

HISTORY

CH:1 - WRITING AND CITY LIFE

Introduction

- **Mesopotamia:** Located between Euphrates and Tigris rivers, birthplace of city life.
- **Historical Names:** Initially Sumer and Akkad, later Babylonia and Assyria.
- **Languages:** Sumerian replaced by Akkadian (~2400 BCE); Aramaic gained prominence (~1400 BCE).
- **Archaeological Discoveries:** Excavations began in the 1840s, driven by Old Testament references.
- **Shift in Focus:** By the 1960s, archaeology focused on reconstructing lives of ordinary people, not proving the Bible literally true.

Mesopotamia and Its Geography

- **Diverse Environments:** Green plains, mountains, steppe, desert.
- **Agriculture:** Began in northeast plains (~7000-6000 BCE); supported by fertile silt from rivers and irrigation canals.
- **Resources:** Sheep, goats, fish, date-palms; limited minerals (wood, metals, stones imported).
- **Urban Growth:** Rural prosperity alone didn't create cities; trade and other factors were key.

Significance of Urbanism

- **Urban Economies:** Beyond food production, included trade, manufacturing, services.
- **Specialization:** Division of labor; people relied on others for goods/services.
- **Organization:** Social structures and written records managed trade, storage, distribution.

Movement of Goods into Cities

- **Trade:** Mesopotamians traded for wood, metals, stones from Turkey, Iran, Gulf regions.
- **Transportation:** River boats, barges, canals, and natural channels; Euphrates was a major trade route (e.g., Mari).

Development of Writing

- **Earliest Writing:** ~3200 BCE, picture-like signs and numbers on clay tablets for transactions.
- **Cuneiform:** Wedge-shaped signs on clay tablets; durable when sun-dried.
- **Standardization:** By 2600 BCE, Sumerian cuneiform standardized; later Akkadian used (~2400 BCE).
- **Uses:** Expanded to dictionaries, legal documents, royal deeds, law announcements.
- **Longevity:** Cuneiform in Akkadian used until 1st century CE.

System of Writing

- **Cuneiform Signs:** Represented syllables, not individual consonants/vowels.
- **Skill Required:** Scribes learned hundreds of signs, wrote on wet clay before it dried.

Literacy

- **Rare Skill:** Few Mesopotamians could read/write; learning signs was challenging.
- **Kings' Pride:** Literate kings boasted of reading ability in inscriptions.
- **Oral Transmission:** Texts often read aloud; oral education emphasized for future generations.

Uses of Writing

- **Example:** Enmerkar, ruler of Uruk, used writing to avoid messenger errors in trade with Aratta for metals, lapis lazuli.
- **Significance:** Writing enhanced trade and communication in urban culture.

Urbanization in Southern Mesopotamia: Temples and Kings

- **Early Cities:** Developed around temples and trade centers.
- **Temples:** Homes of gods, central to agriculture and economy.
- **Leadership:** Victorious chiefs gained authority, offered goods to gods, and beautified temples.
- **Uruk:** Early temple town with defensive wall, population shift; workers (captives, locals) received rations.
- **Technological Advances:** Bronze tools, brick columns, potter's wheel, sculpture, mosaics.

Life in the City

- **Ruling Elite:** Wealth evident in extravagant burial goods (e.g., Ur).
- **Family Structure:** Nuclear families; married sons lived with parents.
- **Marriage:** Involved declarations, parental consent, gifts, temple offerings.
- **City Layout (Ur):** Narrow streets, no town planning, no street drains; goods moved by donkeys.
- **Houses:** Roofs sloped inward, rainwater drained to courtyards; refuse raised street levels.
- **Superstitions:** Omen tablets linked raised thresholds to wealth.
- **Burials:** Royalty and commoners buried in cemeteries; some under house floors.

Trading Town: Mari

- **Location:** Upstream on Euphrates, thrived after 2000 BCE in the pastoral zone.
- **Economy:** Pastoralism (sheep, goats); trade hub for wood, copper, tin, oil, wine.
- **Conflict:** Herders vs. farmers over grazing, raiding.
- **Kings:** Amorites, respected Mesopotamian gods, built a temple for Dagan.
- **Prosperity:** From trade, not military dominance; levied charges on cargo.

Cities in Mesopotamian Culture

- **Cultural Pride:** Mesopotamians valued city life, diverse communities.
- **Gilgamesh Epic:** Hero Gilgamesh found solace in Uruk's walls, symbolizing urban pride.

Legacy of Writing

- **Scholarly Tradition:** Included mathematics (multiplication, division, square tables) and time reckoning.
- **Time Divisions:** Year (12 months), month (4 weeks), day (24 hours), hour (60 minutes); adopted by later civilizations.
- **Astronomy:** Recorded solar/lunar eclipses, star positions.
- **Education:** Urban schools and writing preserved knowledge.