The Mud-Brick Civilizations of Mesopotamia

Land Between the Rivers

Mesopotamia has often been called the cradle of civilization. In the area which encompasses much of modern-day Iraq and stretches to the Persian Gulf, we have some of the earliest evidence of the first domestication of plants and animals. Early on, small villages there developed into large towns and eventually cities.

The word Mesopotamia means “the land between the rivers,” and the rivers in question are the Tigris and Euphrates, which flow south to drain into the Persian Gulf. Irrigation and the rich soil of the rivers’ flood plains provided the basis for the population growth that fueled the growth of big cities.

Who Was Who

The history of Mesopotamia is an interesting one, and before going into some specifics about its various civilizations, let’s take a brief look at who came and went, to help keep things in order. No one group ruled in Mesopotamia indefinitely. Its history is more a matter of one bunch in charge, followed by another. What follows is the basic scenario.

The first major civilization in the area was the Sumerian, which later came under the control of the Akkadians. The Sumerians later made a brief comeback, and were eventually absorbed by the Old Babylonians, who in turn became subject to the Kassites and then the Assyrians. The latter succumbed to the Neo-Babylonians, who were conquered by the Persians, who were vanquished by the Greeks, to be eventually incorporated into the Roman Empire. That’s not the end of it, but it’s worth a few moments.
Sumer

The earliest civilizations all grew up in fertile areas bordering great rivers. One of the first of these was in Mesopotamia (meaning ‘between the rivers’), the name given by the Ancient Greeks to the land between the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The most dramatic developments took place in the southern part, Sumer, situated in what is now Iraq.

Early Sumer

The Sumerians grew wheat, barley, vegetables and dates and reared sheep and cattle.

The settlements were clustered on the river banks. The houses were built of sun-dried mud-bricks and there were stables made of matting for the animals.

A new more efficient plough was introduced in the Uruk period. It was drawn by oxen instead of men, and later had a metal blade. This enabled much larger areas to be ploughed, which increased the crop yield.

The potter’s wheel was in use about 3400BC, and later adapted for transport. A donkey pulled a wheeled cart could carry up to three times as much as it could on its back.

Fishing, hunting and catching wildfowl provided additional food.

The farmers built dikes to protect their crops from flooding.

Hut for cattle

The earliest Sumerian culture is called Ubaid, after the site where it was first discovered. By about 5000BC, farmers were established on the river banks and around the marshes. The land was flat and fertile but had little rain, and although the Euphrates flooded its banks each spring, in summer the soil baked hard. Gradually the farmers learned how to build irrigation canals in order to store the water and transfer it to the fields. This allowed more land to be cultivated and the population increased. Surplus food was produced, which allowed some people to become full-time craftsmen, traders or priests, rather than farmers. A few of the larger settlements, such as Eridu, Ur and Uruk, grew into cities and eventually into independent city states.

In about 4000BC a new phase began, named after Uruk. During this period there was a series of new advances, the most important of which was the invention of writing in about 3000BC (see page 10). The Sumerians also devised an elaborate legal system and became skilled mathematicians and astronomers (see page 64). The reconstruction shown here is of an early Sumerian village.
Homework Assignment: The Mud-Brick Civilizations of Mesopotamia

Read the attached handout on the civilizations of Mesopotamia and answer the following questions.

1. How were the Euphrates and Tigris rivers important to the people of Mesopotamia?

2. List the various civilizations that occupied Mesopotamia. Develop a logical argument for why there are so many different societies in one area.

3. Who were the Sumerians?

4. Describe the Sumerian settlement. How did they farm, what did they eat, etc?