

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA



Samples are provided for evaluation purposes. Copying of the product or its parts for resale is prohibited. Additional restrictions may be set by the publisher.

**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	2
<b>Lesson 1</b>	Land Between the Rivers .....	4
<b>Lesson 2</b>	Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs .....	8
<b>Lesson 3</b>	The Bible's Mesopotamia. ....	12
<b>Lesson 4</b>	Mesopotamia's Later Empires .....	16
<b>Appendix</b>	Image Close-ups .....	21

# Introduction

## The Birthplace of Civilization

The incomplete historical record can never do justice to some mysteries. And certain kinds of questions always seem to lie just a bit beyond the historian's reach. The story of ancient Mesopotamia is a case in point.

For example, what exactly is it that allows us to call a society a "great civilization"? In part, value judgments of all sorts are involved here. Yet most of us seem to feel that an important dividing line was crossed in ancient Mesopotamia, that the world's first civilization did emerge there. That dividing line is defined by some combination of technology, complex social organization, a written language, and other cultural achievements. And all of these did come together in Sumer about 5000 years ago.

But even if we agree on a definition, can we ever understand fully what caused this birth of civilization? Here, the incomplete historical record offers us only clues, not a definitive answer. Yet just exploring those clues might be enough—if it leads us to reflect more deeply on what history is and what we mean when we call a society "civilized."

This set is meant to help students focus their thoughts and imaginations on exactly these kinds of questions. The 12 visual displays included in it deal with a number of the central themes in the history of ancient Mesopotamia. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Land Between the Rivers**

The three illustrations here focus on the natural setting in which the first of Mesopotamia's civilizations, Sumer, came into being.

### **Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs**

Canals, levees, ziggurats, and bronze weapons and tools were only a part of what made Sumer the first great civilization. Its cultural and intellectual achievements may be more important—and far longer-lasting in their impact. The illustrations here are meant to help students glimpse some of that achievement.

### **The Bible's Mesopotamia**

Until the mid-1800s, much of what the West knew of Mesopotamia was derived from the stories in the Old Testament. The illustrations here refer to three examples of this. They will help students assess the accuracy and the point of view of the biblical account of the ancient world.

### **Mesopotamia's Later Empires**

Unlike Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia was surrounded by hostile outsiders who faced few natural barriers and who often intruded upon the more settled societies there. This resulted in a steady rise and fall of empires and a good deal of political instability as compared with Egypt. But it also meant a constant infusion of new ideas, making Mesopotamia a kind of melting pot of the ancient world.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Ancient Mesopotamia***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand the features that lead historians to call a society a civilization.
2. Students will understand how natural setting and human effort combined to bring civilization into being in Mesopotamia.

# Land Between the Rivers

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

Settled farming villages appeared in many parts of the world as far back as 10,000 years ago. But it took thousands of years longer for the first real civilizations to arise. The term “civilization” is not easy to define. It refers to a more complicated way of life than that of a village where people all know one another and where daily tasks are fairly simple and easily learned. History’s first civilization arose over 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia. There, such features of civilization as cities, trade and merchants, written language, sciences, kings, and organized religious and political systems appeared. Buildings called “ziggurats” (the ruins of one are shown here) were temples to the gods that controlled the fate of the city-states of this civilization, known as Sumer.

**Illustration 2**

“Mesopotamia” is Greek for “the land between the rivers.” The rivers in this case were the Tigris and Euphrates. This map can help explain why civilization could develop here. Each year, the rivers flooded, carrying silt from the nearby mountains. This kept the land extremely fertile. But the flat topography meant that floods could bring vast destruction as well as fertile new soil. Only with a system of levees and canals could the waters be controlled and the land put to use. Such a system required a high degree of cooperation and skillful organization. Villages had to unite to work together. Out of this need for cooperation, civilization was born.

**Illustrations 3A & 3B**

Sumer’s flat, empty plain was good for raising barley and wheat, and for grazing sheep, goats, and other animals. But it lacked key resources, such as timber and the copper and tin need to make bronze. This meant that Sumer had to carry on a great deal of trade. It exchanged agricultural goods for minerals and timber with peoples in the Zagros Mountains, Asia Minor, and along the Mediterranean coast. This trade encouraged the growth of cities, usually at temple sites along the trade routes. These cities, in turn, became political and religious centers for their surrounding regions. Illustration 3A shows Sumerian merchants haggling. Illustration 3B shows a clay figure of the Sumerian goddess Inanna (or Ishtar) on a throne. The city-states of Sumer were built both for trade and for the priests and temples needed to appease Sumer’s unpredictable deities.



## Lesson 1—Land Between the Rivers

# Illustration 1



© Instructional Resources Corporation

### *Discussing the Illustration*

1. The ruins shown here are of one of the oldest structures in the world. This was a temple known as a “ziggurat.” Ziggurats first appeared about 5000 years ago in the ancient Mesopotamian society of Sumer. They were stepped, pyramid-like structures with several levels, outside staircases, and a shrine at the top. Not much of the exterior of this structure still exists in this photo from the early 1900s. Can you guess why? From what you see here, what problems would archaeologists have in learning much about ziggurats and Sumerian society in general?
2. Many ziggurats were made mainly of sun-dried or baked mud bricks. From this photo, can you guess why the Sumerians used this type of building material so often? What else about Sumer and ancient Mesopotamia does this photo help to show?
3. Ziggurats were both like and unlike the great pyramids of ancient Egypt. From what you know about both kinds of structures, can you explain how they were like and unlike each other?

### *Follow-up Activity*

1. **Background:** The earliest farming villages in the Middle East actually appeared in the more hilly areas north and east of the flat, dry lands where Sumer would later arise. Farming on the dry lands of Sumer itself could not take place until the inhabitants learned to build systems of levees and canals. Cooperating to do this is what helped unite villages into larger city-states and bring Sumerian civilization into being.

**Research:** To do this activity, you need to read more about the land along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where Sumer arose. You also need to learn more about the climate in this region, the seasons of the year, and the flooding of the rivers.

**Activity:** Pretend you are a Sumerian and you want some nearby villages to unite and build a system of canals and levees. Write out a speech to convince these villages to do this. In this speech, use what you have learned from your research. Give your speech to the class and discuss it with them.