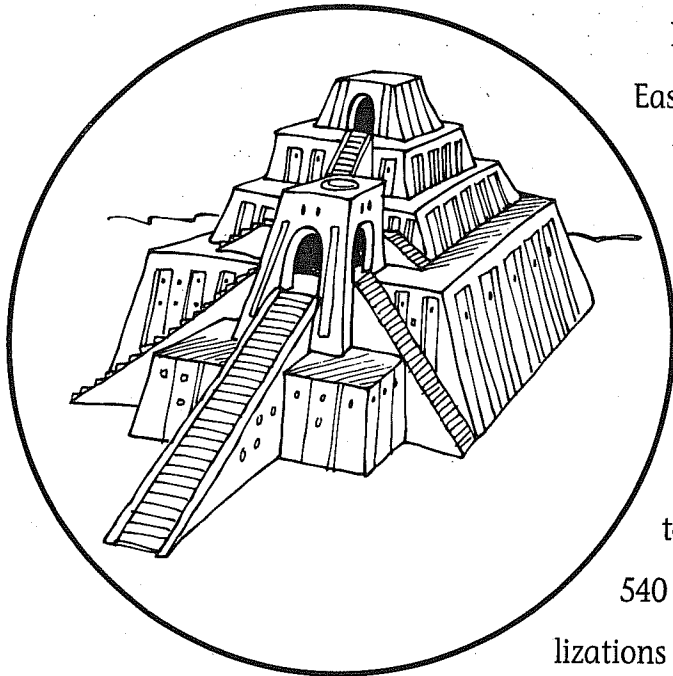


Mesopotamia



Mesopotamia was an ancient region in the Middle East. The name Mesopotamia means “the land between the rivers.” This was the name for the region of land that lay between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Mesopotamia covered an area that was 300 miles (480 km) long and 150 miles (240 km) wide in what is now Iraq and parts of Turkey and Syria. This region was home to many different cultures from about 10,000 B.C. to 540 B.C. The Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian civilizations were all located in Mesopotamia.

The geographic location of Mesopotamia was key to the survival and culture of the people who lived there. The land along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers was so good for growing crops that it became known as the “Fertile Crescent.” This fertile land allowed the people of Mesopotamia to grow wheat, barley, sesame, and flax, as well as a variety of fruits and vegetables. The farmers invented new ways to bring the water to their crops. They were able to grow much more than they needed. They traded this excess supply of crops to other communities.

The rivers’ water also provided a means of transportation. Goods could be shipped up and down the rivers in order to be sold. Once trade began between different people, the Mesopotamians realized they needed some way to record the quantities and the prices of their sales. This led to the invention of a form of writing called cuneiform.

Around 3300 B.C., people used pictures that represented objects or ideas to communicate. This was the earliest known attempt at written language. However, these pictures, while simple, did take a lot of time to write. The Mesopotamians wrote on damp clay. Clay was abundant, and images could be pressed into the clay and allowed to dry. A tool called a stylus was used to make the images. Its tip made a wedge-shaped impression in the clay. As speed became more important, the

images in the clay changed from pictures with curved lines to those forms that could be made with straight lines only. Cuneiform script had been invented.

People who could read and write cuneiform script were very important in the Mesopotamian society. However, it took a long time to learn how to do this. At the time, it was considered more difficult than any other type of work. There were more than 500 different signs to memorize. It took years before someone could properly learn all of these signs. Cuneiform signs were small and complicated. Students had to learn how to write neatly. Because the signs were inscribed on clay tablets, they also had to write without making mistakes.

The abundance of clay in Mesopotamia also provided an ideal building material as the cities grew. The citizens erected buildings for their homes and to house their government. They built palaces for their leaders. They built high walls for protection from floods and attacks. In addition, each city created a temple to honor their gods. This temple would be built on top of a structure called a ziggurat.

The word ziggurat means "to build high." Ziggurats were the center of religious life in every Mesopotamian city. The people believed that the ziggurat was the connection between heaven and earth. A ziggurat resembled a pyramid-shaped tower with a series of stacked platforms that created a very tall structure. These ziggurats were between three and seven tiers high. They were built with mud bricks and held together with wood beams and reed matting. Ramps and staircases made each platform accessible. The temple was at the very top. It was dedicated to the city's god. Priests, officials, worshippers, and slaves were always coming and going from this great structure.

The cultures of Mesopotamia were great in their day. Besides cuneiform and the ziggurats, they were thought to have invented the wheel, used mathematics, developed maps, and developed a calendar based on the moon's phases. Eventually, the power of Mesopotamia began to fade as the Persians took control over the region. However, to this day, we benefit from the contributions of ancient Mesopotamia.