

Mesopotamia 101

By Vickie Chao



¹ In recent years, Iraq has often dominated the headlines of our evening news. Sure, its abundant natural resource -- oil -- is what makes this Southwest Asian country so influential in the world of politics. But aside from that fact, Iraq is also home to one of the oldest civilizations on Earth!



² Nearly nine thousand years ago, or around 7000 B.C., people began to settle in a region sandwiched between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Later on, when the Greeks visited that area, they called it "Mesopotamia," which literally meant "the land between the rivers" in their language. Strictly speaking, Mesopotamia covers a broad plain of dry but rich soil lying beyond today's Iraq. It actually includes a portion of modern-day Turkey and Syria, too. Nonetheless, because Iraq represents the bulk of the region, its name and Mesopotamia are nearly synonymous.

³ By all accounts, Mesopotamia (or to a larger extent, a part of the so-called Fertile Crescent that extended all the way to the Mediterranean Sea) was a perfect place for settlement. With the Tigris lying to the east and the Euphrates to the west, both mighty streams carry sediment from the mountains of Anatolia (present-day Turkey) in the north. Along their respective downstream courses to the Persian Gulf, they deposit this rich soil on both sides of the floodplain, making the entire area ideal for growing vegetation. When the first settlers moved into Mesopotamia all those years ago, they made good use of this fertile land by planting all sorts of crops there. To irrigate their fields, they dug canals to divert water from the rivers. Over time, they had such huge success, especially around a region called Sumer, that their civilization (dubbed the Sumerian civilization) became one of the first and most advanced in the world.

⁴ The Sumerian civilization began to take shape sometime around 3500 B.C. Its written language is long thought to be the oldest that ever existed. But after flourishing for more than a millennium, the Sumerian civilization collapsed and was ultimately replaced by two other great ones -- Babylonia in the south and Assyria in the north. For the next 1,500 years or so, the Babylonians and the Assyrians often locked horns as both vied for control of the entire region of Mesopotamia. In the end, the Babylonians emerged as the victors. After the last great Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal died in 627 B.C., the Neo-Assyrian Empire began to disintegrate rapidly. Eighteen years later, in 609 B.C., the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians. From that point on, the Neo-Assyrian Empire ceased to

exist. As joyful as the Babylonians must have been, they had no idea that their glory days were going to end soon, too. During that short span of seventy years, they -- led by the famous Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II (also spelled as Nebuchadrezzar, reigned from 605 B.C. to around 562 B.C.) -- conquered Judah, subdued Jerusalem, and built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. After Nebuchadnezzar II passed away, the Neo-Babylonian Empire started to show signs of weakness. About two decades later, it surrendered peacefully to the Persian King, Cyrus II or Cyrus the Great. That fateful year -- 539 B.C., to be exact -- was the curtain call for the Neo-Babylonian Empire. With the Persians taking over now, a new chapter began in Mesopotamia. Though the Sumerian, Assyrian, and the Babylonian civilizations were gone forever, the trio left a deep imprint in our history. Since they were all spun from the same land, Mesopotamia thus became known as the cradle of civilization!