

Iraq: the cradle of Western civilization

On the land we now call Iraq, much of Western civilization first flowered. The Greeks called it Mesopotamia, “the land between the rivers,” but it has been home to many great civilizations since the area’s fertile alluvial soil and abundant water

first attracted early farmers. Many Old Testament stories — Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babel, even the Garden of Eden — have been traced by researchers to this region. Over the centuries, great civilizations — Sumer,

Babylon, Persia — rose and fell as various societies took hold or invaders occupied the land. Here is a look at some of the significant early empires to have controlled the lands near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers:

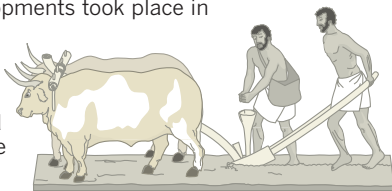
Sumer: the first great civilization

Advances in farming skills and husbandry allowed early agricultural settlements to produce surplus food. As a result, some people in the village could branch off into skilled crafts or mining. Nonfarmers could trade goods for food, and villages could trade with other villages. The settlements grew into cities and more people specialized in nonfarm tasks, including merchants, scribes, warriors and religious leaders. Eventually, a loosely connected network of city-states grew into a civilization known as Sumer.

Many ‘firsts’

Many of history’s greatest developments took place in early Mesopotamia:

- Agriculture: Successfully exploiting Mesopotamia’s rich soil required that Sumerian farmers cooperate to build irrigation canals and dikes.
- Use of copper
- Villages, cities and urban civilization
- Herding and animal husbandry
- Making of bronze
- Code of Laws
- Mathematics
- Calendars and maps
- Wheel — for carts and making pottery
- Written language is invented, with scribes keeping track of the

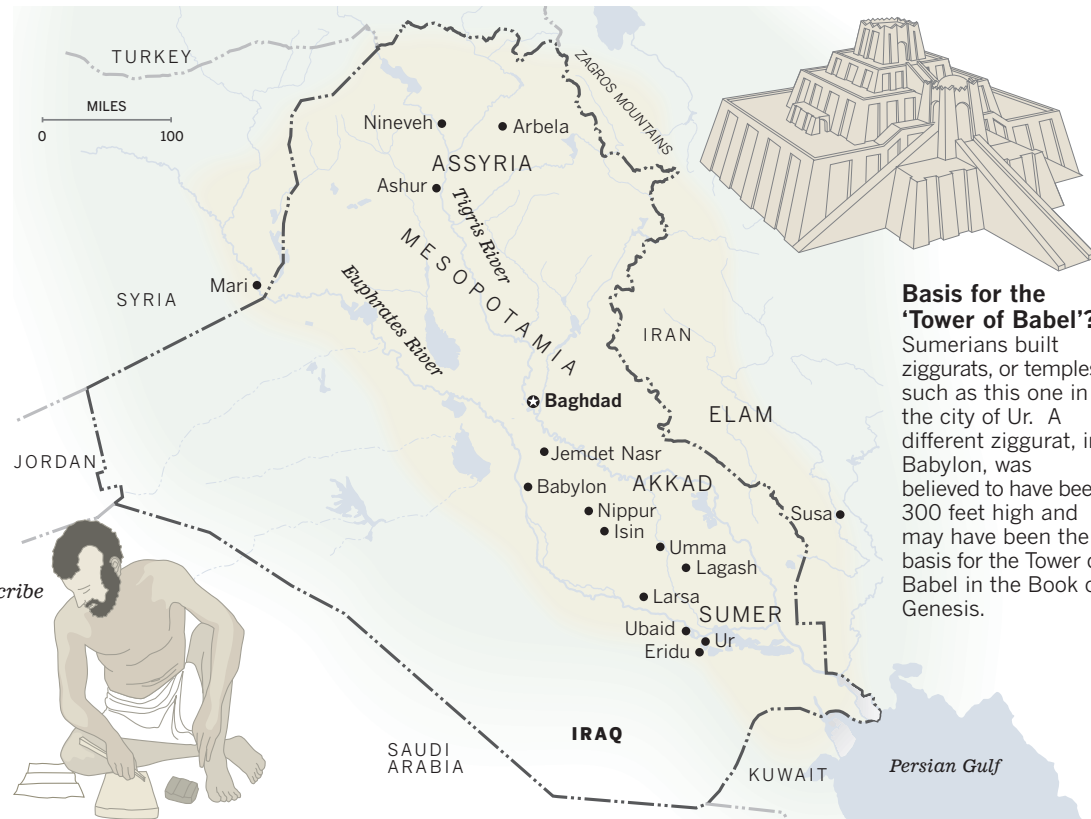


harvest and other business. In 2000 BC, they wrote in both the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, and mastered a decimal mathematics system. Their cuneiform script was impressed in clay tablets with a reed stylus.



Cuneiform script

Scribe



Basis for the ‘Tower of Babel’?

Sumerians built ziggurats, or temples, such as this one in the city of Ur. A different ziggurat, in Babylon, was believed to have been 300 feet high and may have been the basis for the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis.

Some of the events in Iraq of archeological significance

The land of Mesopotamia was home to a several important early societies.

c. 5000 BC Immigrants settle in Sumer; first towns; copper used.

c. 3500 BC First civilization; first city-states; Ur founded; cuneiform script developed.

2350 BC Sargon, the king of Kish, unites cities to form an empire known as Akkadia.

1792-1750 BC The era of Old Babylon is marked by the reign of Hammurabi and his Code of Laws (“an eye for an eye . . .”).

c. 1700 BC Abraham is born and raised in Ur, in what is now southern Iraq. He is venerated by Christians, Muslims and Jews as patriarch of their faiths.

1000 BC Assyrian invaders

subjugate Mesopotamian people.

c. 740 BC King Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria establishes a permanent conscripted army of thousands of men from conquered lands.

669 BC Assyria destroys Babylon.



Neo-Babylonian Empire

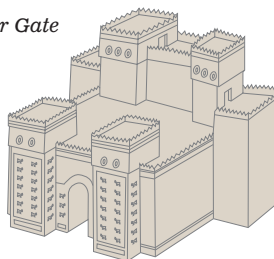
Many view this period as the apogee of 5,000 years of Mesopotamian civilization.

612 BC Chaldeans defeat the

Assyrians and Neo-Babylonian age begins.

605-562 BC Nebuchadnezzar II rebuilds and rules Babylon. Travelers would enter through the magnificent Ishtar Gate. Babylon is home to the Hanging Gardens, which Herodotus named one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and the Jews are exiled in Babylonia in 586 BC.

Ishtar Gate



Persian Empire

The city of Babylon was one of five capitals of the Persian Empire. It later served as capital of Alexander the Great’s far-flung conquests. In the era of the “Arabian Nights,” the Arab Empire created a new capital, Baghdad.

539 BC Persians from what is now Iran conquer Babylonia and much of the Middle East.

331 BC Alexander the Great

captures Mesopotamia from the Persians. By the time Alexander dies of fever in Babylon eight years later at the age of 32, he has assembled a vast empire stretching from Egypt to the Indus River, spreading Greek culture and language to the entire known world. His generals fight over Alexander’s empire after his death, but the Hellenistic influence remains for centuries.

637 AD Arab Muslim conquerors take control.

762 AD Arab Abbasid dynasty establishes a new capital of Baghdad.

800 AD Baghdad is a world center of culture and trade with a population of more than 1 million