

The Geography of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is an ancient region that was located in parts of modern Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey. It was one of the world's earliest civilizations, existing from roughly 3100 BC to 539 BC.

All of the early civilizations began around rivers. Mesopotamia is no exception; it means "the land between the rivers". Two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris created a crescent-shaped area that was home to ancient Mesopotamia. This is called the "Fertile Crescent".

Rivers were the lifeblood of the people. They provide fresh drinking water, water for crops and a means to transport and trade goods. The Tigris and Euphrates would overflow each year. This would cause flooding and hardship for the inhabitants of the area. As the water receded, however, it left behind fertile soil that was good for farming.

This enabled the people of Mesopotamia to grow a surplus of food. A surplus means that you have more than you need. Crops such as barley and other cereal grains was produced and enabled the population to grow. When a farmer can grow more food than his family needs, he can sell it to others.

This means that not everyone needs to farm. Some people can become craftsmen and artisans. Others can form and run the government. This is a critical factor of civilization. Civilization is created when there is a government, culture, jobs, cities and art.

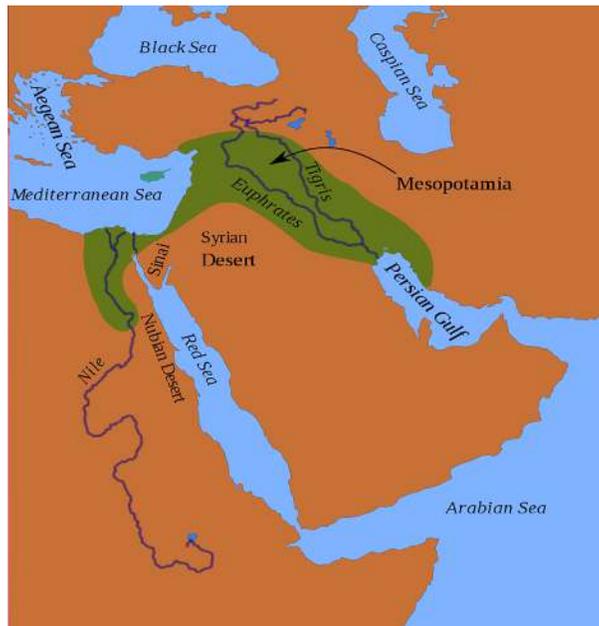
The lack of natural barriers in the Fertile Crescent caused frequent migrations of people, creating a diverse population. One results of the movement of people was cultural diffusion, the spreading of customs and ideas. This helped great civilizations to arise.

The Climate of Mesopotamia

Just to the south of Mesopotamia are the Syrian and Arabian Deserts. A little farther southwest is the Sahara Desert. Can you guess what kind of climate they had?

The area of the Fertile Crescent has a semiarid climate. Arid means very dry. Semiarid means somewhat dry. Unlike some deserts, the area gets some rain, but it is generally less than 10 inches a year.

Compare that to New York State which receives approximately 50 inches a year and California gets close to 20 inches and you can see 10 inches is very little rainfall. The area had long, hot summers and short, cool winters. The temperatures in the summertime often reached 100-110 degrees.



Waterways of Mesopotamia

Look at the map of Mesopotamia above. The Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Caspian Sea, Aegean Sea - so many seas surrounded ancient Mesopotamia!

Mesopotamia has been called the "cradle of civilization" because it was the location of the birth of civilization with the first advanced cities and a large, diverse population.

All this freshwater was a major advantage to this early river civilization

Irrigation: Adapting to the Environment

So how is it that Mesopotamians were able to produce a surplus of crops to feed a whole civilization? One word: irrigation. They created systems of moving water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to farmlands in order to water the crops. Also, the soil around the rivers was fertile.

The soil in the region is mostly clay-like and nutrient-rich which allowed for the production of crops such as wheat and barley.

The Sumerians (an early city-state of Mesopotamia) built canals by digging tunnels in the earth from the river to various farms. They also built aqueducts, bridge-like structures that carry water. Another way they controlled water was by building dikes, walls to hold back water from overflowing.

Irrigation was so important to the survival of Mesopotamians that there were laws in place requiring everyone to help build new canals and help during floods!