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The characteristics of Mesopotamian civilization included the city-state, irrigation, polytheistic religion, three distinct social classes and the development of the solar calendar. Mesopotamian civilization is thought to have been the first human civilization center of the world.The Sumerians found the Mesopotamian area before any other group of people and settled there. They built their cities along the Lower Mesopotamia rivers and created technological advances including wheels and plows as well as detailed irrigation systems, using canals and levees, that allowed crops to flourish. In fact, the name “Mesopotamia” means the “land between the rivers.” One of the most important parts of the Mesopotamian civilization was its religion. The Sumerians believed in multiples gods and goddesses, and they built seven cities with a temple at each one dedicated to a different divine figure. Each city also had its own army for protection against other civilizations. Everything that the Sumerians did, they did in consultation with the gods and the goddesses. These deities were instrumental parts of the Sumerians lives. Another advancement in the Mesopotamian civilization was the invention of the solar calendar. The solar calendar had 12 months that were based around the moon though there were no seasons. It was not until 1582 that the Gregorian calendar was introduced. MORE FROM REFERENCE.COM Mesopotamian civilizations were structured on the banks of two popular rivers of that era namely, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, these rivers are now known as Iraq and Kuwait. The early Mesopotamian civilizations started to form during the time of the Neolithic Revolution which happened in the 12000 BCE. Popular and major Mesopotamian civilizations consist of – the Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian, and Babylonian civilizations. It was evident during that time that the use of technology, literature, legal, philosophy, codes, and architecture was used extensively in these societies. In this section, we are going to know the details about this Mesopotamian civilization where we will talk about Mesopotamian life. What is Mesopotamian Civilization?Mesopotamian, which is now modern-day Iraq and Kuwait are particularly referred to as the origin of the civilization, this is evident that at that time, the most influential city-states and empires first emerged during that period.Mesopotamia Location The modern name for ‘Mesopotamian’ comes from the Greek word meaning ‘middle’ for Mesos and ‘river’ for potamos, and thus it means this is literally a “country which is between two rivers.” These two rivers surrounding the civilization are the Tigris and Euphrates. Thus, the Mesopotamian location is between two rivers – Tigris and Euphrates. Mesopotamia was one of the first places to develop the practice of agriculture, while it also served as the crossroads for the Egyptian and the Indus Valley civilizations during that time period. This made civilization a hotspot of languages and cultures, all this led to the growth of writing, technology, language, trade, religion, and practice of law.Mesopotamia civilization is also engaged with ancient cultures like the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. We are going to talk about these cultures briefly in the later section. Origin of Mesopotamian Civilization Mesopotamian civilization is regarded as the most ancient civilization which recorded human history to date. The Mesopotamian cities started to form and develop during the time of 5000 BCE, this happened initially in the southern parts. This name Mesopotamia is derived from the Greek word which is known as Mesos, which means the middle, and potamos, which means the river, land between two rivers.Mesopotamian City To sum it up altogether, the Mesopotamian city is located between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, this is the north or the northwest of the bottleneck at Baghdad, which in modern times is known as Iraq. This is basically an Al-Jazīrah (meaning “The Island”) of the Arabs. South of this city lies another popular town named Babylonia, which is named after the city of Babylon.The extent of Mesopotamian civilization is towards the southwest of Asia in the Tigris and the Euphrates River system. The place has its benefit from the climatic and the geographic factor, these were the host reasons for beginning human civilization in this place. The history of this city is marked by many of the important inventions which caused the world to change. Here it included the concept of time, the wheel, math, maps, sailboats, and writing. Mesopotamia civilization can also be defined by a change in the succession of all these ruling bodies from different areas and from different cities which seized control over a period of almost thousands of years.In Mesopotamian society, it is believed that many civilizations have developed in this place. This society is a historic region of West Asia that is situated in the Tigris and the Euphrates River system. The fact is that the word Mesopotamia means the place "between two rivers' ' in Greek. This civilization is the home to many ancient civilizations, namely Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, where the people are credited with a good hold in mathematics and astronomy. Mesopotamia Time PeriodWe believe that the Sumerian civilization was the first one to take the form in southern Mesopotamia which is around 4000 BCE or which is 6000 years ago, this makes this civilization the first urban civilization in this region. The Mesopotamians were well-acknowledged for developing the first written scripts which took place around 3000 BCE in the wedge-shaped marks which are pressed into the clay tablets.The whole early dynastic period is dated in the time of 2900–2350 BC, this was done according to the Middle Chronology, or in the 2800–2230 BC according to the Short Chronological period. One study revealed that the ancient Mesopotamian civilization has wiped out the dust storms which occurred nearly around 4,000 years ago. SumeriansSumerians were one of the ancient civilizations that happened in the Mesopotamian age. This Sumerian civilization first initiated its form in southern Mesopotamia which is around 4000 BCE — or 6000 years ago. This era made the first urban civilization in this region. Sumerians had built many ships which allowed the people to travel into the Persian Gulf and which helped them to trade with the other early civilizations, like the Harappans in the northern part of India. The Sumerians have traded in the fields of textiles, leather goods, and jewellery sectors as well in the Harappan society which traded the semi-precious stones, copper, pearls, and ivories.The worship ritual in the Sumerians followed the worship of multiple gods—many of them were anthropomorphic — their gods took the human-like form. Temples of these gods were constructed at the top of the massive ziggurats which were the structured centres in most of the dwelling cities. It is said that these structures would have taken thousands of people and years to construct.Akkadian EmpireAround 3000 BCE, the Sumerians had a cultural drift with another group located in northern Mesopotamia, they are known as the Akkadians, which is named after the city-state called Akkad. The Akkadian language is very much relatable to the modern Hebrew and Arabic languages. Their languages are called the Semitic languages. Assyrian EmpireThe Assyrian Empire is named for its capital city, which is the ancient city of Ašur, this is also known as the Ashur, the place is located in northern Mesopotamia. Ashur was actually the original name for the number of Akkadian-speaking city-states which were ruled by Sargon and by his descendants during the reign of the Akkadian Empire. After several hundred years of the collapse of the great Akkadian Empire, Assyria then became a major empire in this area.BabylonBabylon was located in the central part of Mesopotamia, this was a minor city-state and for a century after the civilization was founded in 1894 BCE, Babylon was found. Life changed in Babylon with the reign of Hammurabi, which continued from 1792 to 1750 BCE. Hammurabi was an excellent ruler, who established a centralized bureaucracy system along with the taxation system. Hammurabi had freed the place Babylon from the foreign rule which when then conquered the whole of southern Mesopotamia, brought stability to the whole religion.Did You Know? The Sumerian civilization was the first among other urban civilizations in ancient Mesopotamia. This civilization began in the foothills of the Taurus and in the Zagros mountains, but in 9000 BC, the people began to shift towards the southern region of Mesopotamia. Copper was the first metal that was found and extracted from its ore, and this extraction was done around 5000 BC. In around the 25th century BC, the Sumerian king of Lagash, named Eannatum, began the military campaign, which aimed at annexing all the Sumerian cities and thereby bringing them under his own rule. ConclusionStudying about this civilization was an absolute stock of knowledge, from this study we get to know that many inventions and discoveries were made in this era, thus we feel grateful about the Mesopotamian age. This civilization is considered as one of the earliest civilizations in the world and also said to have relations with Indus Valley Civilization. Understand the how Mesopotamian civilization evolved from the Sumerian Civilization, resulting in the final conquest of the area by Muslim Arabs. Be able to identify the characteristics and developments of the Sumerian, Uruk, Akkadian, Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian civilizations and empires. Sumer was an ancient civilization in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages. Although the historical records in the region do not go back much further than ca. 2900 BCE, modern historians believe that Sumer was first settled between ca. 4500 and 4000 BCE by people who may or may not have spoken the Sumerian language. These people, now called the “Ubaidians,” were the first to drain the marshes for agriculture; develop trade; and establish industries including weaving, leatherwork, metalwork, masonry, and pottery. The Sumerian city of Eridu, which at that time bordered the Persian Gulf, is believed to be the world’s first city. Here, three separate cultures fused — the peasant Ubaidian farmers, the nomadic Semitic-speaking pastoralists (farmers who raise livestock), and fisher folk. The surplus of storable food created by this economy allowed the region’s population to settle in one place, instead of migrating as hunter-gatherers. It also allowed for a much greater population density, which required an extensive labor force and a division of labor with many specialized arts and crafts. (10) An early form of wedge-shaped writing called cuneiform developed in the early Sumerian period. During this time, cuneiform and pictograms suggest the abundance of pottery and other artistic traditions. In addition to the production of vessels, clay was also used to make tablets for inscribing written documents. Metal also served various purposes during the early Sumerian period. Smiths used a form of casting to create the blades for daggers. On the other hand, softer metals like copper and gold could be hammered into the forms of plates, necklaces, and collars. (10) By the late fourth millennium BCE, Sumer was divided into about a dozen independent city-states delineated by canals and other boundary makers. At each city center stood a temple dedicated to the particular patron god or goddess of the city. Priestly governors ruled over these temples and were intimately tied to the city’s religious rites.(10) Figure 2-2: Ziggurats Mesopothemia by unknown from Wikispaces.com is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 One of the most remarkable achievements of Mesopotamian architecture was the development of the ziggurat, a massive structure taking the form of a terraced step pyramid of successively receding stories or levels, with a shrine or temple at the summit. Like pyramids, ziggurats were built by stacking and piling. Ziggurats were not places of worship for the general public. Rather, only priests or other authorized religious officials were allowed inside to tend to cult statues and make offerings. The first surviving ziggurats date to the Sumerian culture in the fourth millennium BCE, but they continued to be a popular architectural form in the late third and early second millennium BCE as well. (11) Figure 2-3: Great Ziggurat of Ur by Hardnfast is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Figure 2-4: Part of Tablet V, the Epic of Gilgamesh by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic King of Uruk best known from The Epic of Gilgamesh (written c. 2150-1400 BCE) the great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work which pre-dates Homer’s writing by 1500 years and, therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic western literature. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, the great king is thought to be too proud and arrogant by the gods and so they decide to teach him a lesson by sending the wild man, Enkidu, to humble him. Enkidu and Gilgamesh, after a fierce battle in which neither are bested, become friends and embark on adventures together. When Enkidu is struck with death, Gilgamesh falls into a deep grief and, recognizing his own mortality through the death of his friend, questions the meaning of life and the value of human accomplishment in the face of ultimate extinction. Casting away all of his old vanity and pride, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest to find the meaning of life and, finally, some way of defeating death. In doing so, he becomes the first epic hero in world literature. The grief of Gilgamesh, and the questions his friend’s death evoke, resonate with every human being who has wrestled with the meaning of life in the face of death. Although Gilgamesh ultimately fails to win immortality in the story, his deeds live on through the written word and, so, does he. The Sumerian city of Eridu, which at that time bordered the Persian Gulf, is believed to be the world’s first city. Key developments of this time was the strategy to drain marshes for agriculture, initiation of trade, establishment of industries, development of cuneiform, and development of the ziggurat. The Epic of Gilgamesh is a tale that resonates with every human being who has wrestled with the meaning of life in the face of death. Although Gilgamesh ultimately fails to win immortality in the story, his deeds live on through the written word and, so, does he. By the time of the Uruk period (ca. 4100–2900 BCE), the volume of trade goods transported along the canals and rivers of southern Mesopotamia facilitated the rise of many large, stratified, temple-centered cities where centralized administrations employed specialized workers. Artifacts of the Uruk civilization have been found over a wide area—from the Taurus Mountains in Turkey, to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and as far east as Central Iran. The Uruk civilization, exported by Sumerian traders and colonists, had an effect on all surrounding peoples, who gradually developed their own comparable, competing economies and cultures. Sumerian cities during the Uruk period were probably theocratic and likely headed by priest-kings (ensis), assisted by a council of elders, including both men and women. The later Sumerian pantheon (gods and goddesses) was likely modeled upon this political structure. There is little evidence of institutionalized violence or professional soldiers during the Uruk period. Towns generally lacked fortified walls, suggesting little, if any, need for defense. During this period, Uruk became the most urbanized city in the world, surpassing for the first time 50,000 inhabitants. (10) The Akkadian Empire was the first political entity to make extensive and efficient use of bureaucracy and administration on a large scale and set the standard for future rulers and kingdoms. His story was long known throughout Mesopotamia where, in time, he came to be considered the greatest man who had ever lived, celebrated in glorious tales down through the Persian Empire, along with his grand-son Naram-Sin. The historian Paul Kriwaczek sums up the impact Sargon had on later generations in Mesopotamia, writing, “for at least 1,500 years after his death, Sargon the Great, founder of the Akkadian Empire, was regarded as a semi-sacred figure, the patron saint of all subsequent empires in the Mesopotamian realm” (111). Even so, where he came from and even his actual name are unknown. `Sargon’—whose name means “True King” or Legitimate King”— was not the name given him at birth but the throne name he chose for himself. It is a Semitic, not Sumerian, name and so it is generally accepted that he was a Semite. Nothing certain is known of Sargon’s birth or younger years. In fact, although his name was among the most famous in antiquity, he was unknown to the modern world until 1870 CE when the archaeologist Sir Henry Rawlinson published the Legend of Sargon which he had found in the library of Ashurbanipal while excavating Nineveh in 1867 CE. The Legend of Sargon reads: My mother was a changeling, my father I knew not, The brother of my father loved the hills, My home was in the highlands, where the herbs grow. My mother conceived me in secret, she gave birth to me in concealment. She set me in a basket of rushes, She sealed the lid with tar. She cast me into the river, but it did not rise over me, The water carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. He lifted me out as he dipped his jar into the river, He took me as his son, he raised me, He made me his gardener (Bauer, 95). After conquering Sumer, he either built a new city or renovated an older one, Akkad (also known as Agade) on the banks of the Euphrates River. This was a complete break with precedent in that, previously, the king of an existing city conquered another for the glory of the home city and the resources which would now be available. Sargon, on the other hand, conquered for no city, only for himself and, once he had control of the area, then built his own city to enjoy the benefits of conquest. Forming an empire is one thing; but keeping it operating is quite another. Still, in administration, Sargon proved himself as capable as he was in military conquest. The Akkadian Empire created the first postal system where clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform Akkadian script were wrapped in outer clay envelopes marked with the name and address of the recipient and the seal of the sender. These letters could not be opened except by the person they were intended for because there was no way to open the clay envelope save by breaking it, thus ensuring privacy in correspondence. Sargon also standardized weights and measures for use in trade and daily commerce, initiated a system of taxation which was fair to all social classes, and engaged in numerous building projects such as the restoration of Babylon (which, according to some sources, he founded – though this is not generally accepted as true). He also created, trained, and equipped a full-time army — at least in the city of Akkad — where, as an inscription reads, 5400 soldiers “ate bread daily” with the king. After Sargon’s death, the empire passed to his son Rimush, who was forced to endure what his father had and put down the rebellions which contested his legitimacy. Rimush reigned for nine years and, when he died, the kingship passed to Sargon’s other son, Manishtusu who ruled for the next fifteen years. Though both sons ruled well, the height of the Akkadian Empire was realized under Sargon’s grandson, Naram-Sin. During his reign, the empire grew and flourished beyond the boundaries even Sargon had attained. After his death, his son Shar-Kali-Sharri became ruler and, at this time, the empire began to unravel as city-states broke away to form their own independent kingdoms. (13)(14) Babylon was founded at some point prior to the reign of Sargon of Akkad (also known as Sargon the Great) who ruled from 2334-2279 BCE and claimed to have built temples at Babylon (other ancient sources seem to indicate that Sargon himself founded the city). At that time, Babylon seems to have been a minor city or perhaps a large port town on the Euphrates River at the point where it runs closest to the river Tigris. The known history of Babylon, then, begins with its most famous king: Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE). This obscure Amorite prince ascended to the throne upon the abdication of his father, King Sin-Muballit, and fairly quickly transformed the city into one of the most powerful and influential in all of Mesopotamia. So successful was he in both diplomacy and war that, by 1755 BCE, he had united all of Mesopotamia under the rule of Babylon that, at this time, was the largest city in the world, and named his realm Babylonia. (15) Figure 2-5: Code of Hammurabi by an unknown artist from Louvre Museum is licensed under CC BY 2.5 The Code of Hammurabi is one of the oldest deciphered writings of length in the world, and features a code of law from ancient Babylon in Mesopotamia. Written in about 1754 BCE by the sixth king of Babylon, Hammurabi, the Code was written on stone stele and clay tablets. It consisted of 282 laws, with punishments that varied based on social status (slaves, free men, and property owners). It is most famous for the “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (lex talionis) form of punishment. Other forms of codes of law had been in existence in the region around this time, including the Code of Ur-Nammu, king of Ur (c. 2050 BCE), the Laws of Eshnunna (c. 1930 BCE) and the codex of Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (c. 1870 BCE). The laws were arranged in groups, so that citizens could easily read what was required of them. Some have seen the Code as an early form of constitutional government, and as an early form of the presumption of innocence, and the ability to present evidence in one’s case. Intent was often recognized and affected punishment, with neglect severely punished. Some of the provisions may have been codification of Hammurabi’s decisions, for the purpose of self-glorification. Nevertheless, the Code was studied, copied, and used as a model for legal reasoning for at least 1500 years after. The prologue of the Code features Hammurabi stating that he wants “to make justice visible in the land, to destroy the wicked person and the evil-doer, that the strong might not injure the weak.” Major laws covered in the Code include slander, trade, slavery, the duties of workers, theft, liability, and divorce. Nearly half of the code focused on contracts, such as wages to be paid, terms of transactions, and liability in case of property damage. A third of the code focused on household and family issues, including inheritance, divorce, paternity and sexual behavior. One section establishes that a judge who incorrectly decides an issue may be removed from his position permanently. A few sections address military service. One of the most well-known sections of the Code was law #196: “If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If one break a man’s bone, they shall break his bone. If one destroy the eye of a freeman or break the bone of a freeman he shall pay one gold mina. If one destroy the eye of a man’s slave or break a bone of a man’s slave he shall pay one-half his price.” (16) During the Uruk period cities were probably theocratic and likely headed by priest-kings (ensis), assisted by a council of elders, including both men and women. The Akkadian Empire was the first political entity to make extensive and efficient use of bureaucracy and administration on a large scale and set the standard for future rulers and kingdoms. Sargon the Great is regarded as founder of the Akkadian Empire. Babylonian Civilization at the time formed the largest city in the world know as Babylon. Accreditation of Babylon’s success is to its most famous king, Hammurabi. Under Hammurabi’s reign, there were three social classes. The amelu was originally an elite person with full civil rights, whose birth, marriage and death were recorded. Although he had certain privileges, he also was liable for harsher punishment and higher fines. The king and his court, high officials, professionals and craftsmen belonged to this group. The mushkenu was a free man who may have been landless. He was required to accept monetary compensation, paid smaller fines and lived in a separate section of the city. The ardu was a slave whose master paid for his upkeep, but also took his compensation. Ardu could own property and other slaves, and could purchase his own freedom. (16) Women entered into marriage through a contract arranged by her family. She came with a dowry, and the gifts given by the groom to the bride also came with her. Divorce was up to the husband, but after divorce he then had to restore the dowry and provide her with an income, and any children came under the woman’s custody. However, if the woman was considered a “bad wife” she might be sent away, or made a slave in the husband’s house. If a wife brought action against her husband for cruelty and neglect, she could have a legal separation if the case was proved. Otherwise, she might be drowned as punishment. Adultery was punished with drowning of both parties, unless a husband was willing to pardon his wife. (16) The Late Bronze Age (1700-1100 BCE) saw the Kassite Empire (from the modern-day area of Iran) replace Babylon as the regional power in Mesopotamia. By 1200, however, all of Mesopotamia entered a “dark age” period following a systemic collapse in the region, most likely precipitated by a band of naval raiders, more commonly called the “Sea Peoples.” The collapse of Mesopotamian Civilization allowed for smaller states—outside of the political periphery of the Tigris and Euphrates region—to become regional powers in their own right. The Kingdom of Israel in the modern region of Palestine was one of those nations to benefit from the ebbing of Mesopotamian influence during this age. Figure 2-6: Merneptah Stele known as the Israel stela by Webscribe is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 To be sure, the Egyptian Merneptah Stele makes clear that a collection of people identified as Israel was present in Palestine by 1200 BCE. By the tenth century, these people were able to organize a formal government around the leadership of a king, first Saul, then David (c.1040-960 BCE). David chose the Canaanite city of Jerusalem as his capital and the biblical writer records that he moved the Ark of the Covenant there. As the Ark was thought to contain the living presence of God, bringing it to Jerusalem would have made the city both a political and religious center of considerable importance. David intended to build a great temple to house the Ark but that task fell to his son, Solomon (circa 960-920 BCE) whose rule corresponds to the height of Israelite grandeur. Solomon consolidated treaties with neighboring kingdoms such as Tyre to the north, Egypt, Sheba and sponsored building projects which made Jerusalem a great and opulent city (including, of course, the First Temple). The reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon (but especially the latter two) have been traditionally characterized as a `golden age’ of unity and prosperity. Figure 2-7: Kingdoms of Israel and Judah map by Oldtidens Israel & Judea is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 Culturally speaking, the political elite of the Kingdom of Israel promoted belief in a singular god named Yahweh. As such, the Israelites were unique from their Mesopotamian neighbors in that they were monotheistic rather than polytheistic, at least in principle. David and Solomon, especially, seem to have used this belief to their benefit in unifying the people but, upon Solomon’s death (around 920 BCE) the kingdom split in half. Israel occupied the northern region with a capital at Samaria and the Kingdom of Judah in the south with Jerusalem as capital. The relationship between the two kingdoms would remain tenuous, with the two never achieving their level of influence during reigns of David and Solomon. Much of the reason for this was due to the resurgence of the Mesopotamian kingdom of Assur in the mid-tenth century, and the subsequent development of the Assyrian Empire. (13)(17) The Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-610 BCE or 912-612 BCE) was, according to many historians, the first true empire in the world. The Assyrians had expanded their territory from the city of Ashur over the centuries, and their fortunes rose and fell with successive rulers and circumstances in the Near East. Beginning with the reign of Adad Nirari II (912-891 BCE), the empire made great territorial expansions that resulted in its eventual control of a region which spanned the whole of Mesopotamia, part of Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt. They fielded the most effective fighting force in the world at that time, the first to be armed with iron weapons, whose tactics in battle made them invincible. Their political and military policies have also given them the long-standing reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness. (18) The Assyrian state proved masterful in promoting their ruthlessness and vigor through visual representation. Figure 2-8: Ashurbanipal’s Lion Hunt by Mark.murphy is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 Lion hunter was one role of the Assyrian king. We know this primarily from lion hunt steles located in Nineveh dating back to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II. These steles illustrate the king capturing and killing lions. Without a doubt, these steles functioned as propaganda, promoting the virility and might of the king through his ability to conquer the fiercest of beasts. Figure 2-9: Jehu King of Israel giving tribute to King Shalmaneser III of Assyria cropped by Steven G. Johnson is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 The Assyrians made public their dominance over lesser nations by illustrating the kings of conquered nations bowing before the Assyrian king. In the relief above from the Black Obelisk Inscription, the stele portrays the Israelite king Jehu of Israel paying tribute to the Assyrian king and bowing in the dust before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The cuneiform text on the obelisk suggests that “Jehu the son of Omri” brought gifts of gold, silver, lead, and spear shafts as a sign of loyalty to the Assyrian state. (19) Figure 2-10: Lachish Inscription by Mike Peel is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 On conquering lands in rebellion, the Assyrians would regularly relocate the conquered peoples from their home territory to another portion of the empire. This became known as exile or mass deportation. The stele above represents the Assyrian deportation of the population of Lachish, following their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 701 BCE. Figure 2-11: Nineveh map city walls & gates by Fredarch is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 Nineveh was an ancient Assyrian city on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, and the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Its ruins are across the river from the modern-day major city of Mosul in Iraq. Today, Nineveh’s location is marked by two large mounds, Kouyunjik and NabÃ« YÅ«nus “Prophet Jonah,” and the remains of the city walls. These were fitted with fifteen monumental gateways which served as checkpoints on entering and exiting the ancient city, and were probably also used as barracks and armories. With the inner and outer doors shut, the gateways were virtual fortresses. Five of the gateways have been explored to some extent by archaeologists. Nineveh was an important junction for commercial routes crossing the Tigris. Occupying a central position on the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, Nineveh united the East and the West, and received wealth from many sources. Thus, it became one of the oldest and greatest of all the region’s ancient cities, and the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The area was settled as early as 6000 BCE, and by 3000 BCE had become an important religious center for worship of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar. It was not until the Neo-Assyrian Empire that Nineveh experienced a considerable architectural expansion. King Sennacherib is credited with making Nineveh a truly magnificent city during his rule (c. 700 BCE). He laid out new streets and squares and built within it the famous “palace without a rival”, the plan of which has been mostly recovered. It comprised at least 80 rooms, many of which were lined with sculpture. A large number of cuneiform tablets were found in the palace. The solid foundation was made out of limestone blocks and mud bricks. Some of the principal doorways were flanked by colossal stone-door figures that included many winged lions or bulls with the heads of men. The stone carvings in the walls include many battle and hunting scenes, as well as depicting Sennacherib’s men parading the spoils of war before him. Nineveh’s greatness was short-lived. In around 627 BCE, after the death of its last great king Ashurbanipal, the Neo-Assyrian empire began to unravel due to a series of bitter civil wars, and Assyria was attacked by the Babylonians and Medes. From about 616 BCE, in a coalition with the Scythians and Cimmerians, they besieged Nineveh, sacking the town in 612, and later razing it to the ground. The Assyrian empire as such came to an end by 605 BC, with the Medes and Babylonians dividing its colonies between them. Following its defeat in 612, the site remained largely unoccupied for centuries with only a scattering of Assyrians living amid the ruins until the Sassanian period, although Assyrians continue to live in the surrounding area to this day. (19) The Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-610 BCE or 912-612 BCE) was, according to many historians, the first true empire in the world. On conquering lands in rebellion, the Assyrians would regularly relocate the conquered peoples from their home territory to another portion of the empire. This became known as exile or mass deportation. It was also during this period that Nebuchadnezzar supposedly built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, although there is no definitive archeological evidence to establish their precise location. Ancient Greek and Roman writers describe the gardens in vivid detail. However, the lack of physical ruins has led many experts to speculate whether the Hanging Gardens existed at all. If this is the case, writers might have been describing ideal mythologized Eastern gardens or a famous garden built by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) at Nineveh roughly a century earlier. If the Hanging Gardens did exist, they were likely destroyed around the first century CE. Figure 2-12: Nebuchadnezzar II inscription by Hanay is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 The Neo-Babylonian Empire, also known as the Chaldean Empire, was a civilization in Mesopotamia that began in 626 BC and ended in 539 BC. During the preceding three centuries, Babylonia had been ruled by the Akkadians and Assyrians, but threw off the yoke of external domination after the death of Assurbanipal, the last strong Assyrian ruler. The Neo-Babylonian period was a renaissance that witnessed a great flourishing of art, architecture, and science. The Neo-Babylonian rulers were motivated by the antiquity of their heritage and followed a traditionalist cultural policy, based on the ancient Sumero-Akkadian culture. Ancient artworks from the Old-Babylonian period were painstakingly restored and preserved, and treated with a respect verging on religious reverence. Neo-Babylonian art and architecture reached its zenith under King Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled from 604–562 BC and was a great patron of urban development, bent on rebuilding all of Babylonia’s cities to reflect their former glory. It was Nebuchadnezzar II’s vision and sponsorship that turned Babylon into the immense and beautiful city of legend. The city spread over three square miles, surrounded by moats and ringed by a double circuit of walls. The river Euphrates, which flowed through the city, was spanned by a beautiful stone bridge. At the heart of the city lay the ziggurat Etemenanki, literally “temple of the foundation of heaven and earth.” Originally seven stories high, it is believed to have provided the inspiration for the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. (20) Figure 2-13: Hanging Gardens of Babylon by Maarten van Heemskerck is licensed under Public Domain Figure 2-14: Model of the Ishtar Gate by Gryffindor is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 Figure 2-15: Lion of Babylon by Jan van der Crabben is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Most of the evidence for Neo-Babylonian art and architecture is literary. The material evidence itself is mostly fragmentary. Some of the most important fragments that survive are from the Ishtar Gate, the eighth gate to the inner city of Babylon. It was constructed in 575 BC by order of Nebuchadnezzar II, using glazed brick with alternating rows of bas-relief dragons and aurochs. Dedicated to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, it was a double gate, and its roofs and doors were made of cedar, according to the dedication plaque. Babylon’s Processional Way, which was lined with brilliantly colorful glazed brick walls decorated with lions, ran through the middle of the gate. Statues of the Babylonian gods were paraded through the gate and down the Processional Way during New Year’s celebrations. (20) By the 7 th century BCE, a group of ancient Iranian people had established the Median Empire, a vassal state under the Assyrian Empire that later tried to gain its independence in the 8th century BCE. After Assyria fell in 605 BCE, Cyaxares, king of the Medes, extended his rule west across Iran. (21) Figure 2-16: Cyrus II of Persia by Siamax is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 Around 550 BCE, Cyrus II of Persia, who became known as Cyrus the Great, rose in rebellion against the Median Empire, eventually conquering the Medes to create the first Persian Empire, also known as the Achaemenid Empire. Cyrus utilized his tactical genius, as well as his understanding of the socio-political conditions governing his territories, to eventually assimilate the neighboring Lydian and Neo-Babylonian empires into the new Persian Empire. (21) Cyrus, whose rule lasted between 29 and 31 years, until his death in battle in 530 BCE, controlled the vast Achaemenid Empire through the use of regional monarchs, called satrap , who each oversaw a territory called asatrapy . The basic rule of governance was based upon the loyalty and obedience of the satrapy to the central power, the king, and compliance with tax laws. Cyrus also connected the various regions of the empire through an innovative postal system that made use of an extensive roadway and relay stations. Cyrus the Great was recognized for achievements in human rights and politics, having influenced both Eastern and Western Civilization. The ancient Babylonians called him “The Liberator,” while the modern nation of Iran calls Cyrus its “father.” (22) The book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible remembers him as a savior or “messiah’. This is for good reason. Cyrus granted the descendants of the exiled kingdom of Judah to return home to Israel in 540 BCE following Babylonian captivity (c.f. Isa 45:1). The Cyrus Cylinder serves as a testament of the Persian king’s magnanimous treatment of captured persons. Figure 2-17: Cyrus Cylinder Original image by kourosh e kabir. Uploaded by Antoine Simonin is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 The Cyrus Cylinder is an ancient clay artifact, now broken into several fragments, that has been called the oldest-known charter of universal human rights and a symbol of his humanitarian rule. The cylinder dates from the 6 thcentury BCE, and was discovered in the ruins of Babylon in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, in 1879. In addition to describing the genealogy of Cyrus, the declaration in Akkadian cuneiform script on the cylinder is considered by many Biblical scholars to be evidence of Cyrus’s policy of repatriation of the Jewish people following their captivity in Babylon. The historical nature of the cylinder has been debated, with some scholars arguing that Cyrus did not make a specific decree, but rather that the cylinder articulated his general policy allowing exiles to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. (22) Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great) conquered the Medes to create the first Persian, or Achaemenid Empire. Cyrus was a tactical genus and used his socio-political expertise to assimilate the neighboring Lydian and Neo-Babylonian empires into the new Persian Empire. When Darius I (550-486 BCE), also known as Darius the Great , ascended the throne of the Achaemenid Empire in 522 BCE, he established Aramaic as the official language and devised a codification of laws for Egypt. Darius also sponsored work on construction projects throughout the empire, focusing on improvement of the cities of Susa,Pasargadae , Persepolis, Babylon, and various municipalities in Egypt. When Darius moved his capital from Pasargadae to Persepolis, he revolutionized the economy by placing it on a silver and gold coinage and introducing a regulated and sustainable tax system. This structure precisely tailored the taxes of each satrapy based on its projected productivity and economic potential. For example, Babylon was assessed for the highest amount of silver taxes, while Egypt owed grain in addition to silver taxes. (22) Figure 2-18: Well preserved Achamenid reliefs from Persepolis by travelling runes is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 Sometime after his coronation, Darius ordered an inscription to be carved on a limestone cliff of Mount Behistun in modern Iran. The Behistun Inscription, the text of which Darius wrote, came to have great linguistic significance as a crucial clue in deciphering cuneiform script. The inscription begins by tracing the ancestry of Darius, followed by a description of a sequence of events following the deaths of the previous two Achaemenid emperors, Cyrus the Great and Cyrus’s son, Cambyses II, in which Darius fought 19 battles in one year to put down numerous rebellions throughout the Persian lands. The inscription, which is approximately 15 meters high and 25 meters wide, includes three versions of the text in three different cuneiform languages: Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian, which was a version of Akkadian. Researchers were able to compare the scripts and use it to help decipher ancient languages, in this way making the Behistun Inscription as valuable to cuneiform as the Rosetta Stone is to Egyptian hieroglyphs. (22) Figure 2-19:Bisotun Iran Relief Achamenid Period by Hara1603 is licensed underPublic Domain Between c. 500–400 BCE, Darius the Great and his son, Xerxes I, ruled the Persian Plateau and all of the territories formerly held by the Assyrian Empire, including Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Cyprus. It eventually came to control Egypt, as well. This expansion continued even further afield with Anatolia and the Armenian Plateau, much of the Southern Caucasus, Macedonia, parts of Greece and Thrace, Central Asia as far as the Aral Sea, the Oxus and Jaxartes areas, the Hindu Kush and the western Indus basin, and parts of northern Arabia and northern Libya. This unprecedented area of control under a single ruler stretched from the Indus Valley in the east to Thrace and Macedon on the northeastern border of Greece. At its height, the Achaemenid Empire ruled over 44% of the world’s population, the highest such figure for any empire in history. (21) Conclusion After Cyrus II took Babylon, the bulk of Mesopotamia became part of the Persian Empire, and this period saw a rapid cultural decline, most notably in the loss of the knowledge of cuneiform script. The conquest of the Persians by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE brought Hellenization of the culture and religion, and even though Alexander tried to again make Babylon a city of consequence, its days of glory were a thing of the past. After his death, Alexander’s general Seleucus took control of the region and founded the Seleucid Dynasty which ruled until 126 BCE when the land was conquered by the Parthians who were, in turn, dominated by the Sassanians (a people of Persian descent). By the time of the conquest by the Roman Empire (116 CE), Mesopotamia was a largely Hellenized region, lacking in any unity, which had forgotten the old gods and the old ways. The Romans improved the infrastructure of their colonies significantly through their introduction of better roads and plumbing and brought Roman Law to the land. The entire culture of the region once known as Mesopotamia was swept away in the final conquest of the area by Muslim Arabs in the 7 th century CE which resulted in the unification of law, language, religion and culture under Islam. (13) Reading Question What were some of the ways each civilization impacted the human world? What are some of the traces of the civilizations in today’s society? Critical Thinking Question Women in Mesopotamia did not experience the form of liberty men in the era enjoyed. In what ways are the lives of women in the contemporary human society are different and/or still the same compared to lives of women in Mesopotamia? Explore the challenges in human life in Mesopotamia. Which of these challenges are still prevalent, and what would you devise as solutions? We explain what the Mesopotamian civilization was and its origin. In addition, its characteristics, cultures that shaped it and its contributions. Mesopotamian civilization The Mesopotamian civilization took place around 4000 BC. C. and corresponds to the first populations with permanent settlements. It was established in a very fertile territory, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the current region of Iraq. Hence the origin of the name Mesopotamia which means "land between rivers". The civilizations of Egypt and Greece developed in parallel, with less power and in a more isolated way. Mesopotamia stood out for hosting multiple empires and cultures that evolved together, which is why it is considered the cradle of civilization. Among the main populations, the Sumerian , the Assyrian, the Akkadian and the Babylonian stood out , who developed sophisticated agricultural techniques taking advantage of the flooding of the rivers, which allowed them to establish cities with a high population density. Origin of the Mesopotamian civilization The origin of the Mesopotamian civilization dates back to prehistory , especially the late Neolithic period , an era in which humans lived nomadically in small groups and engaged in hunting or gathering. In a region that did not present the best conditions, they knew how to take advantage of the channels of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to irrigate crops and developed agriculture and animal husbandry , being able to supply food to a large population. This civilization began to build the first stable towns . The beginning of human settlements was a transformation that marked a before and after in history , which continued to develop throughout the world until today. Characteristics of the Mesopotamian civilization The Mesopotamian civilization was characterized by: Agriculture and animal husbandry, leaving hunting and gathering in the background. The new social structure with a large