

## Civilization Begins in Mesopotamia

### I. Impact of Geography

The world's first civilization began in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, called "Mesopotamia" (present – day Iraq). This area is part of a larger region historians call the "Fertile Crescent", a band of land that arches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. It was able to sustain an early civilization because this land had rich soil and abundant crops. The waters of these rivers enriched the land and encouraged people to settle and farm. The rivers often overflowed their banks which caused flooding and destroyed land, villages, and people. Farming could only be done when people controlled the flow of the rivers.

Although the area was hot and dry, people learned how to irrigate the land by diverting water from the Tigris and Euphrates. Irrigation made it possible to grow crops on a regular basis, which allowed farming settlements to flourish and food supplies to increase. "Dikes" were used to control floods and "canals" were used to irrigate farms. The lack of natural barriers in the "Fertile Crescent" allowed frequent migrations and invasions while the diversity of the people made it difficult to unite them into a single nation. In this area great civilizations arose, giving the Fertile Crescent the name "the cradle of civilization".



### II. The People of Mesopotamia

The earliest known people of ancient Mesopotamia were the "Sumerians". The Sumerians had established a number of independent cities in southern Mesopotamia. As the cities expanded, they came to have political and economic control over the surrounding countryside. They became known as "city-states". The city-states were the basic units of Sumerian civilization. Various city-states fought each other for land and water.

The Sumerians believed that thousands of gods and goddesses existed. The belief in many gods and goddesses is called "polytheism". The Sumerians believed that gods and goddesses ruled the cities. This made the city-state a "theocracy", which is a government by divine authority. Eventually, ruling power passed into the hands of worldly figures known as "kings". The Sumerians believed that kings derived their power from the gods and were the agents of the gods. The kings led armies, supervised the building of public works, and organized workers for the irrigation projects upon which farming depended upon.

### Questions of Answer

1. Why was Mesopotamia able to sustain an early civilization?
2. Why was irrigation necessary?
3. What is a "theocracy"?
4. Why did kings have so much power?