the gods—efforts in keeping the world at peace and in harmony.

Buildings and government

A temple was typically at the center of every Mesopotamian city, often on a raised platform, and it symbolized the importance of the city’s favored god.

Mesopotamia gave birth to the world’s first cities, which were largely built of soil, sun-dried and turned into brick. In the words of Bertman, “Unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia –especially in the south– was barren of stone that could be quarried
for construction.” The land was equally devoid of trees for timber, so the people “turned to other natural resources that lay abundantly at hand: the muddy clay of its riverbanks and the rushes and reeds that grew in their marshes. With them, the Mesopotamians created the world’s first columns, arches, and roofed structures,” according to Bertman.

Simple homes were constructed from bundles of reeds lashed together and inserted in the ground. More complex homes were built of sun-dried clay brick, a practice followed later by the Egyptians. Cities and temple complexes were famous for their ziggurats—pyramids built in layers of steps. These were all built using oven-baked bricks of clay, which were then painted over.

The gods were thought to be present in the creation of any building project. It was important to carefully recite prayers to the right gods to ensure successful construction. Whichever kingdom or empire ruled Mesopotamia, in whatever time, gods were central to the lives of the people, whether they were field workers or kings.

The role of the king was established at some point after 3600 B.C. Unlike the priest-rulers who came before, the king dealt directly with the people and made his will clear through laws he created himself. Prior to the concept of a king, the priestly rulers are believed to have dictated the law according to religious rules and received divine messages through signs and omens. The king, while still honoring the gods, was considered a powerful enough representative of those gods to be able to speak their will through his own dictates, using his own voice.

**Speaking for the gods**

This is most clearly seen in the famous set of laws made by king Hammurabi of Babylon, often called Hammurabi's Code, as he claimed to be speaking for the gods. But many Mesopotamian rulers claimed to talk directly with the gods, most notably the Akkadian King Naram-Sin who went so far as to say he was a god himself.

The king was responsible for the welfare of his people. If a king ruled according to a god's wishes, it was said he would be rewarded with a prosperous kingdom. Still, even very efficient rulers, such as Sargon of Akkad, had to deal with constant uprisings and revolts by groups and regions who claimed he was not the true king. Mesopotamia was so vast a region—with so many different cultures and ethnicities within its borders—that a single ruler trying to enforce the laws of a central government would inevitably face resistance.
Legacy

The legacy of Mesopotamia endures today through many of the most basic aspects of modern life, such as the 60-second minute and the 60-minute hour. The historian Helen Chapin Metz notes that priests were always watching for special events happening in nature, as these were seen as signs of success or failure of a community:

For example, the Sumerians believed that each of the gods was represented by a number. The number sixty, sacred to the god An, was their basic unit of calculation. The minutes of an hour and the notational degrees of a circle were Sumerian concepts. The highly developed agricultural system and the refined irrigation and water-control systems that enabled Sumer to achieve surplus production also led to the growth of large cities.

Mesopotamia generally, and Sumer specifically, gave the world some of its most enduring cultural aspects. Even though the cities and great palaces are long gone, that legacy continues.
Quiz

1. Read the paragraph from the section "The Cradle of Civilization."

Starting in the 1840s, archaeologists have found human settlements dating to 10,000 B.C. in Mesopotamia. These indicate that the fertile conditions of the land between two rivers allowed an ancient hunter-gatherer people to settle in the land, domesticate animals, and turn their attention to agriculture. Trade soon followed, and with prosperity came urbanization and the birth of the city. It is generally thought that writing was invented due to trade, out of the necessity for long-distance communication, and for keeping more careful track of accounts.

What idea is BEST supported by this paragraph?

(A) The birth of the city would not have been possible without the ability to communicate long-distance.

(B) The domestication of animals in Mesopotamia enabled long-distance travel to trade with previously inaccessible communities.

(C) The hunter-gatherer people who settled in Mesopotamia had been looking for a place to build a city.

(D) The elements of civilization developed step-by-step as a result of Mesopotamia's optimal location.

2. Read the following statement.

Mesopotamia made cultural contributions that are still reflected in contemporary traditions and beliefs.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

(A) The invention of the wheel is also credited to the Mesopotamians.

(B) It is generally accepted that biblical tales such as the "Fall of Man" and the "Flood of Noah" first were part of Mesopotamian lore.

(C) Mesopotamia gave birth to the world's first cities, which were largely built of soil, sun-dried and turned into brick.

(D) This is most clearly seen in the famous set of laws made by King Hammurabi of Babylon, often called Hammurabi's Code, as he claimed to be speaking for the gods.
Read the analysis of HOW the MAIN idea is introduced.

The main idea of the article is introduced by first describing Mesopotamia's location, and then listing the important developments that resulted from the growth of a civilization there.

HOW is the MAIN idea developed further?

(A) by illustrating that social and intellectual innovation were the result of its cultures and resources

(B) by emphasizing the difference between the role of women in Mesopotamia and other cultures

(C) by highlighting the importance of strong rulers to maintain control in the region of Mesopotamia

(D) by providing evidence that the circumstances needed to develop Mesopotamian cities were hard to secure

One CENTRAL idea of the article is that honoring the gods was important to the lives of all people in Mesopotamia.

Which two details BEST support the summary above?

1. The Mesopotamians believed that they were co-workers with the gods and that the land was infused with spirits and demons.
2. Through daily rituals, attention to the deities, proper funeral practices and simple civic duty, the people of Mesopotamia felt they could maintain balance in the world and keep the forces of chaos and destruction at bay.
3. The work one did, however, was never considered simply a "job" but one's contribution to the community and thus to the gods — efforts in keeping the world at peace and in harmony.
4. If a king ruled according to a god's wishes, it was said he would be rewarded with a prosperous kingdom.

(A) 1 and 2

(B) 2 and 3

(C) 3 and 4

(D) 4 and 1