

Module 2: Ancient River Civilizations
Topic 1 Content: Mesopotamia Presentation Notes

Introduction

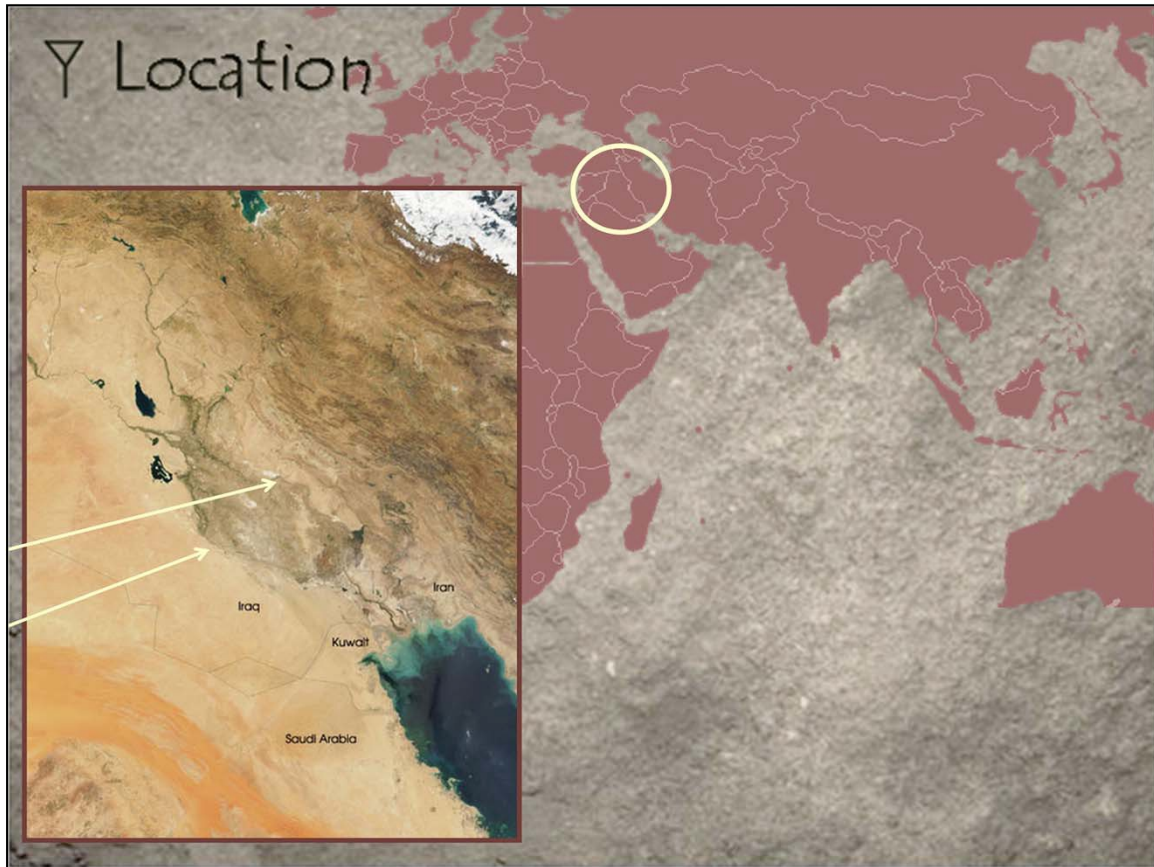


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Location



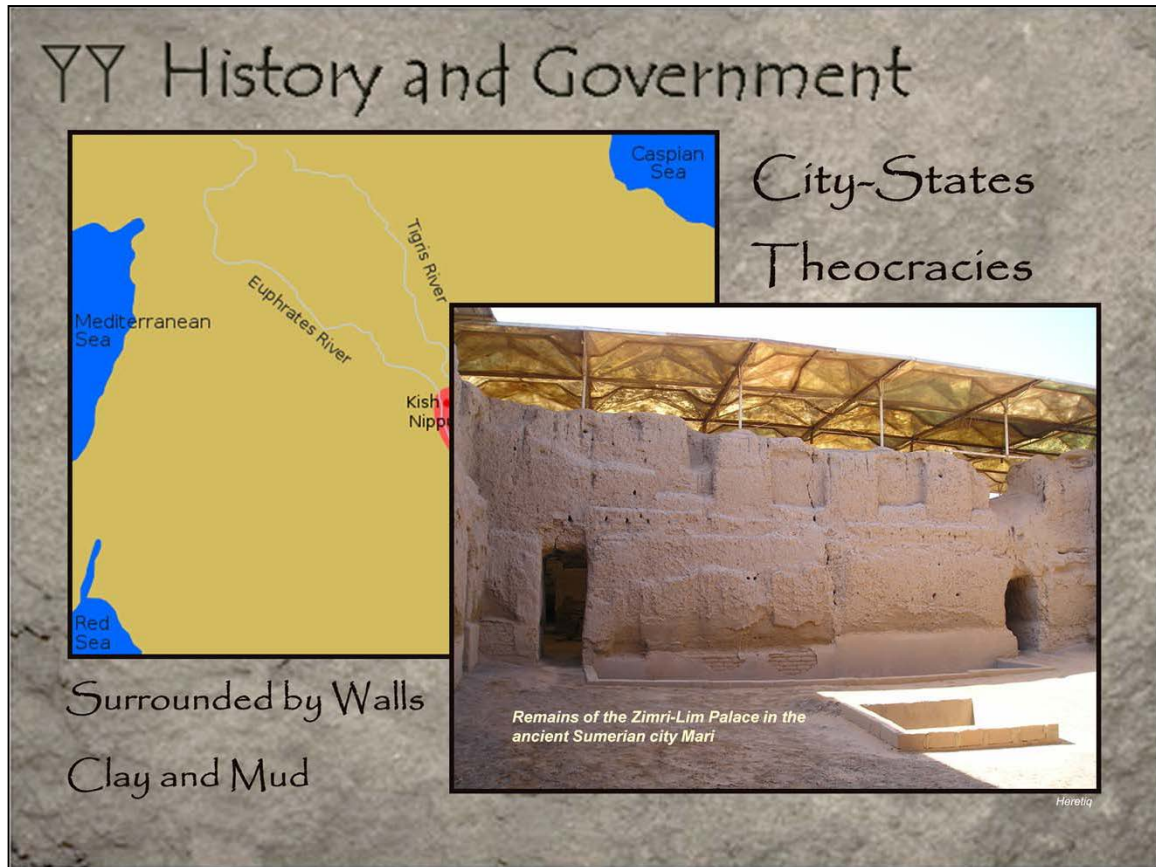
Mesopotamia was located in Southwest Asia in the area that is now modern-day Iraq. Mesopotamian civilization began between two major rivers: the Tigris River and the Euphrates River. In fact, the word Mesopotamia comes from ancient Greek and means “the land between rivers.” This location was part of the Fertile Crescent, a crescent-shaped section of nutrient-rich and fertile land that is situated in an area otherwise unsuitable for agriculture.

While this region does not receive large amounts of rainfall, the rivers would periodically flood and leave nutrient-rich silt behind when the waters receded. Both rivers begin in the mountains of modern-day Turkey and the flooding of the rivers was dependent on snow melts occurring in the mountains. Because this event was somewhat unpredictable, agriculture was best accomplished using irrigation and good drainage.

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History and Government



During the 4th millennium B.C. (B.C.E.), people in the Fertile Crescent had divided into independent city-states, or cities that also control the surrounding areas. In 3000 B.C. (B.C.E.), during the Early Bronze Age, the Mesopotamian civilization of Sumer was thriving in the city-states of Eridu, Ur, Uruk and others. Sumerian cities were theocracies, meaning that the kings that led these city-states were believed to have received their right to rule from the gods. The Sumerian kings lived in large palaces and supervised public works, the military, and made laws. These city-states were independent of each other, and as they grew, they would fight with one another for land and resources.

A city-state was usually surrounded by a large wall for protection and consisted of a temple structure, palace, and the shops and homes of its inhabitants. Sumerians used the clay and mud that was available to them to construct homes, buildings, and walls around their cities. Bricks were created by packing mud and clay tightly together and then leaving them in the sun to dry and harden. The Sumerians built massive structures with these bricks.

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History and Government Continued

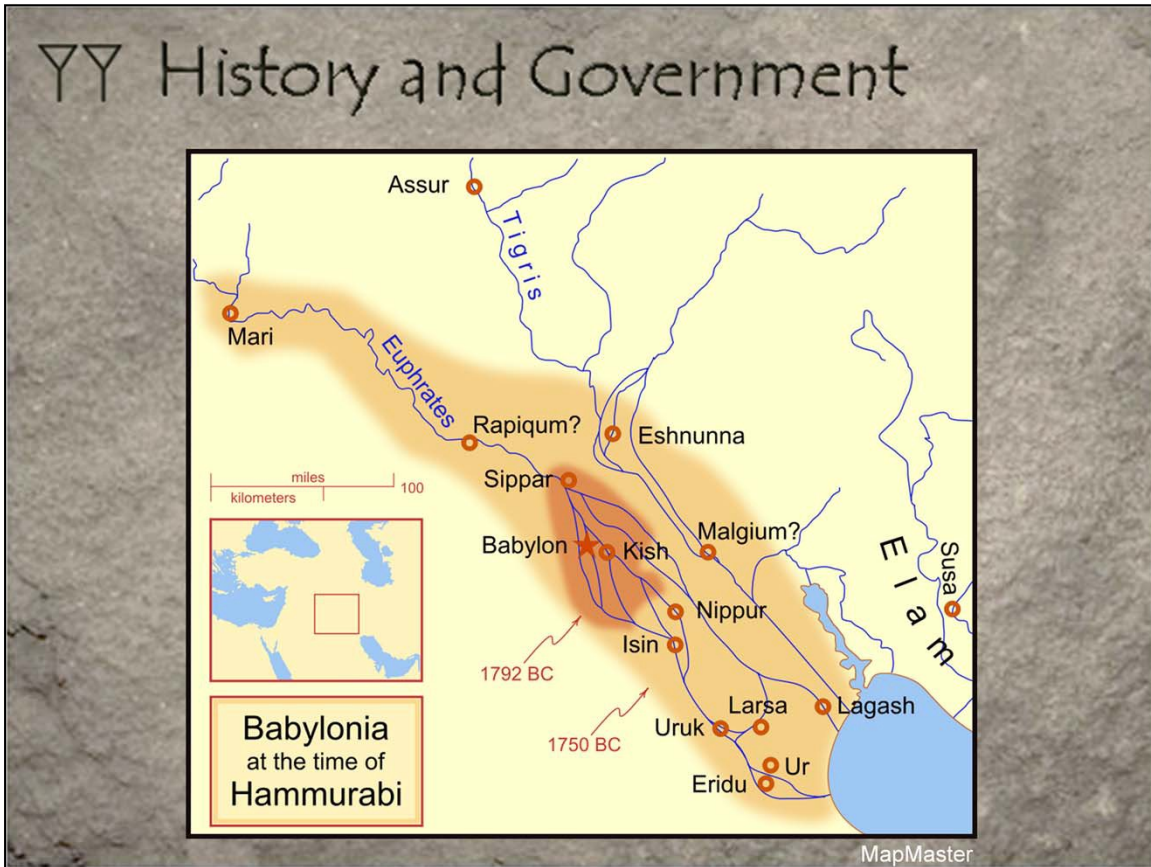


Around 2345 B.C. (B.C.E.), the Sumerian city-states were invaded by the Akkadians, a Semitic-speaking group living in Mesopotamia, north of Sumer. Led by Sargon I, the Akkadians created an empire, which is a group of different states ruled by one power. The Akkadian Empire was the first in a long line of empires throughout history. After obtaining control of Mesopotamia, Sargon continued to increase the land in his kingdom into parts of what is modern-day Syria, Iran, Oman, and the Mediterranean. The Akkadian Empire collapsed by 2100 B.C. (B.C.E.) due to invasions from people living outside of the city-states. After the collapse, Mesopotamia faced around two hundred years of confusion and war.

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History and Government Continued

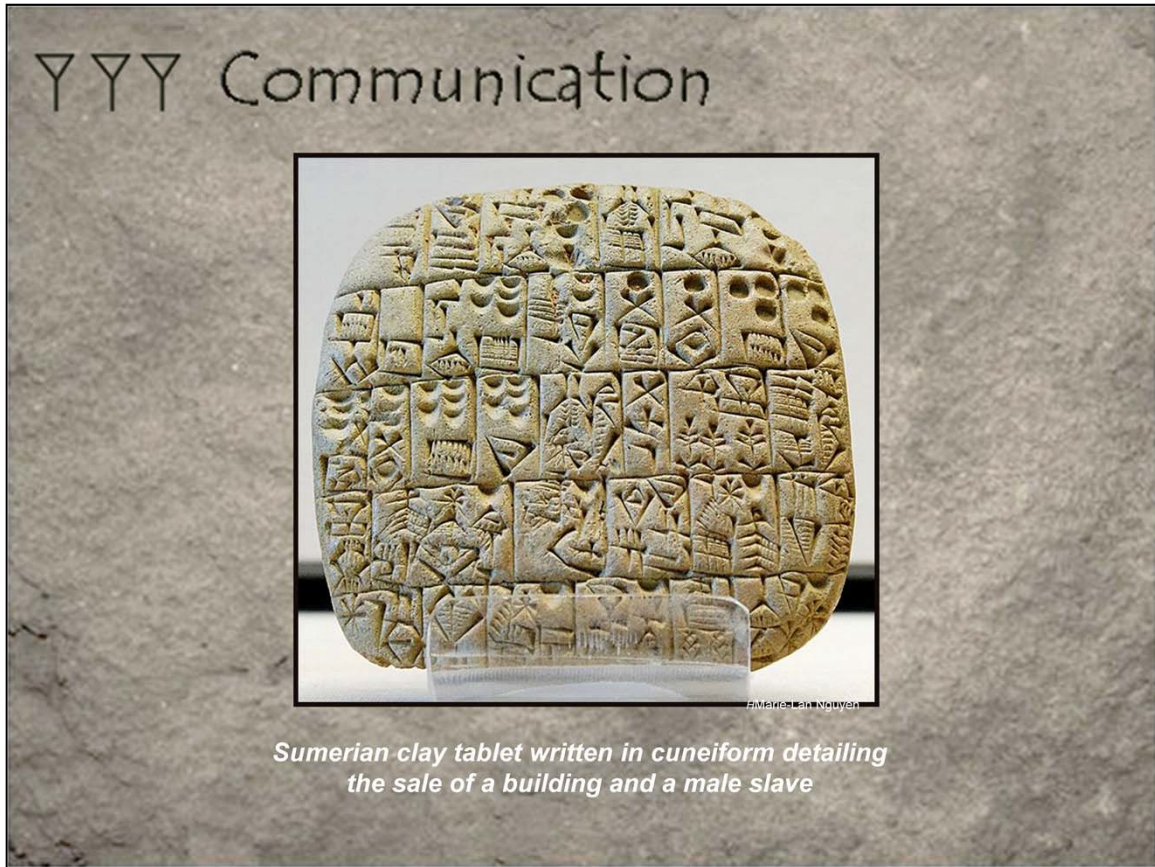


In 1792 B.C. (B.C.E.), Hammurabi became king in the Akkadian city-state of Babylon and united Mesopotamia and the surrounding area to build his own empire. Around 1772 B.C. (B.C.E.), Hammurabi created the *Code of Hammurabi*, a collection of two hundred eighty two laws dealing with contracts, crime, civil matters, and family and household relationships. The law code was extremely strict and was created in a tone of reciprocity. For example, one of the code's most famous laws concluded that "If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out." The code is one of the first examples of organized laws that govern a land and its inhabitants, similar to a constitution. After the rule of Hammurabi, the empire dissolved as the kings that followed were unable to protect the area from invasions.

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Communication

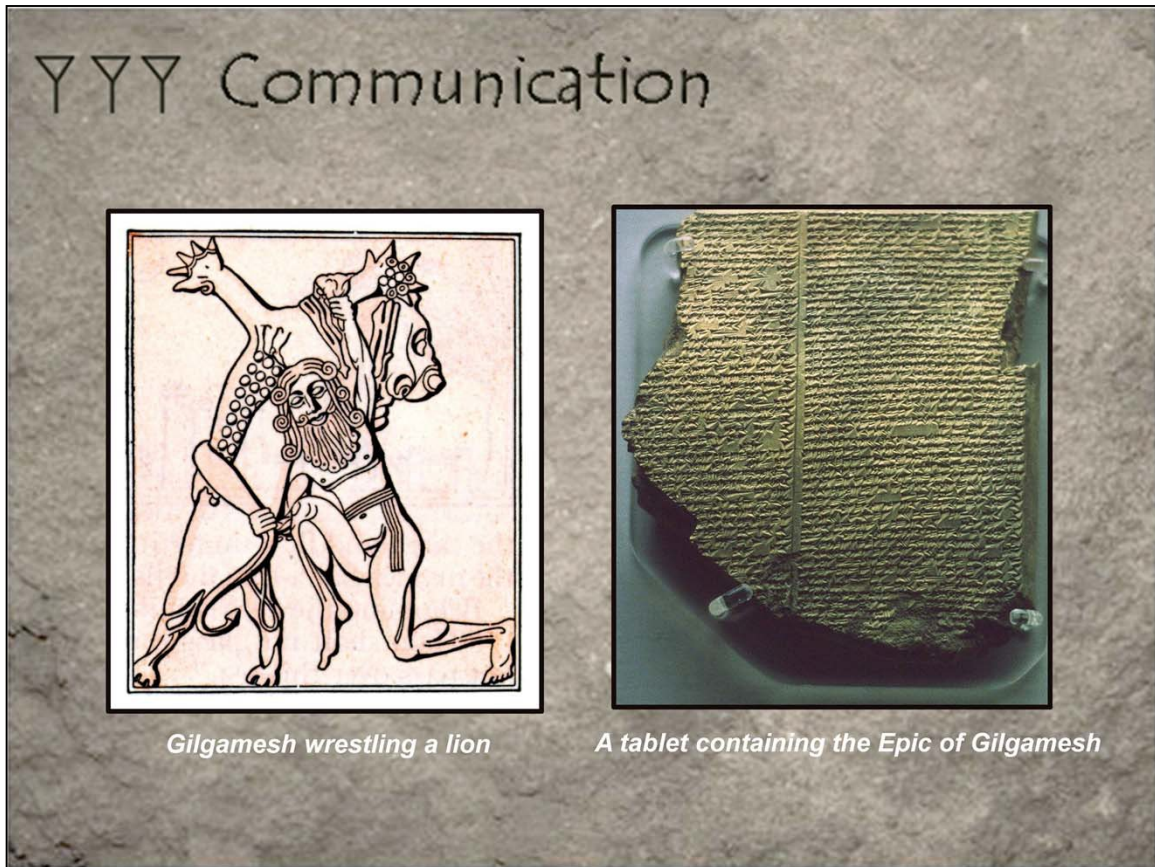


As early as the late 4th millennium B.C. (B.C.E.), Sumerians created the earliest form of writing called cuneiform. This form of writing is wedge shaped. In the beginning, cuneiform was used to keep track of records. Later, it was used to write stories, myths, and laws. The Sumerians are the first known culture to use a writing instrument called a stylus. A stylus is a tool for writing and the Sumerians constructed theirs out of reeds. Then, they used the stylus to make cuneiform impressions on clay tablets that were very durable. Many of these tablets are still in existence and have survived for thousands of years. Scribes held an important status in Sumerian culture because they could hold civic jobs, become educators, and serve as jurists.

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Communication Continued

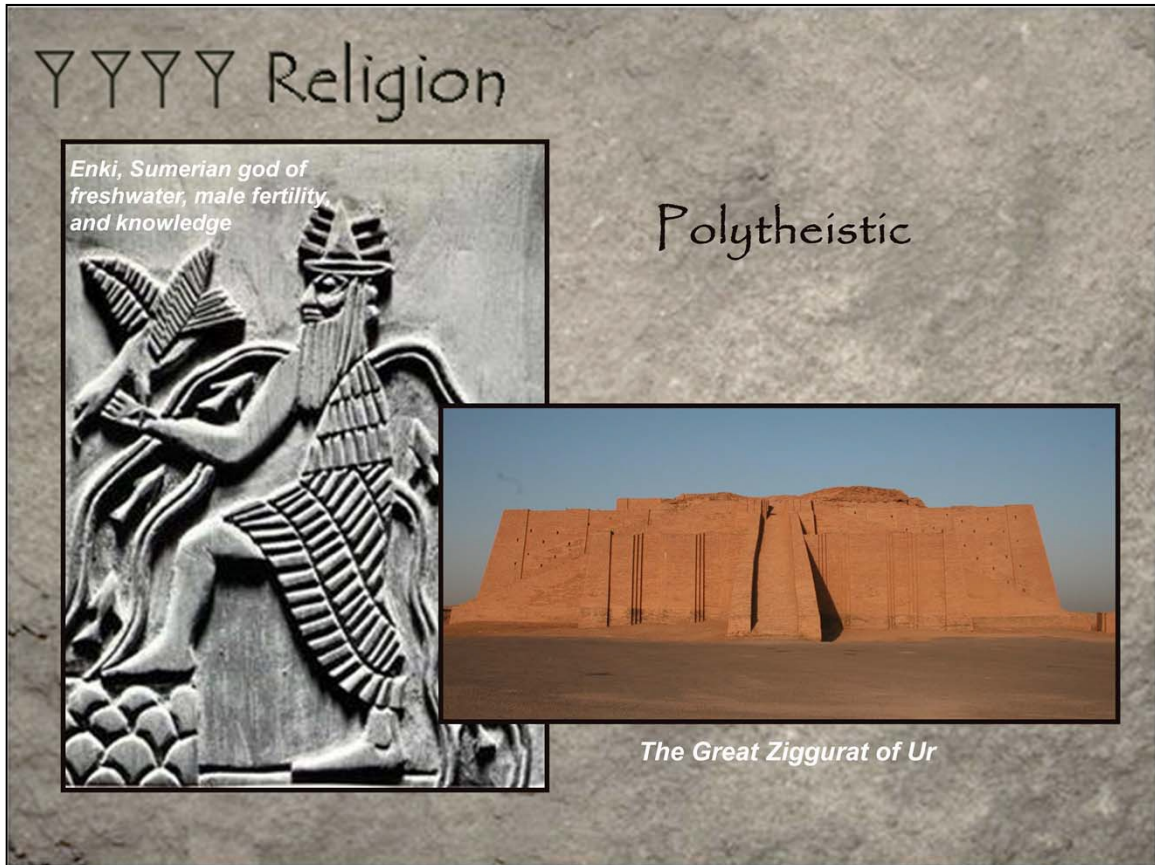


One of the earliest works of literature is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic poem about the hero Gilgamesh who is part human and part god. Based on a Sumerian king who ruled around 2700 B.C. (B.C.E.), individual poems about Gilgamesh were first passed orally in ancient Sumer. These Sumerian versions date back to the third millennium B.C. (B.C.E.). Then, in 1849, tablets containing the full epic were found in modern-day Iraq. Historians believe that these tablets were created between 1300 and 1000 B.C. (B.C.E.). Written on a series of eleven tablets, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of how Gilgamesh, along with his beastly friend, Enkidu, have great adventures. It also recounts the history of a great flood sent by the gods and the quest for eternal life. Various Mesopotamian gods and goddesses make appearances in the epic, and either assist the hero with his actions or send punishment.

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Religion



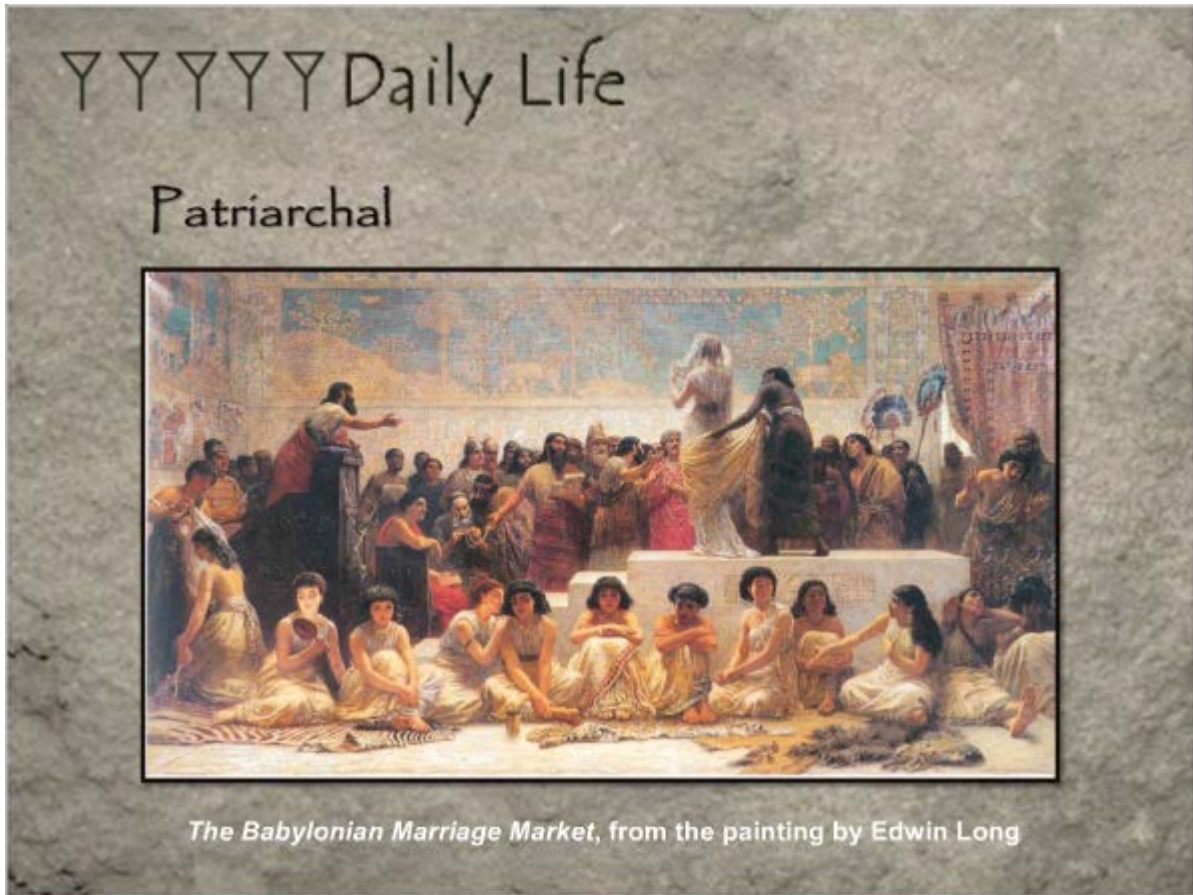
Sumerians were polytheistic, believing in multiple gods and goddesses. The Mesopotamians worshipped thousands of deities. These early people believed that the Sumerian gods and goddesses were responsible for everything, including the extreme weather of the region. Mesopotamians sought to obey and serve the gods to lessen the unpredictability of the gods' actions.

Each Sumerian city-state built a temple to the chief god or goddess of the city and usually placed the temple on top of a ziggurat, which was a large, flat-topped, step pyramid. These temples were necessary to the function of the city and provided a location where people could offer food and drinks to the gods to try to keep them happy. Some of the early temples also served as banks. The priests and priestesses who supervised the temples held a lot of power in the cities where they lived and they were well-respected. The construction projects associated with temples and ziggurats were massive, and were financially supported by the people in the city.

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Daily Life



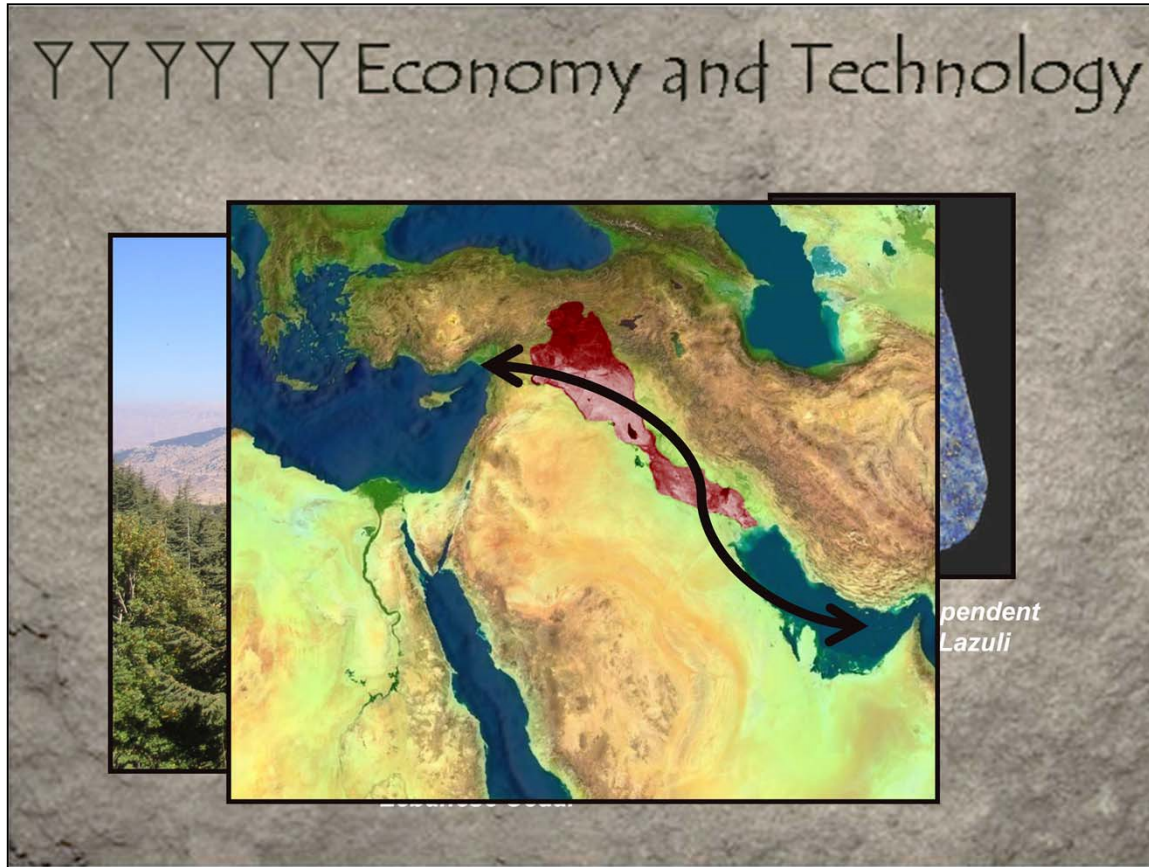
The people of Mesopotamia lived in a patriarchal, or male-dominated, society. Marriages were arranged by parents and the parties signed a contract that confirmed the legality of the marriage. Women were responsible for fulfilling duties in the home, including housekeeping and bearing children. If a wife did not fulfill her duties, a husband had the right to divorce her.

Wealthy and royal boys were educated and many of them participated in the strict training to become scribes, which is a person who writes and keeps records. Being a scribe was highly-respected and meant that other opportunities were available in other careers. Less affluent boys would usually take on the trade of their father or apprentice with another person to learn a trade. Girls were kept at home to assist with housekeeping and child-rearing duties.

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Economy and Technology



Agriculture formed the foundation for the economy in Mesopotamia; however, due to its location near the Tigris River and the Euphrates River, trade and industry were also present. From the Persian Gulf, traders could use the Arabian Sea to access Asia or travel across land to the Mediterranean Sea. Products produced by the people in Mesopotamia, like metal tools and decorations, pottery, and textiles for items that were needed, like cedar from Lebanon and minerals, like Lapis Lazuli.

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Economy and Technology Continued

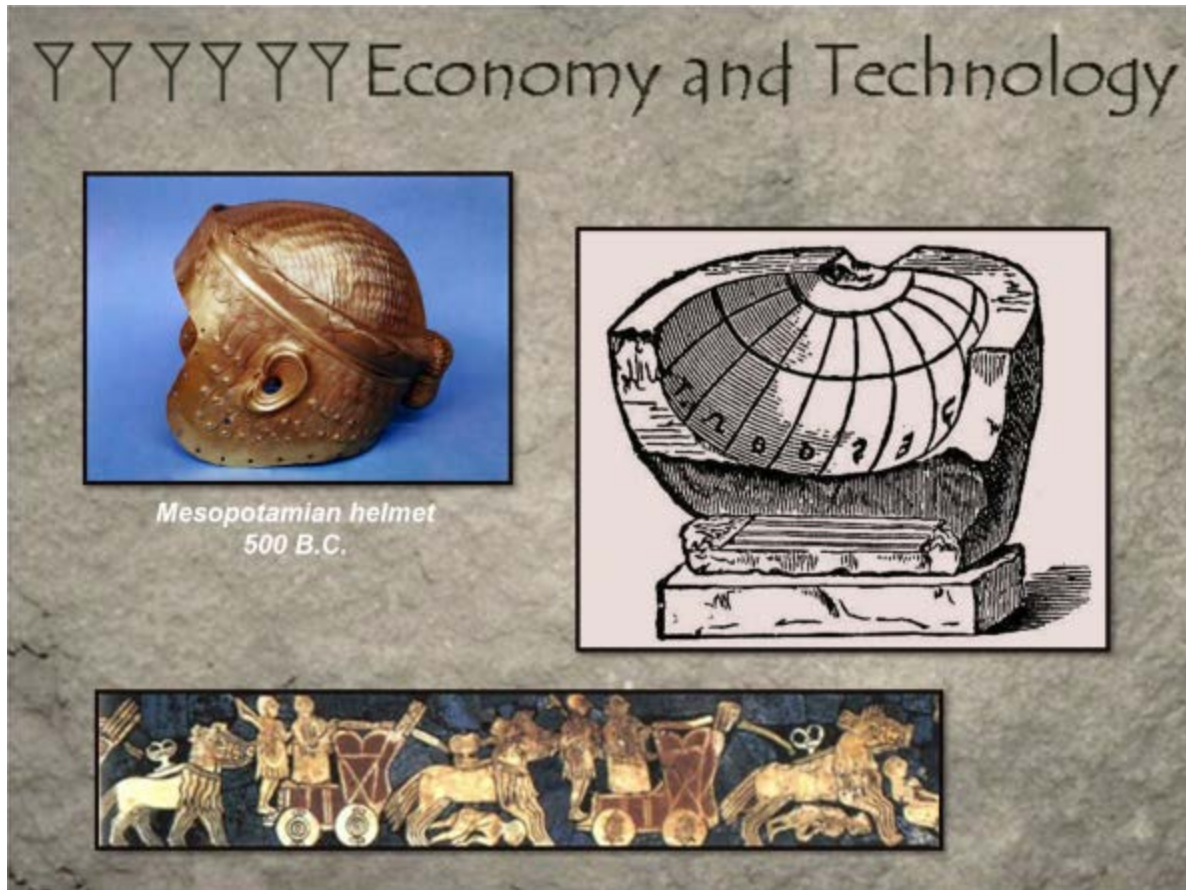


As populations in city-states grew, hierarchies based on class and occupation developed in Sumer and other areas. In Mesopotamia, rulers, nobles, and priests were in the top group. Next came the commoners, who made up most of the population. This group included government workers, merchants, farmers, and artisans. Slaves were in the bottom group. Most often they were owned by royalty and wealth nobles who used them for palace work for farming.

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Economy and Technology Continued



Mesopotamian helmet
500 B.C.

Mesopotamian people were responsible for the invention of many different technologies. As one of the first Bronze Age cultures, they worked with copper, bronze, and gold to create tools, armor, and decorations. In addition, they made advances in agriculture, like irrigation and drainage. In addition to charting the stars, Sumerians used the sun to tell time through the sundial.