Learning A–Z	level Z1	Multi-level	W Z Z1
Grade	5+	Word Count	1,693
Lexile	1040L	Nonfiction • Informational	

Refer to the Focus Question on page 2 of this title to guide discussion and support additional learning connected to the text.

Although humans have existed for nearly two hundred thousand years, they did not form civilizations until relatively recently. One of the most fascinating and earliest examples of a civilization is that of ancient Mesopotamia. Ancient Mesopotamia offers a detailed look at the history and influence of this fertile part of the world. The book can also be used to teach students how to make inferences and draw conclusions as well as to identify adjectives. The book is also available for levels W and Z.

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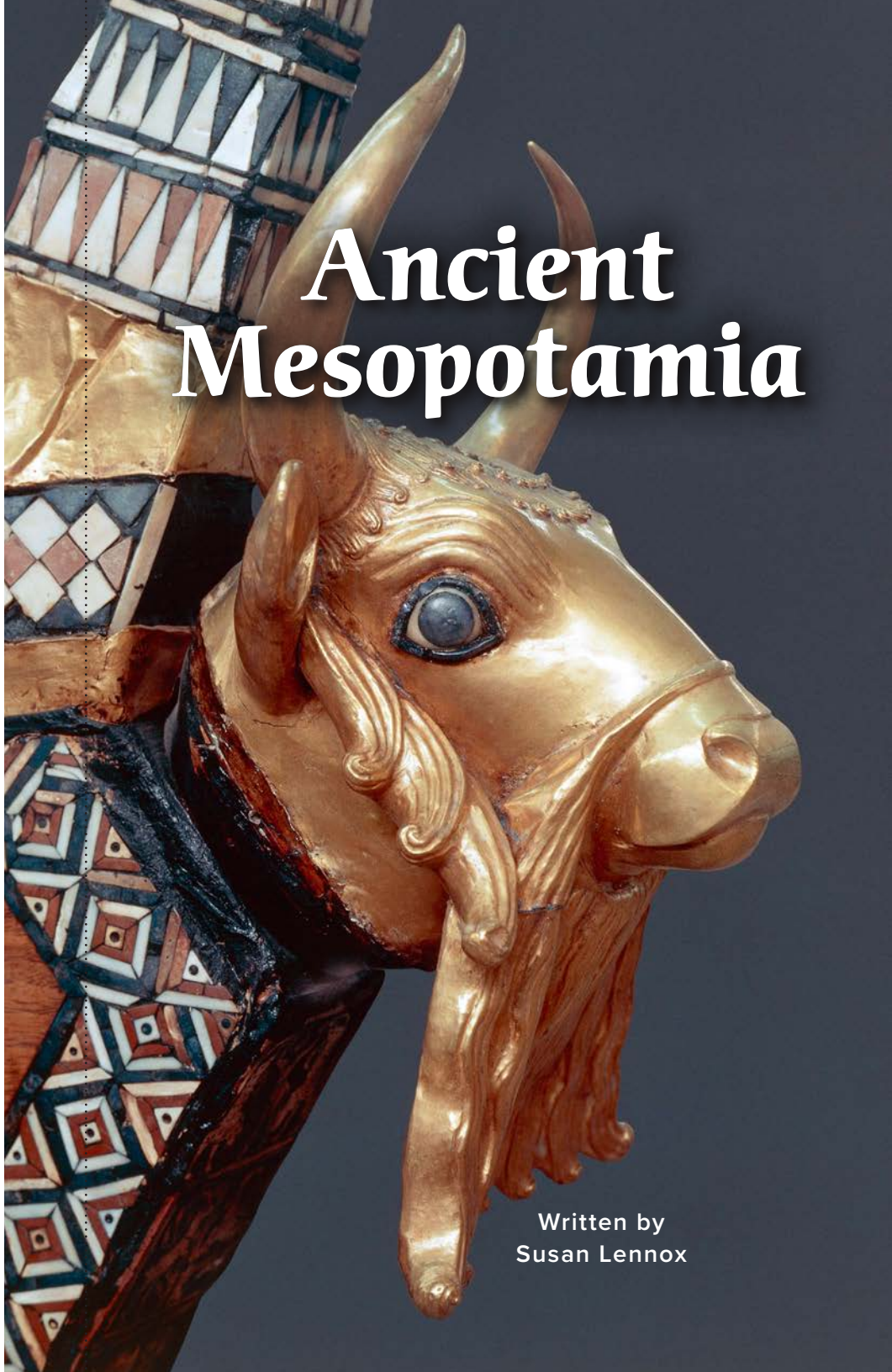


Ancient Mesopotamia

Written by
Susan Lennox

Ancient Mesopotamia

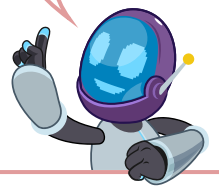
Above: A sculpture of a lion-headed eagle was discovered at an ancient Sumerian archaeological site.

Cover: An ornate bull's head decorates a harp owned by a Sumerian princess of Ur.

Written by Susan Lennox

Focus Question

What were the important features of ancient Mesopotamia?



Words to Know

alloy
city-states
civilizations
commerce
cuneiform
demigod
nomadic
phonologic
pictographs
smelted
stele
ziggurat

Connections

Writing

Write an essay describing the significance of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where the ancient Mesopotamians settled.

Social Studies

Name one important contribution of the Sumerians. Write a script for a commercial to advertise this new technology. Present it to your class.

A clay tablet was used to record rations and goods. The images were inscribed using a sharp instrument.

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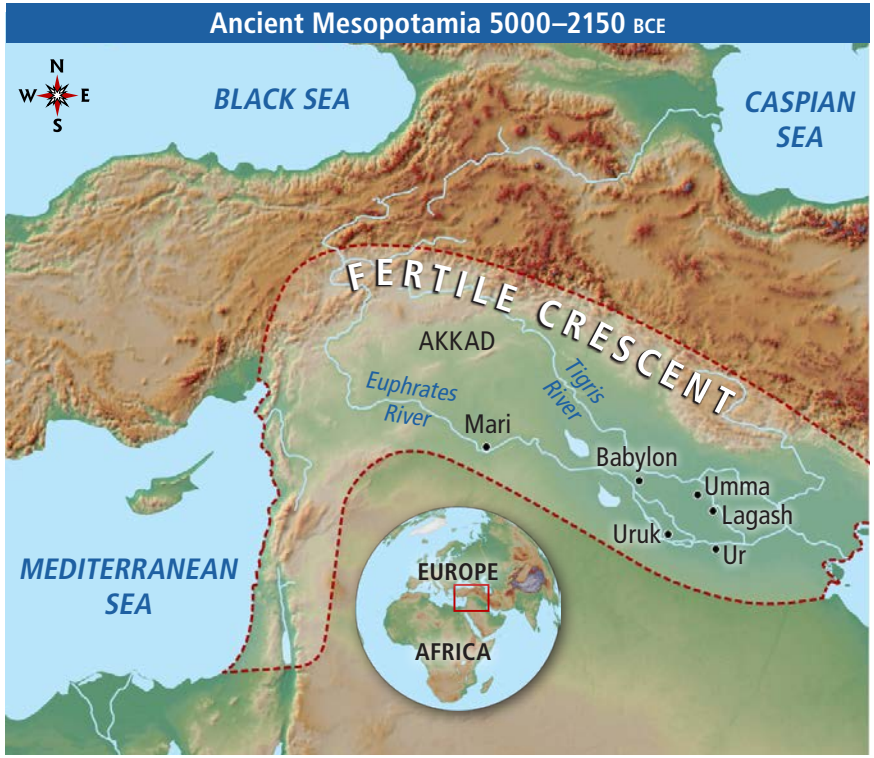


The name Mesopotamia means "the land between two rivers," referring to its location between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Introduction

People began forming the first **civilizations** about 6,000 years ago. In a civilization, at least some of the people live in cities and do specialized jobs. Civilizations have governments and often have writing, arts, science, trade, and monuments.

One of the earliest examples of a civilization is that of ancient Mesopotamia. Occupying present-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Kuwait, Mesopotamia is considered by many historians to be the birthplace of civilization.

The Ubaid

The heart of ancient Mesopotamian civilization was nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. The first people to inhabit Mesopotamia settled the southernmost region of the crescent in what is now Iraq and Kuwait. Modern archaeologists uncovered ancient stone tools, bricks, and pottery at the Tell al 'Ubaid (TEL EL oh-BAYD) site near the Euphrates River. The artifacts were the only sources of information about the lives of these ancient people. The items show that farming settlements existed as early as 5000 BCE. Researchers named the settlers the Ubaid after the site where the artifacts were found.

A small mosaic box thought to be a case for a musical instrument depicts life in early Mesopotamia.

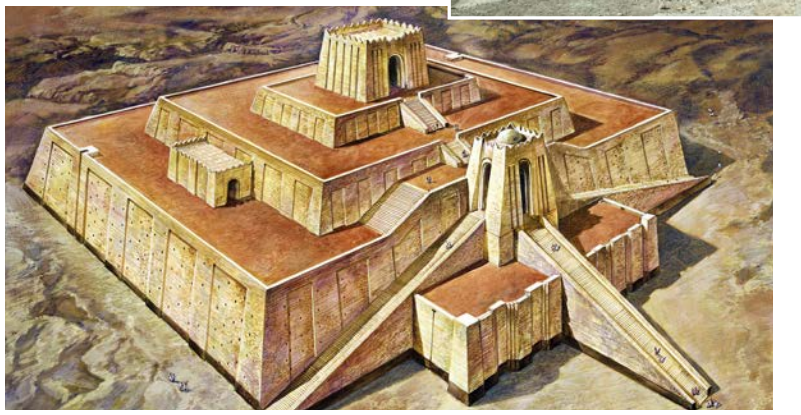
The Ubaid were the first people to develop and cultivate the land known as Sumer. Before the Ubaid formed settlements, they and other Sumerian tribes were **nomadic** hunters and gatherers, moving from place to place. Their travels were determined by weather and the availability of food and water. Eventually, the Ubaid developed ways to sustain themselves in one place. They drained marshes and grew crops in the fertile soil. They constructed irrigation canals to channel water to drier areas. In addition, they made pottery from river clay and wove baskets from reeds that grew in shallow water.

Copper lion heads were commonly used as protective guardian figures on Mesopotamian structures.

The river's bounty not only met their personal needs but also provided goods for trade with travelers. Major trade routes wound from Asia and Europe through the rich plains of Sumeria. Items that the Ubaid could not grow or make themselves were obtained from traders. Cedar from Lebanon and metals from other regions were highly sought by the Ubaid.

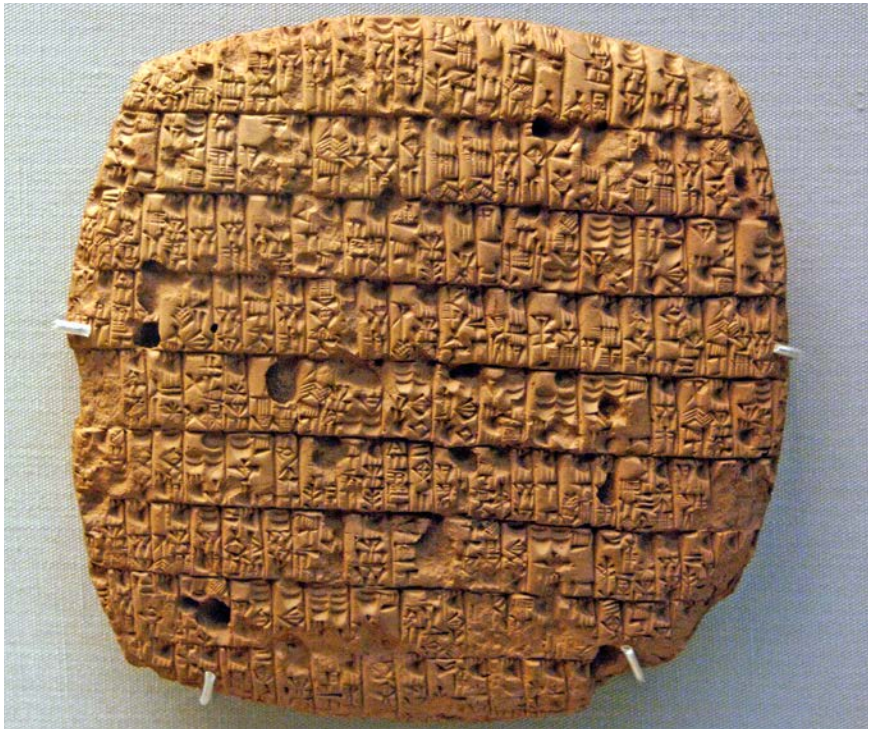
Uruk, the First Known City

Over the years, more and more Sumerian settlements sprang up in the Fertile Crescent. A number of these settlements grew to become true cities and eventually **city-states**. The most influential was the city of Uruk (modern-day Warka, Iraq). From 4100 through 3000 BCE, Uruk was the area's center of authority and trade. At one point, Uruk had up to eighty thousand inhabitants. The city covered more than 2.6 square kilometers (1 sq. mi.) and boasted monumental buildings made of mud bricks. A multitiered **ziggurat**, or temple, served as a center of worship and sacrifice of animals and crops. It and other important structures were decorated with painted clay mosaics and relief carvings.



A drawing (main) shows a reconstructed ziggurat from ancient Mesopotamia. The stone base of Uruk's ziggurat still remains at its original site (inset).

Uruk was also where Mesopotamian **pictographs** first appeared. This early written language grew out of Uruk's role as a center of **commerce**. Simple images were marked on clay tablets to tally workers' rations and as a record of goods. Over the next thousand years, pictographs evolved into a system of writing known as **cuneiform**. For the first time in human history, symbols were used to stand for sounds rather than objects. The symbols could be used to write in any language.



An account of monthly grain rations was written in cuneiform script on a clay tablet around 2350 BCE.

This **phonologic** system had several advantages over a pictographic system. Since the same set of symbols could be shuffled to form different words, fewer symbols were needed. The system also made it easier to express abstract concepts that would be difficult to show as pictures.

Clay tablets inscribed with wedge-shaped cuneiform symbols provide information about Sumerian life during that period. Residents of Uruk and other city-states within Sumeria lived in structured societies. At the highest level was a priest-king. That person led various other ranking officials, such as a leader of the plow, leader of the law, and so on.

Mesopotamian society was divided into three main classes: free people, semi-free people, and enslaved people. Little is known about the lives of people in the lower classes of Sumer. Most Sumerian women were wives and mothers taking care of their homes and families. Most girls did not go to school unless they came from a wealthy family. However, Sumerian women had more rights than women of later Mesopotamian cultures. They could own property, run businesses, act as judges and witnesses in court, and become priestesses, scribes, and physicians.

One of the most renowned and prominent rulers was King Gilgamesh (Bilgames in Sumerian). Gilgamesh is believed to have ruled Uruk around 2700 BCE during the Early Dynastic Period (2900–2350 BCE). He became an epic hero of song and legend. Poems were written about his 126-year reign. He was said to be a **demigod**, the son of King Lugalbanda and the Sumerian mother-goddess Ninsumun. Gilgamesh is credited with building the massive wall that protected Uruk. That wall still stands today.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a collection of ancient Mesopotamian poems that tells the exciting adventures of an ancient king's battles, struggles, and achievements as he strives to attain immortality.

It is also believed to be the oldest surviving literary work in history. Stone tablets inscribed with individual poems date back to about 2100 BCE. A total of twelve tablets relate tales of Gilgamesh as he built the great wall of Uruk, battled and then befriended the wild man Enkidu, and fought the monstrous demon Humbaba.

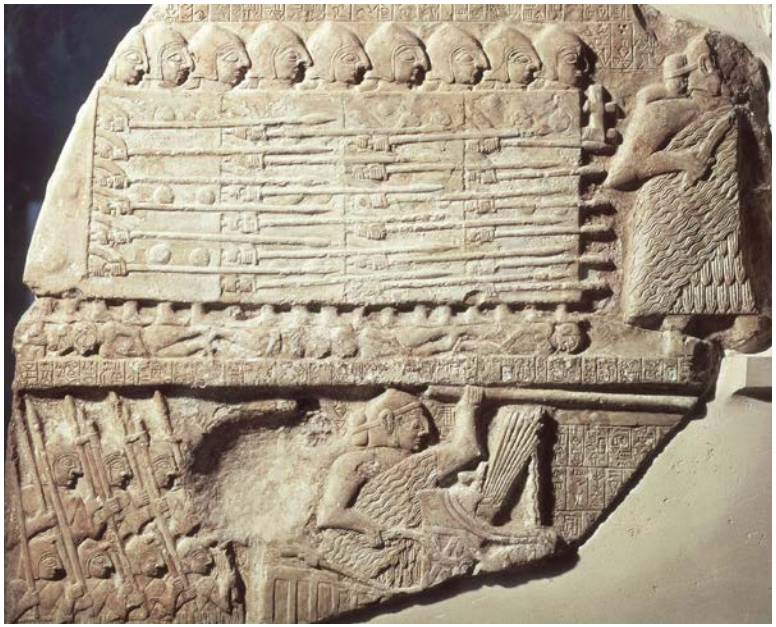
The epic tale describes Gilgamesh wearing the skins of lions he slew.

A carved image from about 600 BCE shows King Gilgamesh engaged in battle with the wild man Enkidu.

Modern archaeologists have long struggled to separate fact from fiction regarding Gilgamesh. It is unlikely, for instance, that he ruled for over a century. Recent findings by a German team of archaeologists, however, do support details found in the ancient poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In 2003, the team claimed to have uncovered the tomb of Gilgamesh beneath an ancient Euphrates riverbed. They found specific structures described in the epic verse. These finds prove that Gilgamesh did at one time actually live.

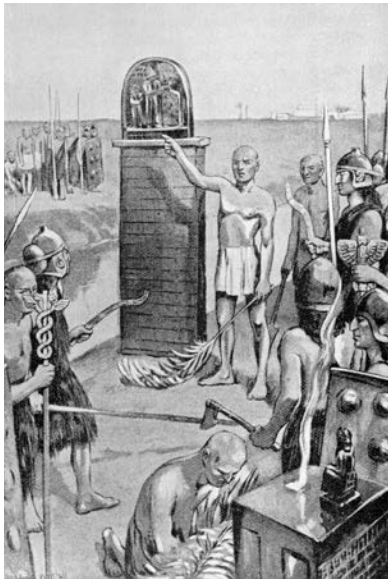
Warring City-States

As the Sumerian city-states expanded and thrived, they began to compete with each other for control and influence over the region. War became more and more common. The earliest detailed record of Sumerian warfare shows a battle between the Mesopotamian city-states of Lagash and Umma in 2525 BCE. Figures and writing inscribed on an upright stone column called a **stele** (STEE-lee) show copper-helmeted infantrymen carrying swords, spears, and shields into battle. Military leaders rode in wheeled carts pulled by pairs of onagers, a native species of donkey.



This fragment from a stele is one of the oldest known historical documents. It shows scenes of war between Lagash and Umma.

Trade routes were vital for supplying the materials needed to craft the tools of warfare. Blacksmiths had discovered that two soft metals, copper and tin, could be **smelted** together to create a relatively hard substance. This **alloy**, known as bronze, was well suited for making swords and spear tips. Tin, however, was rare. It could only be obtained from traders from central Asia or Europe. Disrupting trade routes was a common strategy among feuding city-states. They knew that a lack of smelting materials would put the opposing army at a distinct disadvantage.



A Sumerian priest points to a stele marking the boundary between Umma and Lagash. The two city-states were in constant dispute over possession of land.

The Sumerians' constant fighting came to an end when King Sargon of Akkad (in southern Mesopotamia) took control of the region in about 2340 BCE. His conquest united the city-states into the Akkadian Empire. Sargon maintained order and control by placing key trusted allies in positions of power throughout the kingdom. Sargon's descendants continued this practice.

The Akkadian Empire lasted until 2150 BCE. At its peak, it stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west and Arabia in the south to Iran in the east and the Anatolian Peninsula in the north.

The Akkadians did not speak Sumerian. However, they adapted the Sumerian cuneiform script to write in their own language. The Sumerian language was only used by scholars and literary scribes as part of official and religious ceremonies.

The earliest poet in the history of the world whose name is known was Enheduanna, Sargon's daughter. She was a high priestess in the city of Ur. Many of her poems praised the goddess Inanna, the most popular deity in Mesopotamia. Literacy was highly valued in Mesopotamia, as was shown by an extensive library in the city of Mari. The library held over twenty thousand cuneiform tablets.

Prosperity and Advancement

Peace during the Akkadian Empire brought change to Mesopotamia. Under Akkadian rule, Mesopotamia created the first postal system. Clay tablets were inscribed with cuneiform messages, then wrapped in clay envelopes. An envelope was marked with the seal of the sender and the name and address of the recipient. The message could only be read by the recipient because the clay envelope had to be broken in order to get what was inside.

A centralized government was established, along with enforced laws and regulations. Trade networks expanded, and commerce boomed. Personal property featured relief figures. These ornate images served much more than a decorative purpose. The figures were made by cylinder seals—carved tubes that were pressed into clay and used to show ownership.

This 2,300-year-old letter is written in cuneiform script on a clay tablet.

An ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seal was the signature of all Sumerians.

The seals were used not only to indicate property rights but also to conduct day-to-day business in the empire. Documents and transactions were approved by pressing one's seal into the clay.

The Mesopotamians also developed the idea of numerical place value. Their counting system was a base sixty, or sexagesimal, system. The way we measure time and calculate angles uses this same system, which originated thousands of years ago.

A System of Sixty

We use numerical base systems when we count certain objects. For example, when counting dozens of eggs, we use base twelve: twelve eggs equal one dozen.

When we count time, we use a system devised by the ancient Mesopotamians—base sixty. There are sixty seconds in one minute and sixty minutes in one hour. Why did the Mesopotamians use base sixty? Historians aren't quite sure, but one theory is that sixty can be split evenly so many ways, which made it easy to do math in a world without calculators.

The earliest pottery wheels and wheels for transportation have been found in Sumer. Wheels are still an important part of modern life.

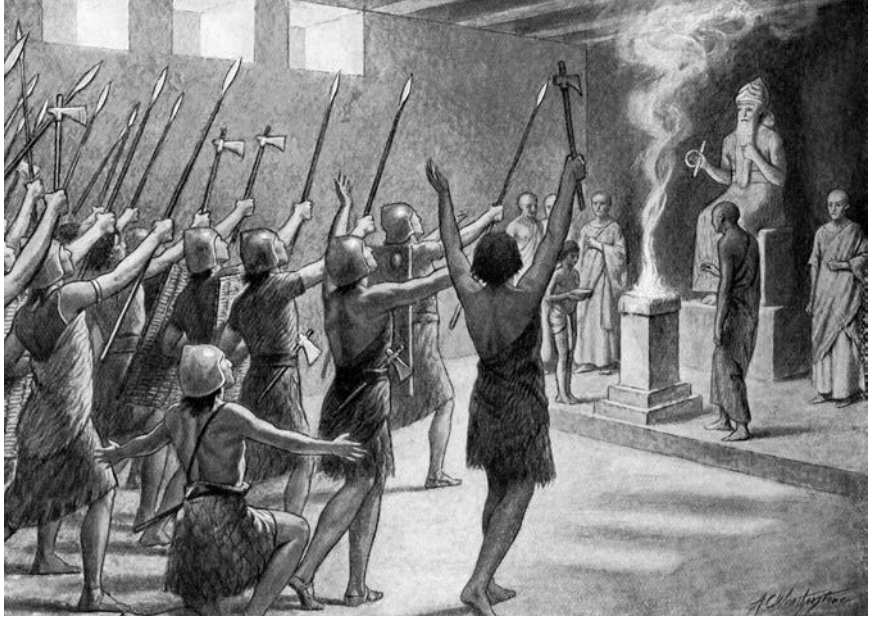
Around 3500 BCE, the Sumerians began using a round, flat mechanical device to make clay bowls. The potter's wheel sat horizontally on an axis and, when spun, allowed the potter to make a bowl with even edges and surfaces.

Three hundred years later, Sumerians began to use wheels as a way to easily move objects and transport people. After much experimenting, the Sumerians tried attaching one wheel to each side of a single axle. The result was a device that made it easy to carry loads. The cart rolled across the ground with minimal effort. Other civilizations may have copied the design, and wheels were soon used around the world.

Fall of an Empire

The Akkadian Empire ended about 2150 BCE after a severe drought and an invasion by the Gutians (GOO-tee-uhnz), who were nomads from the mountains to the north. Gutian war parties made regular raids on the outer reaches of the kingdom. As a result, trade slowed and fields lay untended. The Akkadian ruler at that time, Shar-Kali-Sharri, struggled to maintain control as the Gutians intruded farther into Mesopotamia. Eventually, the Gutian nomads took over Akkad, and the Akkadian Empire collapsed.

An ancient statue depicts Gudea, a Gutian prince who ruled Lagash between 2144 and 2124 BCE.



Sumerians pray to their gods for victory in battle against the Gutians.

The Gutians had little experience running such a complex society. They were poor administrators. They allowed the canal network to fall into disrepair and brought on a terrible famine. Their 125-year rule of Sumer led to what came to be known as the Dark Age of Mesopotamia. It was not until the seventeenth century BCE under the reign of King Hammurabi that Mesopotamia would regain its stature as a thriving empire called Babylonia.

As king of Babylonia, Hammurabi created a code of laws that became a model for many later civilizations.

Glossary

alloy *(n.)* page 13
a metal that is a combination of two or more metals

city-states *(n.)* page 7
cities or urban areas that act as independent countries

civilizations *(n.)* page 4
organized societies that have a stable food supply, government, social structure, culture, written language, and religion

commerce *(n.)* page 8
the buying and selling of goods; business or trade

cuneiform *(n.)* page 8
a system of writing made up of wedge-shaped characters, used in parts of the ancient Middle East

demigod *(n.)* page 10
a being from mythology who is part human and part god

nomadic *(adj.)* page 6
moving from place to place without a permanent home

phonologic *(adj.)* page 9
of or relating to the study of speech sounds within or among languages

pictographs *(n.)* page 8
symbols or pictures that represent words or ideas

smelted *(v.)* page 13
melted or fused using extreme heat

stele *(n.)* page 12
a large, upright slab or column of rock, usually inscribed with designs or words that commemorate something or someone; stela

ziggurat *(n.)* page 7
a rectangular structure in ancient Mesopotamia with steps up the sides and a temple at the top