

The Rise of Babylon

Although the Mesopotamians developed one of the most civilized cultures in the ancient world, it didn't last forever. By 2000 B.C., two forces were pushing the civilization of the Sumer region out of existence: one force was human; the other ecological. Together they changed life for many people living in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley.

The second force—the ecological one—was one the Mesopotamians did not see coming. For centuries, the Sumerians of the southern Mesopotamian region irrigated their fields from the nearby rivers.

While this diversion of water was necessary to produce bountiful harvests of grain and other crops, the water brought something else the Sumerians did not want—salt.

Some of the irrigation water delivered to Sumerian fields dried in the burning desert heat, leaving behind salt deposits in the soil. The amount of salt deposited each year was imperceptible, yet significant.

After centuries of irrigating the same region of farmland, the salt deposits caused the soil to become less fertile. This process of ever increasing the amount of salt in the soil is known as *salinization*.

Even as early as 2350 B.C., the land was becoming noticeably less productive. By 2000 B.C., the Sumer valley had fallen into economic collapse, bringing an end to the Sumerian era of Mesopotamian history.

Speeding along this process of destruction were a Semitic people called the Amorites. As Semites, they spoke a different language from the Mesopotamians. This tribe invaded Sumer, destroying its great cities, the city of Ur among them.

Soon the Amorites were busy establishing a new kingdom and civilization for themselves to the north of Sumer, in a region known as Akkad. In this region, the Amorites built a new capital called Babylon. The people who lived there soon became known as Babylonians, or, as modern archeologists refer to them, Old Babylonians.

The founder and leader of this new civilization, which eventually developed into the Old Babylonian Empire, was a ruler known as Hammurabi. He ruled from approximately 1792–1750 B.C.

In his early years, Hammurabi was merely the leader of one of several warring tribes in southern Mesopotamia. But by 1763, Hammurabi conquered all of the Sumerian region and within less than a decade was the dominant force in northern Mesopotamia as well.

In time, Hammurabi began to refer to himself as “King of Akkad and Sumer.” Later, he exalted his title to a new height—“King of the Four Quarters of the World.”



With the establishment of a new kingdom, the Babylonians created a civilization of their own. Mathematics developed further. The Babylonians understood the concept of square roots, cube roots, reciprocals, and exponential functions. In addition, they developed the idea of the 24-hour day, the 60-minute hour, and the 60-second minute.

Also, they developed their concept of an accurate calendar, dividing their year into 12 months, based on 28-day cycles of the moon.

With the passing of the Sumerian culture and the development of the Old Babylonian culture, humans in the ancient Near East continued the dramatic process called *civilization*.

The Code of Hammurabi

In A.D. 1901, French archeologists uncovered an eight-foot-tall shaft of basalt stone. Carved on the stone stele, or shaft, were 3600 lines of cuneiform writing. Known today as the Code of Hammurabi, the carvings list 282 laws created during the reign of this most important of Babylonian kings.

Hammurabi's Code represents one of the first organized systems of law in the history of Western civilization, dating at least three centuries before the Hebrew leader Moses and the Ten Commandments. Below are a few of the crimes and punishments included in Hammurabi's Code. (Note: A seignior is a Babylonian nobleman.)

1. If a seignior accused another seignior and brought a charge of murder against him, but has not proved it, his accuser shall be put to death.
2. If a seignior bears false witness in a case, or cannot prove his testimony, if that case involves life or death, he shall be put to death.
22. If a seignior committed robbery and has been caught, that seignior shall be put to death.
25. If fire broke out in a seignior's house and a seignior, who went to extinguish it, cast his eye on the goods of the owner of the house and has appropriated the goods of the owner of the house, that seignior shall be thrown into that fire.
53. If a seignior was too lazy to make the dike of his field strong and did not make his dike strong and a break has opened up in his dike and he has accordingly let the water ravage the farmland, the seignior in whose dike the break was opened shall make good the grain that he let get destroyed.
129. If the wife of a seignior has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject.

153. If a seignior's wife has brought about the death of her husband because of another man, they shall impale that woman on stakes.
195. If a son strikes his father, they shall cut off his hand.
196. If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye.
200. If a seignior has knocked out the tooth of another seignior, they shall knock out his tooth.

Review and Write

After reading the example judgments from the Code of Hammurabi, do you think this legal system was fair or unfair? Explain your reasons in a 100-word essay.



The Assyrians and the New Babylonians

After the Kassites destroyed the ancient Babylonians around 1595 B.C., a dark age followed. No powerful tribe maintained order in Old Babylon until the coming of a violent, militaristic people known as the Assyrians.

By 1250 B.C., this Semitic people dominated the entire Mesopotamian region. Although they ruled over Akkad and Sumer for only a few short years, the Assyrians controlled southern Mesopotamia for over 600 years.

By 900 B.C., the Assyrians were on the move again, ultimately conquering Syria and even south-eastern Anatolia by 840 B.C.

The high point for the Assyrians came in the 8th century with the reign of Sennacherib [705–681 B.C.]. He built a new capital for his people, Nineveh, on the banks of the upper Tigris River. Nineveh was known in the ancient world as a beautiful city with a grand palace, great library, splendid orchards, and zoos featuring rare animals.

The Assyrians defeated many neighboring states through sheer force and intimidation. The Assyrians were ruthless soldiers, slaughtering some opponents, and torturing others—cutting off noses, legs, tongues, and hands. They erected piles of skulls near defeated villages—a powerful symbol of their cold-blooded vengeance.

The army of the Assyrians relied on modern weapons of war including iron chariots, heavily armed troops, and horse-bound cavalry firing bows and arrows at a full gallop. The people they controlled lived in constant fear. The Assyrians also used battering rams to tear down the walls of any city that tried to defend itself.

By the 7th century, however, the Assyrians were defeated by an alliance of tribes led by the Medes, a people from the east, in modern-day Iran. By 612 B.C., the city of Nineveh fell to a combined Median-Babylonian army.

Another empire, the New Babylonian, soon replaced the Assyrians. The most famous New Babylonian king was Nebuchadnezzar who ruled from 605–562 B.C.

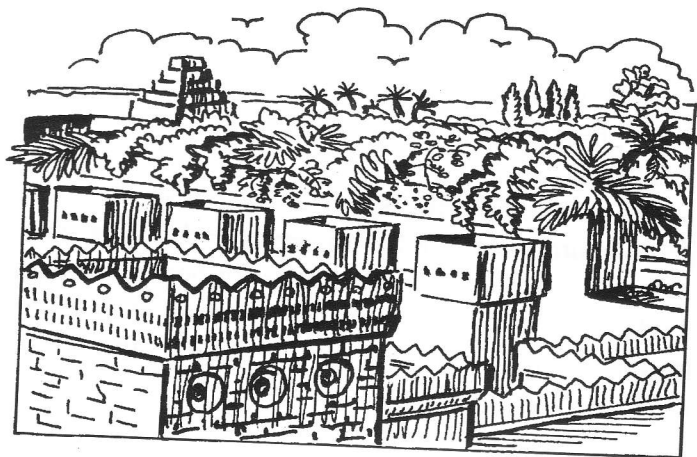
The city of Babylon once again became the capital for this new kingdom. However, this New Babylon was grander than ever before. The city sprawled out in every direction, covering over

2000 acres of land. (The typical Old Babylonian city covered about 200 acres.)

Monuments, palaces, and protective walls dazzled all visitors to Babylon. The New Babylonians created their buildings from brightly colored glazed bricks, which shone in brilliant shades of blue and gold.

The famous Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, were created in Babylon. According to legend, these elaborate gardens and terraces were built by Nebuchadnezzar for his wife, a Persian princess, who was homesick for the lush rolling hills and valleys of Iran.

But, as with every civilization, New Babylon did not last forever. The city was conquered by the Persians in 539 B.C. Three centuries later, the city of Babylon was completely abandoned, its lush Hanging Gardens forgotten.



Review and Write

By this point in our study, we have seen several important civilizations rise to power only to eventually fall. What are the important factors which you believe help to explain why civilizations in the ancient world rose and fell?

The Persians: The Kind Conquerors

In 559 B.C., the Persians, an Indo-European people living on the vast plain east of Mesopotamia, witnessed the rise to power of a new king named Cyrus. Within 10 years, Cyrus led the Persians through a period of military expansion. By 539 B.C., he conquered Asia Minor, the New Babylonian Empire, all of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and the Phoenician cities. A few years later, in 525, his son Cambyses [529–521 B.C.] added Egypt to those nations controlled by the Persians. This new Persian Empire became one of the most extensive in history to that date.

King Cyrus, however, was not a typical conqueror. Tolerant and kind, he allowed his subjects to maintain their customs, traditions, and religions. He did not separate them from their homelands as the cruel Assyrians had, and gave them autonomy in local matters.

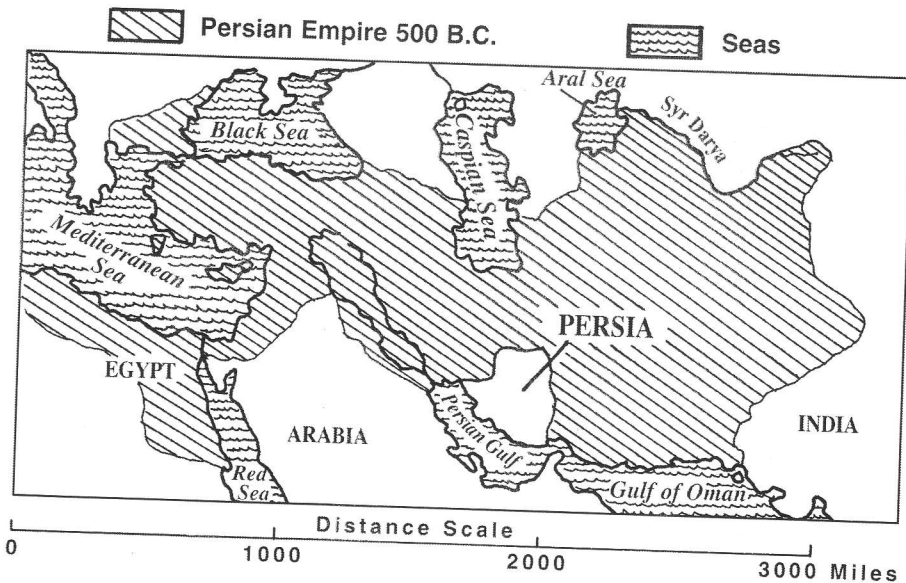
The Hebrews, for example, had been taken captive by the Assyrians and the New Babylonians, with many of their leaders and young people removed from their homeland in what had become the two split kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Cyrus allowed many of the Jews to return to Palestine and rebuild their great temple.

There was always an understanding that, despite such freedoms at home, Persia was supreme. Each state under Persia's control paid tribute to the treasury of Cyrus.

The Persian Empire continued to expand under Cambyses and Darius I, known as the Great, who ruled from 522–486 B.C. By the reign of Darius, the Persian Empire extended from Egypt to Libya to Macedonia in the west, and to India and China in the east. The Persians added to their empire's wealth by establishing extensive trading systems.

Darius placed 20 percent taxes on such common activities as farming, mining, and fishing. He also began adopting the use of a new type of exchange: minted, standardized silver coins.

To help hold his vast empire together, King Darius established an overland system called the Royal Road. Covering more than 1600 miles, appointed riders traveled the entire length of the road in a week's time rather than the customary three months it took by camel caravan. At over 100 places along the road, the Persians set up post stations where riders could get fresh horses—something like a Persian pony express.



The Persians' religion was a unique one. Just as the ancient Hebrews practiced monotheism, so did the Persians. A prophet named Zarathustra (also known as Zoroaster) created a religion which recognized a supreme god named Ahura Mazda, meaning "Wise Lord."

Zoroastrianism taught that the world is a battleground between good and evil. The free will each person has allows him or her to side with either force. Those who choose to do good will be rewarded with an eternity in paradise.

The Persian Empire lasted approximately 200 years. In the 4th century B.C., a young warrior from Macedonia (located north of modern-day Greece), Alexander the Great, invaded the Persian world, conquering the empire in 331 B.C.