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Mesopotamian Civilization Block:

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What is good in a man's sight is evil for a god,What is evil to a man's mind is good for his god.Who can comprehend the counsel of the gods in heaven?The plan of a god is deep waters, who can fathom of it?Where has befuddled mankind ever learned what is a god's conduct?

**Before Civilization**
Between 9000 B.C. and the beginning of the Christian era, western civilization came into being in Egypt and in what historians call Ancient Western Asia (modern-day Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, southwestern Russia, Iraq and Iran). The earliest permanent settlements occurred between 9000-6000 B.C. and were accompanied by the domestication of plants and animals. Between 4000-3000 B.C., the first cities appeared in response to the pressures of population growth, the organizational requirements of irrigation and the demands of more complex trade patterns. According to our previous definitions, these societies of Egypt and Ancient Western Asia correspond to what we would call civilization.

Around 10,000 B.C., many hunter-gatherers living along the coastal plains of modern Syria and Israel and in the valleys and hills near the Zagros Mountains between Iran and Iraq began to develop special strategies that led to a transformation in the human community. Rather than constantly traveling in search of food, people stayed in one region and exploited the seasonal sources of food, including fish, grain, fruits and game. At a community such as Jericho, people built and rebuilt their mud brick and stone huts rather than moving on as had their ancestors. In general, these communities began to focus on seasonal food sources and so were less likely to leave in search of new sources.

Just why hunters and gatherers in this region of the ancient world turned to agriculture is difficult to say. And there are a variety of problems associated with this transformation. For one thing, specialization in a relatively small number of plants or animals could spell disaster during times of famine. Some scholars have argued that agriculture developed out of an increased population and the development of a political hierarchy. In settled communities, infant mortality decreased and life expectancy rose. This change may have occurred since life in a fixed community was less demanding. The practice of infanticide decreased since children could now be used in rudimentary agricultural tasks. And as population growth put pressure on the local food supply, gathering activities required more coordination and organization and led eventually to the development of political leadership.

Settlements began to encourage the growth of plants such as barley and lentils and the domestication of pigs, sheep and goats. People no longer looked for their favorite food sources where they occurred naturally. Now they introduced them into other locations. An [agricultural revolution](https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/development-of-agriculture/) had begun.

The ability to domesticate goats, pigs, sheep and cattle and to cultivate grains and vegetables changed human communities from passive harvesters of nature to active partners with it. The ability to expand the food supply in one area allowed the development of permanent settlements of greater size and complexity. The people of the Neolithic or New Stone Age (8000-5000 B.C.) organized fairly large villages. Jericho grew into a fortified town complete with ditches, stone walls, and towers and contained perhaps 2000 residents. [Catal Hüyük](http://www.catalhoyuk.com/) in southern Turkey may have been substantially larger.

Although agriculture resulted in a stable food supply for permanent communities, the revolutionary aspect of this development was that the community could bring what they needed (natural resources plus their tool kit) to make a new site inhabitable. This development made it possible to create larger communities and also helped to spread the practice of agriculture to a wider area. Farmers in Catal Hüyük cultivated plants that came from hundreds of miles away. The presence of tools and statues made of stone not available locally indicates that there was also some trading with distant regions.

Agricultural society brought changes in the organization of religious practices as well. Sanctuary rooms decorated with frescoes and sculptures of the heads of bulls and bears shows us that structured religious rites were important to the inhabitants of these early communities. At Jericho, human skulls were covered with clay in an attempt to make them look as they had in life suggesting that they practiced a form of ancestor worship. Bonds of kinship that had united hunters and gatherers were being supplemented by religious organization, which helped to regulate the social behavior of the community.

Around 1500 B.C., a new theme appears on the cliff walls at Tassili-n-Ajjer. We see men herding horses and driving horse-drawn chariots. These practices had emerged more than fifteen hundred years earlier in Mesopotamia, a desert plain stretching to the marshes near the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Chariots symbolized a dynamic and expansive phase in western culture. Constructed of wood and bronze and used for transport as well as for warfare, the chariot is symbolic of the culture of early river civilizations, the first civilizations in Ancient Western Asia.

**Mesopotamian Civilization**  The history and culture of Mesopotamian civilization is inextricably connected to the ebb and flow of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The earliest communities developed to the north but since rainfall in that area was so unpredictable, by 5000 B.C. communities had spread south to the rich alluvial plain. The economy of these communities was primarily agricultural and approximately 100-200 people lived in these permanently established villages. The alluvial plain in southern Mesopotamia ("land between the rivers") was far more fertile than the north but because there was little rainfall, irrigation ditches had to be constructed. Furthermore, the river beds of the Tigris and Euphrates rise and fall with the seasons and they change their course unpredictably. Southern Mesopotamia also had its share of flash floods which could destroy crops, livestock and village homes. Floods and torrential rains were a significant theme in Mesopotamian literature as depicted in the*[EPIC OF GILGAMESH](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/gilgamesh.html)*.

The rampant flood which no man can oppose,Which shakes the heavens and causes earth to tremble,In an appalling blanket folds mother and child,Beats down the canebrake's full luxuriant greenery,And drowns the harvest in its time of ripeness.

Rising waters, grievous to eyes of man,All-powerful flood, which forces the embankmentsAnd mows down mighty trees,Frenzied storm, tearing all things in massed confusionWith it in hurling speed.

Civilization emerged in Mesopotamia because the soil provided a surplus of food. With this surplus, people could settle down to village life and with these new settlements, towns and cities began to make their appearance, a process known as urbanization. With settlements and a surplus of food came an increase in the population, a well-defined division of labor, organization, cooperation and kingship. The emergence of cities involved interaction between people. Most cities evolved ****from smaller farming villages and with the practice of irrigation, which was necessary for villages distant from the Tigris and Euphrates, a stable food supply was produced. This, in turn, allowed increases in the number of people who inhabited each settlement.

Because the land closest to the river was the most fertile, there was a variation in terms of the wealth of these early farmers, which led to distinct social classes. At the same time, the construction of canals, ditches and dikes essential to irrigation demanded cooperation between different social groups. Decision-making, regulation and control of all food production and herding meant cooperation. And because more food could be produced by less people, some people gave up farming and became craftsmen, laborers, merchants and officials and this too required cooperation. The Mesopotamians built massive temples or ziggurats which housed the priestly class, the human representatives of the gods. The priests controlled the religious life of the community, the economy, land ownership, the employment of workers as well as the management of long distance trade.

Mesopotamian villages and towns eventually evolved into independent and nearly self-sufficient city-states. Although largely economically dependent on one another, these city-states were independent political entities and retained very strong isolationist tendencies. This isolationism hindered the unification of the Mesopotamian city-states, which eventually grew to twelve in number.

By 3000 B.C., Mesopotamian civilization had made contact with other cultures of the Fertile Crescent (a term first coined by James Breasted in 1916), an extensive trade network connecting Mesopotamia with the rest of Ancient Western Asia. Again, it was the two rivers which served as both trade and transportation routes.

The achievements of Mesopotamian civilization were numerous. Agriculture, thanks to the construction of irrigation ditches, became the primary method of subsistence. Farming was further simplified by the introduction of the plow. We also find the use of wheel-made pottery. Between 3000 and 2900 B.C. craft specialization and industries began to emerge (ceramic pottery, metallurgy and textiles). Evidence for this exists in the careful planning and construction of the monumental buildings such as the temples and ziggurats. During this period (roughly 3000 B.C.), cylinder seals became common. These cylindrical stone seals were five inches in height and engraved with images. These images were reproduced by rolling the cylinder over wet clay. The language of these seals remained unknown until to 20th century. But, scholars now agree that the language of these tablets was Sumerian.