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Date _____



Mesopotamia & the Fertile Crescent

Engage

NARRATOR: Civilization—I’m sure you’ve heard of it. An organized society with social, political, and cultural systems. Government, art, religion, those little misty spray bottles with a fan attached.

But combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bells didn’t just magically appear. Civilization had to start somewhere. And that somewhere is Mesopotamia—the cradle of civilization.

In a region called the Fertile Crescent—in modern-day Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria—the nomadic lifestyle of hunter-gatherers gave way to permanent civilization. And it’s not because their feet were tired—although I’m sure they were. It’s all because of every real estate agent’s three favorite words:

REAL ESTATE AGENT VOICE: Location, location, location.

MESOPOTAMIAN: Umm...That’s one word.

Explore

NARRATOR: Location! “Mesopotamia” comes from a Greek word meaning “between rivers.” This beachfront property between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers offered a stable climate, rich soil from frequent flooding, and steady access to fresh water. Ideal conditions for...

VOICE: Mud wrestling?

NARRATOR: No...agriculture! It started with the domestication of animals like pigs, sheep, and goats as early as 11,000 BCE. Then came domesticated plants like barley, flax, and wheat around 9,500 BCE.

Explain

As agricultural technology advanced and food supply became more stable, people no longer had to spend

the entire day searching for their next meal. This allowed them to specialize in trades other than farming like building, weaving, and baking.

This division of labor is a defining trait of advanced civilization. It's just more efficient: While you harvest wheat to keep people fed, I can weave a basket to help carry that wheat to the people who need to be fed.

One of Mesopotamia's first urban civilizations was called Sumer. By 3500 BCE, Sumerians had developed a system of irrigation. Artificial river banks called levees prevented flooding, and canals allowed humans to control where water went. This made growing crops and raising livestock even easier.

And once you have a steady food supply, people have full stomachs. And people with full stomachs have more time to come up with really cool stuff like, uh, I don't know, writing!

The Sumerians developed one of the first written languages ever, known as cuneiform. What started as pictures inscribed into wet clay to track goods like grain and cattle evolved into a sophisticated system of wedge-shaped marks and lines.

MESOPOTAMIAN: This one says my name!

NARRATOR: No it doesn't. The Sumerians pioneered metal work, adding tin to copper to make bronze tools and weapons. They created the mathematical system that divides one minute into 60 seconds and an hour into 60 minutes. They also built massive temples at the center of their cities called ziggurats.

As more city-states popped up throughout the 4th and 3rd millennium BCE, harmonious, mutually beneficial relationships thrived as love and compassion became the language of the land. I'm kidding! It was actually war—war and imperialism. The Akkadian Empire conquered Sumer around 2334 BCE to take control of Mesopotamia. Less than 200 years after that the Akkadian Empire crumbled, making way for the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires.

Elaborate

As power changed hands and Mesopotamian culture evolved, cuneiform was adapted for many uses. Some of the earliest known recorded laws and works of literature come from Mesopotamia, like the Code of

Hammurabi—you know, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”—and the Epic of Gilgamesh, a 3,000 line poem.

Evaluate

Alas, in 539 BCE the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonian Empire and took control of the region. Mesopotamia was no more.

Today, the area once known as the Fertile Crescent isn’t very fertile at all. Nonetheless, the influence of Mesopotamia still echoes through modern-day writing, law, mathematics, architecture, and, of course, civilization itself.