

## FC10: The Sweep of Mesopotamia's History (c.3000-529 BCE)

### Introduction: the environment

In modern day Iraq, along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, lie the deserted ruins of a civilization that lay forgotten for centuries until its rediscovery in the 1800's. Looking at these ruins, one finds it hard to imagine a thriving civilization full of people haggling in the market place, fighting wars, dancing in festivals, celebrating births and marriages, mourning their dead, and going about their daily routines much as we do today. Yet, that is exactly what went on here when these were not ruins, but the center of the first human civilization.

Every culture is largely a product of its environment and must be understood within the context of that environment. We use the term *geopolitics* to describe an area's geography (physical and climatic) and the effects of that geography on the area's history and politics. Mesopotamia, from the Greek words meaning "land between the rivers," presented a harsh environment to inhabit, but also an ideal one in which to build the first civilization. Its geopolitics consisted of three basic elements:

1. ***It was a hot dry river valley.*** This forced the inhabitants to organize irrigation projects that led to civilization.
2. ***It had virtually no natural resources except for mud and water.*** This forced its inhabitants to be very resourceful. Basically, just about everything about early Mesopotamian civilization was made from mud: its houses, temples, palaces, fortifications, writing tablets, and the crops which were traded for the resources needed to build up this civilization to new heights. Underlying all the glories of this civilization was mud.
3. ***It was flat and open terrain with virtually no natural barriers.*** This led to jealous nomadic neighbors constantly invading Mesopotamia, either breaking up already existing empires or forcing the Mesopotamians to build strong empires at each other's expense in self-defense. Mesopotamian history was nothing if not violent.

### Sumer: myth and history (c.2800-2350 B.C.E.)

The Sumerians were the people who built the first civilization, living in the southeastern end of Mesopotamia known as Sumer. Our knowledge of the very early Sumerians is much like our knowledge of the early Hebrews in the Biblical book of Genesis. In each case, the dividing line between dim misty legends and a clear historical account was a great flood. In the Bible before the flood, we find patriarchs who loom larger than life, living for well over 900 years each and coming across more like stiff and lifeless statues than real human beings. The same is true of Sumerian heroes or patriarchs before their flood (c.2800 B.C.E.), except they live for tens of thousands of years and seem even more fantastic than the Biblical patriarchs. After the great flood of 2800 B.C.E., we see more written records and, consequently, real personalities emerge. The Bible is the same way after its great flood and Noah. The larger than life patriarchs give way to more human ones, such as Abraham.

The myths that often fill the gaps in the historical record can help us understand real history. If we carefully interpret them, they can tell us about historical events and the values that civilization held. For example, the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible is seen by some as symbolic of the ongoing struggle between farmers and nomads. Only this time it is told from the nomadic Hebrews' point of view rather than from the farmer's point of view. Thus the

nomadic shepherd Abel is good and his farmer brother, Cain, is the murderer. In Mesopotamian myths, the roles are reversed. The many similarities between Biblical stories and Mesopotamian myths suggest early contacts between the two cultures. Both have stories of a great flood and of a paradise, or Garden of Eden, from which humans are driven because of their folly. If a new god replaces an older one, this often signifies that one culture has conquered another. Such was the case when the Babylonian Marduk replaced the Sumerian Enlil as the chief Mesopotamian god, signifying Babylon's conquest of Sumer.

When the Sumerians finally emerge into history, we find them divided into thirteen major city-states who spent a good deal of their time fighting each other. Although they shared a common religion centered around their holy city of Nippur, that religion seems to have done more to spark wars than prevent them. Each city-state had its own patron god or goddess that made it feel superior to the other city-states. Each city-state also wanted to control the holy city of Nippur, which led to constant fighting that caused Nippur to change hands nineteen times in twenty-four years! For centuries, Sumerian chariots and infantry battalions ranged across Mesopotamia, raising its dust in battle. Whenever one city-state, such as Kish, would gain the upper hand and seemed on the verge of conquering Sumer, the other cities would gang up on it and restore the balance of power. And so it went on for centuries.

### **The Akkadian Empire (c.2350 - 2250 B.C.E.)**

It should come as no surprise that all this fighting wore down the Sumerians and left them open to attack from one of the many nomadic desert tribes surrounding them. In this case, it was a people known as the Akkadians. The story goes that its founder, Sargon of Kish, much like Moses, was set afloat in a reed basket as a baby to save his life. He was found by the royal gardener and raised in the palace where he rose quickly to power and influence as the king's cupbearer. At last, he murdered the king and seized the throne, calling himself Sargon, which meant "legitimate king." What this legend most likely tells us is that the Akkadian takeover of Sumer was a long process of gradual infiltration by the Akkadians into Sumerian society rather than the result of one big invasion. The fairly smooth transition to power also suggests that the Akkadians had absorbed much of Sumerian culture and become civilized. Thus the Akkadian Empire signified the spread of civilization more than its overthrow.

Sargon managed to take over all of Sumer and probably gave it a greater degree of peace than it had known for most of its history. He used Akkadian governors and garrisons (occupation armies) to keep the city-states in line. He would also take hostages and tear down the walls of any rebellious cities to ensure their good behavior.

Once his hold on the Sumer was secure, Sargon fought against the ever-troublesome Elamite tribes in the mountains to the east. He then marched northwestward, subduing all of Mesopotamia and even reaching the Mediterranean Sea, which seemed like the ends of the earth to people then. To commemorate this, Sargon took the title "King of the Four Quarters" (of the known world). His realm was history's first empire.

Sargon's grandson, Naramsin, further extended Akkadian power. However, he supposedly committed the fatal mistake of sacking the holy city of Nippur, which resulted in a series of revolts. These revolts weakened the Akkadian Empire enough to allow some other nomads, the Gutians, to attack and take over. Agade, the Akkadian capital, was so thoroughly destroyed in this turmoil that its location is still not certain.

### **Sumer's last flowering: the Third Dynasty of Ur (c.2100-2000 B.C.E.)**

Partly, through a process of absorbing the nomadic Gutians and partly through popular revolts, Sumerian civilization revived in one final flowering known as the Third Dynasty of Ur. Much of Sargon's old empire was reunited, while new cities and expanded trade routes spread civilization northward. The most impressive monument of the age was the ziggurat of Ur. It was 120 feet high with a base of 260 feet by 175 feet. Even today, its mere ruins strike us with awe.

Once again, nomadic tribes, this time the Amorites, weakened and eventually overthrew the Sumerians. As with the earlier Sumerians, civil wars and revolts set them up for this. Gradually, the nomads settled down and new city-states rose up in the north. One of these city-states would build a new civilization grafted upon the old. That city was Babylon.

### **Hammurabi and the Babylonian Empire (c.1750-1600 B.C.E.).**

Certainly one of the most famous figures in Mesopotamian history was the Babylonian king, Hammurabi. When he came to the throne around the year 1750 B.C.E., his city, Babylon, was just one of several city-states vying for power in Mesopotamia. Surrounded by aggressive and warlike rivals, and with a territory only fifty miles in diameter, Babylon needed a shrewd and tough king. Hammurabi fit the bill marvelously.

Over the next twenty-five years, this Babylonian king masterfully maneuvered his city-state among all its hostile neighbors. At one point, he would ally with one state to eliminate another. Later on, he would make a new ally to help him destroy the first. In such a way, he steadily expanded Babylon's borders and swelled its army's ranks with troops supplied by subject cities. One final showdown with the city-state, Larsa, left him master of Mesopotamia and "King of the Four Quarters."

It is one thing to conquer an empire. It is an entirely different thing to hold it together. Hammurabi proved himself an excellent ruler as well as a conqueror. Following the example of the Akkadians, he put governors and garrisons in the subject cities to prevent revolts. But he clearly saw that those measures alone would not be enough to build a lasting empire. Therefore, he worked to establish a code of laws and one language for government and business to tie his empire together. He also constructed public works projects, such as temples and irrigation canals, throughout his empire. By providing jobs and a greater degree of prosperity, he hoped to build loyalty to Babylon or at least reduce resentment to his rule if they saw him working for their welfare.

Little is known about the Babylonian Empire after Hammurabi's death. It seems that his empire entered a period of decline after his death. Usually, the reasons for an empire's decline are numerous, and they interact with each other in a way that makes them feed back upon one another. This creates more problems, making them interact even more intensively, and so on. For example, Hammurabi's building and irrigation projects were very expensive and ate up a good deal of royal revenues. This left the crown with little money to pay its local officials. That led to a greater degree of freedom for those officials. As a result, their abuses grew, and royal revenues declined further. This process would then repeat itself with greater intensity again and again.

This feedback also led to even more problems. Extra officials were created to gather more taxes, which added further to the burdens of society. In order to pay those extra taxes, farmers started abandoning the two-field system, irrigating and planting both fields each year

instead of leaving one fallow. The extra irrigation raised the water table and poisoned the soil with minerals such as salt, while the extra planting without giving the land any rest exhausted the soil's fertility. Crop yields, the underlying basis for civilization, went down and intensified all the other problems feeding into and off of the agriculture. Bit by bit, Babylon's empire crumbled to pieces. And waiting in the wings, as always, were the nomads. Only this time they had a new and frightening weapon with which to terrorize the Near East.

### **The horse and chariot (c.1650 B.C.E.)**

As far back as the Sumerians, Mesopotamians had driven in war chariots pulled by wild donkeys, called onagers. However, the old Sumerian chariot had been quite cumbersome, with four solid wheels that added weight and reduced speed and mobility. As a result, such a chariot probably did not play too decisive a role in Mesopotamian warfare. Then, around 1650 B.C.E., nomads from the north appeared with a new type of chariot. It had two wheels mounted on the back, which made it more maneuverable. Also, its wheels were spoked, not solid, making it lighter and faster. Finally, it was pulled by a strange new beast, the horse, which was faster and more powerful than the onager.

Armed with the horse and chariot and the much more powerful composite bow, the northern nomads burst upon the civilized world with a ferocity that sent its kingdoms reeling back in confusion for a century or more. Peasant infantry were totally unprepared for the spectacle of maybe hundreds of chariots drawn by these strange beasts bearing down on them, stirring up clouds of dust, and making strange and terrifying noises. At times, they broke and ran at this sight alone, leaving their cities as open prey to the victorious nomads. All across the Near East, one civilization after another fell prey to the nomads armed with this terrifying new weapon. A people known as the Hyksos conquered northern Egypt. The Hittites overwhelmed the cities of Asia Minor and even raided as far as Babylon, sacking it in 1595 B.C.E. Another people, the Kassites, conquered Babylon and ruled it more permanently. Further east, the Indus River civilization fell to the Aryans, also armed with the horse and chariot. For a century or more civilization was thrown into turmoil.

Eventually, these nomads would follow the example of other nomadic conquerors by adopting civilized ways and merging their identities with the cultures they had conquered. Civilized people had also learned a lesson: the value of the horse and chariot. For several centuries, the elite corps of Near Eastern armies ruling the battlefields of the Near East would be their battalions of horse drawn chariots.

### **The First Assyrian Empire (c.1365-1100 B.C.E.)**

Assyria lies at the northern end of Mesopotamia where many of the trade routes of the Fertile Crescent and the Near East converged. This made Assyria a prosperous land for trade. It also was a dangerous place, since trade routes are also convenient invasion routes. As a result, Assyria had an especially warlike history, and its people were known for two occupations: trade and warfare.

Since they lived in such a rough environment, the Assyrians became quite capable empire builders. Their first empire seems to have encompassed most, if not all, of Mesopotamia, and bordered the newly emerging civilization and empire of the nomadic Hittites. They also conquered the kingdom of Mitanni, originally founded by another chariot driving group of nomads, the Hurrians.

Once again, a new wave of nomads swept in with a devastating ferocity that toppled civilized empires and kingdoms far and wide. To the northwest, a mysterious people known as the Sea Peoples overwhelmed the Hittite Empire. Some of these Sea Peoples, the Peleset (the Biblical Philistines), seriously weakened the Egyptian Empire and conquered Palestine, thus giving Palestine its name. To the west of the Hittites, the Mycenaean Greeks fell to Dorian invaders from the north. The Trojan War was probably part of these upheavals. The Assyrians themselves were not immune, being conquered by the Aramaeans coming out of the desert. Among the results of these invasions, the trade routes bringing tin to the Near East were cut. This brought the Bronze Age to an abrupt halt and ushered in the Iron Age.

### **The Second Assyrian Empire (911-612 B.C.E.)**

The Assyrians were a tough resilient people. Once the dust had settled from the latest round of upheavals and the nomads had started to assume a degree of civilization, the Assyrians reasserted themselves and built what amounted to the greatest Near Eastern Empire up to that point in history. At the height of their power, they ruled over Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. There were several reasons for their success as empire builders.

1. ***They had a plentiful supply of iron with which to equip their armies*** . Other less well-endowed peoples, such as those of Egypt, would be at a decisive disadvantage when fighting the Assyrians.
2. ***Refinements in siege warfare*** . Up to this point in history, about the only effective method for besieging a city was to starve it into submission. This made sieges long, tedious, and often unsuccessful endeavors. The Assyrians changed all that. They designed rolling siege towers from which they could assault city walls, and battering rams that could pound mud brick walls to dust. Armed with such weapons, the Assyrians were able to reduce city after city and establish a much firmer control over their empire.
3. ***A deliberate policy of terror to keep people obedient.*** The Assyrians are largely remembered in history as being extremely cruel. To a large extent, this reputation is justified. Cities daring to defy them in a siege or subject peoples desperate enough to revolt often suffered large-scale massacres. The Assyrians themselves who wanted to scare other people from defying them may have exaggerated the extent of this bloodshed. Also, the greater degree of success in besieging cities gave them more opportunities to sack cities than other peoples had. Keep in mind that most ancient peoples indulged in wholesale plunder and slaughter of cities that had tried to resist them and failed. Another Assyrian terrorist tactic was to uproot rebellious peoples en masse and settle them away from their home in order to disorient them in strange surroundings and prevent further revolts. The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were lost by this process of being resettled in a new land and gradually losing their culture and identity in the new cultures surrounding them. Contrary to their expectations, the Assyrians' terrorist policies seem to have inspired more revolts than fear.
4. ***Cavalry.*** At first the horse was seen as useful only for pulling chariots. Eventually, some nomads caught on to the fact that horses could be ridden. This involved solving several problems. First of all, the horse had to be bred up to a size where it was capable of carrying a man. Secondly, it had to get used to someone riding it, since no animal takes kindly to another animal jumping on its back. Finally, people had to figure out where to

sit. For some reason, maybe height, men first rode the higher, but precarious, rump. Finally, someone figured out that the lower, but safer, back was a better place to ride.

Nomads to the north especially took to the horse. The speed with which the Plains Indians adapted to the horse when the Spanish introduced it to this continent shows what an impact it probably had on other nomads as well. Nomadic horse archers, controlling their horses with knee pressure, gained a mobility that civilized peoples could never match. Supposedly, a Comanche Indian could fire twenty arrows a minute while hanging under the protection of his horse's neck and moving at a full gallop.

When large civilized armies, such as that of the Persian King, Darius I, tried to conquer such nomads, they usually failed miserably in just trying to catch them. One measure to contain the nomads was the maintenance of long expensive fortified frontiers, such as the Great Wall of China, to stop their raids. Occasionally, the problem of nomadic raids would become a serious threat when various nomadic tribes would be united into one empire, such as that of Attila the Hun or Genghis Khan. Luckily for civilization, such empires were usually dependent on the personality and leadership of their founders and fell apart soon after their deaths.

The Assyrians were the first civilized people of the Near East to mount the horse for military purposes. Cavalry were more maneuverable and versatile than chariots. For one thing, they could operate on rougher ground than chariot wheels could. Possibly more important, riding the horse led to much faster communications. This allowed kings to build and hold much larger empires than before, since they could learn of revolts and react to them much more quickly. The fact that the Assyrian Empire was three times bigger than any empire, which preceded it, was probably due in large part to the horse.

Assyria administered its empire somewhat harshly but efficiently. States close to the Assyrian homeland answered directly to Assyrian governors and garrisons. States farther away, such as Egypt and Israel, could continue to exist under their own rulers as long as they paid tribute and loyally supplied troops for Assyrian wars. If they rebelled, massacres or mass deportations would result, followed by direct Assyrian rule.

Assyrian history was quite turbulent. It was under constant pressure from nomads to the north, and always quelling revolts within its empire. People objected as much to the Assyrian merchants who flooded their market places as they did to their army and ruling methods. As the Biblical prophet, Nahum put it: "Thou hast multiplied thy merchants above the stars of Heaven" (Nahum III, 16). Assyria's subjects apparently had a wide variety of complaints against their masters.

As long as the empire had able and energetic kings, it survived all these wars and revolts, although they must have been a terrible strain on Assyria's economy and resources. The death of the last strong king, Ashurbanipal, in 625 B.C.E., touched off one last round of popular revolts and invasions that the Assyrians were not destined to survive. An alliance of Babylon with the nomadic Medes to the north finally brought the Assyrian Empire crashing down in ruins. In 612 B.C.E., despite heroic resistance to the last, the Assyrian capital, Nineveh was taken and destroyed. The biblical prophet, Nahum, certainly expressed the feelings of many when he wrote: "Woe to the bloody city!...All who hear of your destruction shall clap their hands over you; for upon whom has your wickedness not passed continuously." Such celebrating was somewhat premature, for the Israelites and others like them would merely be trading one master for another. One state that recognized the danger was Egypt. Strangely

enough, they allied with the hated Assyrians to stop the advance of a resurgent Babylon. The issue was decided at Carchemish in 605 B.C.E., the last great chariot battle in history. The result was a decisive victory for the Babylonians, who largely took the place of Assyria in the Near East.

### **The Neo-Babylonian or Chaldaean Empire (612-539 B.C.E.)**

In dividing the spoils of victory, the Medes got the vast lands to the north, while Babylon got the more compact, but richer and civilized lands of the Fertile Crescent. The Neo-Babylonian or Chaldaean Empire, as it is variously called, encompassed most of the old Assyrian Empire with the exception of Egypt. This period saw Babylon at the height of its power and glory.

Babylon's most famous king during this period was Nebuchadnezzar. His main concern was controlling the Western end of the Fertile Crescent: Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt. He never did conquer Egypt, although it no longer presented a threat to him. The remaining two tribes of Israelites in Judah made the mistake of rebelling. As a result, Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed in 587, and the Jews were hauled to Babylon for a captivity that lasted some seventy years. Fortunately, they kept their identity and were allowed to return home by the Persians who overthrew the Babylonians.

One other people Nebuchadnezzar had trouble with were the Phoenicians who had helped the Jews in this revolt. Although most Phoenician cities surrendered, Tyre did not. This city sat on an island about one-half mile from shore. Supposedly, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Tyre for thirteen years without taking it. The main reason was he had no navy with which to blockade Tyre and cut off its supplies. Finally, the Tyrians paid Nebuchadnezzar some tribute if he would leave them alone.

The showpiece of the empire was Babylon, which contained some of the most wondrous sights of the ancient world. The Greek historian, Herodotus, has given us a second hand description of the city at its height. Even taking into account that Herodotus exaggerated a bit, we get a picture of a marvelous city. The Euphrates River split the city into two halves that were connected by a 400-foot long masonry bridge. A massive double set of walls protected the city from invaders and floods. Herodotus claimed a four-horse chariot could drive on top of the battlements and have enough room to turn around! The main ceremonial gateway was the beautiful Ishtar Gate. It was made of blue glazed bricks and decorated with relief sculptures of various animals. The palace complex covered thirteen acres and supposedly the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon were placed here. Their purpose was to comfort the queen who was homesick for the lush hills of her homeland. Finally, there was the fabled Tower of Babel, the largest and most elaborate ziggurat of its day. It was eight stories high and, according to Herodotus, the sanctuary on top was filled with tons of gold.

Babylon's final glory was short lived. Various factors combined to weaken it and set it up for a final fall. For one thing, religious disputes over trying to replace Marduk with the moon god split the empire. Even more important were economic factors. Babylon seems to have lost much of its trade because the Medes cut the overland routes to the north. The southern sea routes also suffered when the ports were silted up, preventing ships from coming in or going out. All of these triggered a feedback cycle much like that which wrecked Babylon after Hammurabi's death some 1200 years before. Heavy expenses from building projects and declining revenues from trade caused the government to raise taxes. This extra burden on the

peasants caused them to abandon the two-field system and farm and irrigate both fields each year. The soil again became salinated as a result of too much irrigation, which raised the water table and brought salt with it, poisoning the crops in the process. This damaged the economy and lowered tax revenues even further, bringing on more tax increases and so on.

The final blow came in 539 B.C.E. when the Persians took Babylon in a night attack. The center of power shifted away from Babylon to the Persian Empire in the north. Mesopotamia's glory days were over, although its culture heavily influenced the Persians, who in turn heavily influenced Muslim civilization, the dominant culture in the Near East today. As a result, Mesopotamia is very much with us. Its culture has just changed and evolved with the times.

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