

Chapter 6

Exploring Four Empires of Mesopotamia



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What were the most important achievements of the Mesopotamian empires?

6.1 Introduction

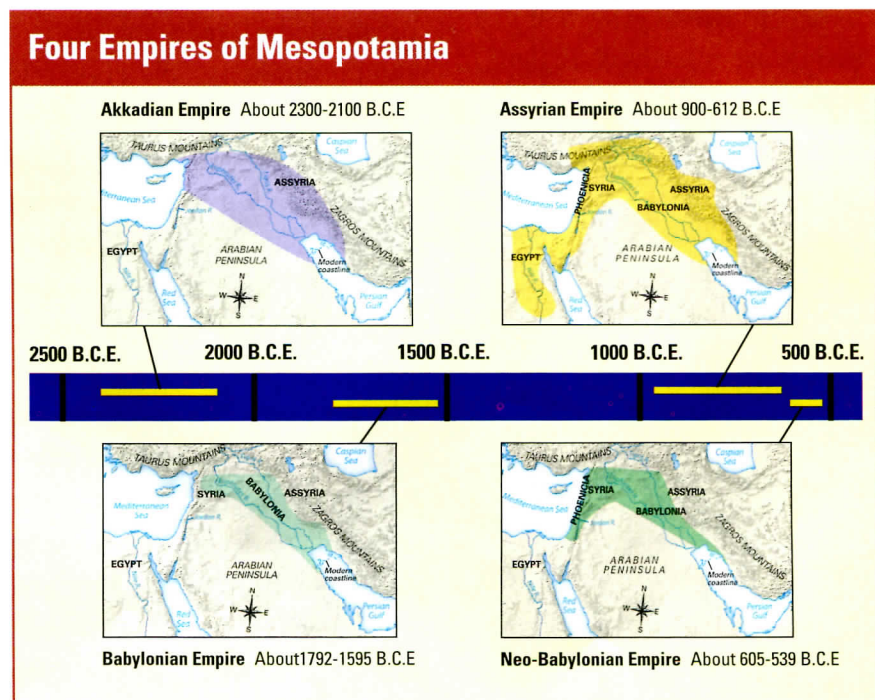
Ancient Sumer flourished in Mesopotamia between 3500 and 2300 B.C.E. In this chapter, you will discover what happened to the Sumerians and who ruled Mesopotamia after them.

The city-states of ancient Sumer were like small independent countries. They often fought over land and water rights. They never united into one group. Their lack of unity left them open to attacks by stronger groups.

About 2300 B.C.E., the Akkadians (uh-KAY-dee-unz) conquered Sumer. This group made the Sumerian city-states a part of an empire. An empire is a large territory where groups of people are ruled by a single leader or government. Groups like the Akkadians first conquer and then rule other lands.

In this chapter, you will learn about four empires that rose up in Mesopotamia between 2300 and 539 B.C.E. They were the Akkadian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, and the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

This timeline shows four empires that ruled Mesopotamia during a period of almost 1800 years.



◀ This Assyrian carving depicts soldiers marching off to battle.

The Akkadian Empire, About 2300 B.C.E.



The Akkadian military conquered the independent city-states of Sumer and united them under King Sargon.

empire a large territory in which several groups of people are ruled by a single leader or government

6.2 The Akkadian Empire

For 1,200 years, Sumer was a land of independent city-states. Then, around 2300 B.C.E., the Akkadians conquered the land. The Akkadians came from northern Mesopotamia. They were led by a great king named Sargon. Sargon became the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire.

Sargon was both a strong king and a skilled general. He built his **empire** through effective military **strategies**. First, he **assembled** a large army. Then, he taught his soldiers to fight in tight formations. Soldiers carrying shields stood at the front of the formation. Behind this line stood soldiers carrying spears. The spear carriers extended their weapons between the shields.

Sargon used his military skills to win territory for his empire. After defeating the king of the city-state of Uruk, Sargon had gained control of all of Mesopotamia, including Sumer.

To keep control of his empire, Sargon used very clever political strategies. He destroyed the walls of many cities to make it harder for people to rebel. He also demanded the loyalty of the governors of city-states. If they were disloyal, Sargon replaced them with his own men. And he became the first king to decree that his sons rule after his death.

Sargon lived to be a very great age. His name soon passed into legend. He and the Akkadians had created the world's first empire. This was their greatest achievement.

6.3 Life Under Akkadian Rule

Sargon ruled his empire for 56 years. During that time, he made the city of Agade (uh-GAH-duh), in northern Mesopotamia, the empire's **capital**. He built up the city with **tributes** collected from the people he conquered. Agade became a cultural center, with many beautiful temples and palaces. It was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world.

The Akkadians may have ruled Sumer, but the Sumerian culture lived on. The Akkadians farmed using the Sumerians' irrigation **techniques**. To record information, they used Sumer's system of cuneiform writing. They even worshipped the same gods and goddesses, although they called them by different names. Religion stayed central to the social order, and kings continued to rule in the name of the gods.

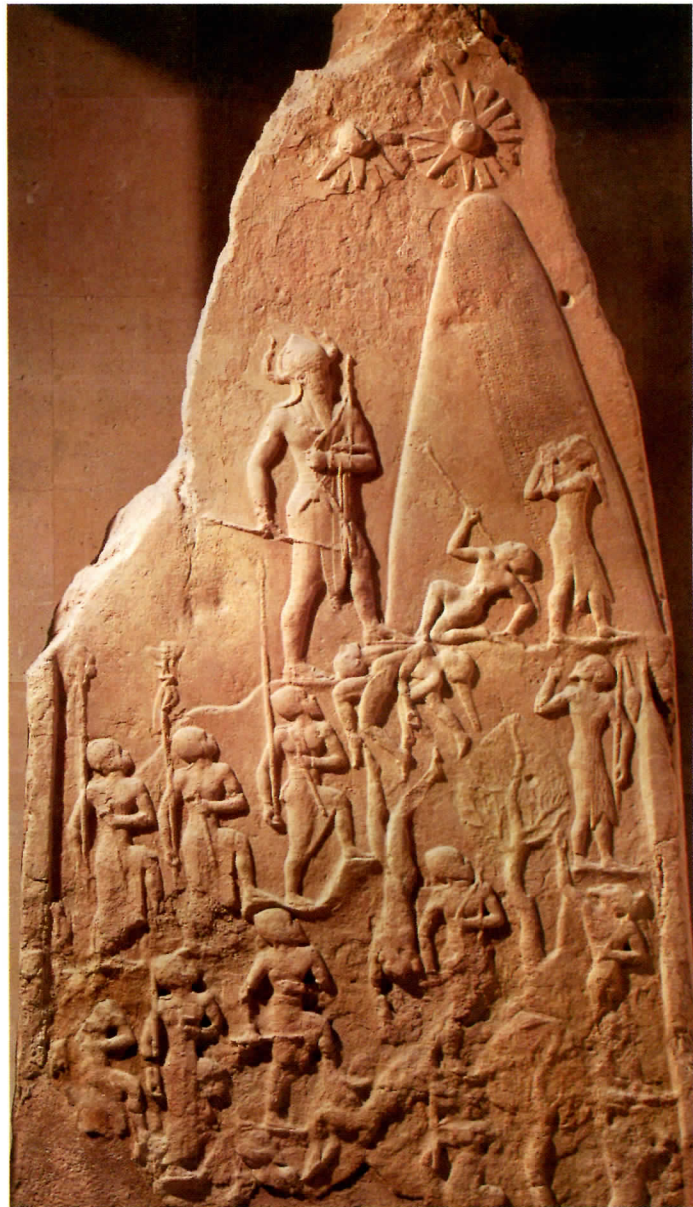
The Akkadians had their own cultural achievements. Over time, their language replaced the Sumerian language. In art, they became especially well known for their skillful three-dimensional sculptures. Artisans also carved relief sculptures on stones. These carved stones are called *steles*. The Victory Stele is a famous example. It was created to celebrate a military victory by Sargon's grandson, King Naram-Sin. The stele shows Naram-Sin leading his victorious army up a mountain slope. Some of his enemies are crushed underfoot. Others die, flee, or beg for mercy.

Sargon had hoped that his empire would last for a thousand years. But later kings found it difficult to rule such a large territory. The empire grew weak. After about 200 years, the Akkadian Empire fell to new **invaders** from the north.

On the Victory Stele, King Naram-Sin is shown as taller than the other men. He wears a horned crown to make him look like a god.

capital a city that is the center of government

tribute wealth sent from one country or ruler to another as a sign that the other is superior



King Hammurabi united Mesopotamia and made the city-state of Babylon the capital of the Babylonian Empire.



code of laws a collection of written laws and rules



Hammurabi's code was carved on a stele so that all people would know their rights and responsibilities.

6.4 Hammurabi and the Babylonian Empire

For a time after the fall of the Akkadians, Sumer was once again a group of city-states. The next ruler to unite all of Mesopotamia was a king named Hammurabi (hah-muh-RAH-bee).

Hammurabi was the king of Babylon (BAH-buh-luhn), a small city-state in central Mesopotamia. After conquering the rest of Mesopotamia, Hammurabi made Babylon the capital of his empire. The region under his rule became known as the Babylonian Empire, or Babylonia.

Hammurabi is best known for his **code of laws**, which he wrote from 1792 to 1750 B.C.E. Hammurabi used the code of laws to **unify** his empire and to preserve order. He based the laws not merely on his own authority, but on the word of the gods. Hammurabi claimed that the gods had told him to create laws that applied to everyone in the empire. Laws that were based on the gods' will could never be changed. The code of laws was written on a stele and placed in a temple for everyone to see.

Hammurabi's code was detailed. It covered many situations, such as trade, payment for work, marriage, and divorce. The code spelled out punishments for crimes, such as stealing or causing injury. For example, if a poorly built house were to collapse and kill its owner, then the builder could be put to death. If the owner's son rather than the owner were killed in the collapse, the builder's son could be put to death.

Laws like this one seem harsh to us now. Yet Hammurabi's code was an important achievement. Although the laws and punishments did not treat all people equally, the code was the first set of laws to apply to everyone.

6.5 Life in the Babylonian Empire

Babylonia thrived under Hammurabi. He worked to unite the people of his empire. He made the Babylonian god, Marduk (MAHR-dook), supreme over other gods. He built roads and created a postal service.

Agriculture and trade flourished. Hammurabi was careful to maintain irrigation systems properly so that land remained fertile and provided plenty of food. Because the city of Babylon was on the banks of the Euphrates River, it became an important center of trade. Babylonians traded with people all along the Persian Gulf. They traded grain and woven cloth for wood, gold, silver, precious gems, and livestock (animals).

Trade helped the empire's **economy**. Many types of artisans used materials brought back from distant lands. The arts also flourished. Writers wrote historical poems, some of which survive to this day.

Most important, Babylonian society was unusually fair for its time. The laws treated the various classes differently, but even slaves had some rights. Slaves could work elsewhere and keep their wages. They could own property. If they saved enough money, they could even buy their freedom.

Women also had more rights than they did in most ancient societies. Even though their fathers chose their husbands, women could own property. They could also keep money of their own.

Hammurabi was proud of his achievements. He once wrote:

I rooted out the enemy above and below.

I made an end of war.

I promoted the welfare of the land. . . .

I have governed them [the people] in peace.

I have sheltered them in my strength.



This woman is weaving cloth on a simple loom. One end of the loom is tied around a tree or post, and the other end is tied around her back.

economy the way a region or country uses resources to produce and sell or trade goods and services to meet people's needs and wants

At its peak, the Assyrian Empire extended from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. This vast territory was difficult to control and defend.

The Assyrian Empire, About 650 B.C.E.



This carving shows an army using a battering ram to break through the walls of a city.

siege a military blockade and attack on a city to force it to surrender

6.6 The Assyrian Empire

The line of kings begun by Hammurabi did not continue to rule Babylonia for long. Over the next several hundred years, a number of groups ruled parts of what had been the Babylonian Empire. The next great empire in Mesopotamia was created by a warlike people called the Assyrians.

Assyria lay to the north of Babylon. The Assyrians had lived in Mesopotamia for a long time. They had briefly established their own empire before Hammurabi conquered them. They rose to power again toward 900 B.C.E., when a series of rulers of Assyria began preparing for war. With a newly trained army, the Assyrians began to expand their territory.

The Assyrians were feared for their military might and their cruelty. Their greatest achievements were their new weapons and their war strategies. They perfected the use of horses and iron weapons in battle. They also became greatly skilled at **siege** warfare. In a siege, army soldiers camp outside a city and repeatedly attack it until the city falls. The Assyrians developed new ways of attacking cities. They were the first to use battering rams. These long, heavy beams on wheels were used for breaking down walls. The Assyrians also built moveable towers that were rolled up to a city's walls. Soldiers used the towers to climb over the walls.

The Assyrians were often ruthless. They might force entire populations to leave areas they had recently conquered. The Assyrians spread tales of their cruelty far and wide. Creating fear among their enemies was part of the Assyrian military strategy.

6.7 Life Under Assyrian Rule

The Assyrian Empire was ruled by powerful kings. Religion, however, remained very important in the social and political order. Even kings were obliged to obey the gods.

The Assyrians believed that their kings were special beings. To honor them, the Assyrians built beautiful palaces. The great palace in the capital city of Nineveh (NIH-nuh-vuh) had many rooms. Some palaces were built on tall mounds, to raise them higher than the surrounding buildings. Huge sculptures of winged bulls or lions, with human faces, stood at the entrances.

Like other societies in Mesopotamia, the Assyrians dug canals to irrigate their land and keep it fertile for farming. They also built some of the first aqueducts. Aqueducts were pipes or channels used to carry water. A system of canals and aqueducts brought drinking water to Nineveh from 30 miles away.

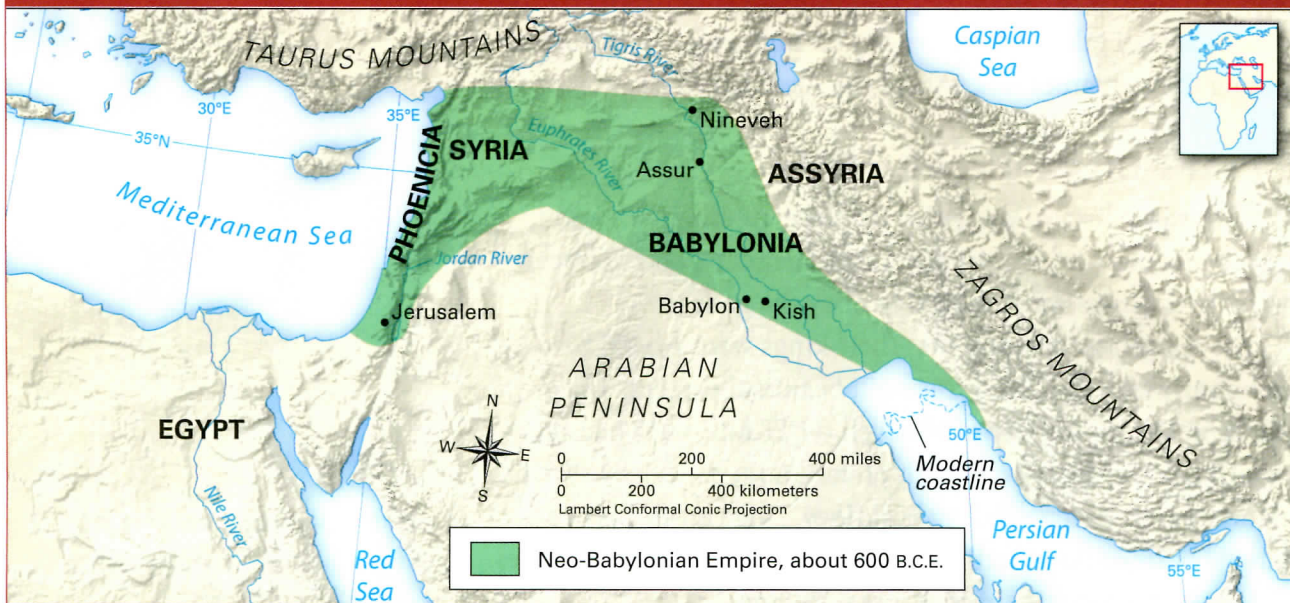
Assyrian artisans were known for their two-dimensional sculptures called *bas-reliefs*. Many of their most famous bas-reliefs were on palace walls. They were amazingly realistic. Often they showed the king hunting, fighting in battle, or enjoying family life. The Assyrians used ivory to decorate thrones, beds, chairs, and doors.

The Assyrian Empire lasted about 300 years. At its height, it stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. But its weakness lay in being too vast a territory to control. The army was stretched thin, and the Assyrians could not fight off neighbors who rose up against them. In 612 B.C.E., Nineveh was plundered by a combined army of Babylonians, Scythians, and a group called the Medes. The Assyrians' power was broken forever.

This winged bull with five legs stood guard before the palace of an Assyrian king.



The Neo-Babylonian Empire, About 600 B.C.E



Compare the area, above, of the Neo-Babylonian Empire with the area of the Babylonian Empire that existed about 1,000 years earlier.

6.8 The Neo-Babylonian Empire

After the fall of Nineveh, the Babylonians once again took control of Mesopotamia. They established a new empire, the Neo-Babylonian Empire. *Neo* means “new.”

The new empire’s most famous king was Nebuchadrezzar II (neh-byuh-kuh-DREH-zehr). A ruthless military leader, he reigned from 605 to 562 B.C.E.

Nebuchadrezzar expanded his empire whenever he could. He drove the Egyptians out of Syria. He also conquered part of Canaan (present-day Israel), the home of the Israelites, or Jews. When the Israelites rebelled, he took most of them captive and brought them to Babylonia. Many of them were never able to return to their homeland.

As a military leader, Nebuchadrezzar knew that it was important to keep the capital city of Babylon safe. He had an inner wall and an outer wall built around the city. These walls were so thick that two chariots could pass each other on top of them. Towers, for archers to stand on, were placed on the walls. Finally, a moat was dug around the outer wall and filled with water. During peacetime, people used bridges to cross the moat and enter the city. In times of war, the bridges were dismantled.

The Ishtar Gate was one of the entrances into Babylon. Each gate was dedicated to a Babylonian god or goddess. Ishtar was the goddess of war and love.



6.9 Life in the Neo-Babylonian Empire

Nebuchadnezzar worked hard to restore the splendor that Babylon had enjoyed under Hammurabi. From 605 to 562 B.C.E., he rebuilt the city's ziggurat. This huge structure was several stories high. The Babylonians called it the "House of the Platform of Heaven and Earth."

Nebuchadnezzar decorated his palace with lush gardens. The gardens were planted on rooftops and tall terraces so the greenery would cascade down the walls. A watering system kept the plantings fresh and green. These Hanging Gardens of Babylon became famous. This human-made display was viewed as one of the great wonders of the ancient world.

The Babylonians were also skilled in mathematics and astronomy. They created the first sundial, a device that uses the sun to tell time. They made discoveries that led to our present-day system of a 60-minute hour and a 7-day week.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire lasted only 75 years. Then, in 539 B.C.E., a new conqueror named Cyrus (SIE-ruhs) swept into Babylon from the east. He was the leader of the Persian Empire.

The Persians came from the land we now call Iran. For about 200 years, they ruled the most powerful empire in the world. Then the Persians were conquered by a man named Alexander the Great.



The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the great wonders of the ancient world. The sight of so many trees and bushes rising above the desert landscape was astonishing.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the most important achievements of the four empires that once ruled Mesopotamia.

The Akkadian Empire King Sargon created the world's first empire. The Akkadians developed their own language. Artists carved beautiful relief sculptures on stones.

The Babylonian Empire King Hammurabi created a code of laws that applied to everyone in the empire. Babylonian agriculture and trade thrived under his rule.

The Assyrian Empire The Assyrians honored their powerful kings with beautiful palaces and huge sculptures. They built some of the earliest aqueducts.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire King Nebuchadnezzar restored the splendor of King Hammurabi's time. His Hanging Gardens of Babylon became famous.