Ancient Mesopotamia
Mesopotamia Before History Began

- In prehistoric times, small bands of people roamed the hills to the North and East of the Fertile Crescent. They slept in temporary camps and hunted for food.
- Around 7000 B.C.E. they started to build towns.
- Life was easier for babies and children in the new settlements and more people lived to be adults.
- Eventually, there were not enough fields to support the people.
- They had to search for more land and they found a fertile plain bordered by two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates.
The name Mesopotamia comes from two Greek words that mean “middle” and “river”.

It was located between the forest region of northern Europe and Asia.

Mesopotamia is a land surrounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The Euphrates is about 600 miles longer than the Tigris, but the Tigris carries more water. In ancient times, both were used for fishing, transportation and irrigation.
Water Without Rain

- The plain that became Mesopotamia had good farmland. The rivers carried soil down from the mountains and there was plenty of sunshine. However, there was not much rain. Plants need water to grow.

- There was plenty of water in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sumerian farmers learned to dig ditches and make water flow into the fields. This caused enough wheat and barley to grow to feed hundreds of people. This was one of the first uses of irrigation in the world.

- People began making pottery for carrying water, storing seed and preparing food.
In Mesopotamia, building houses was difficult because there was little wood or stone so they learned how to make mud bricks. Sometimes, they baked the mud in ovens to make it harder, but usually they just left it in the desert sun. From these simple blocks of clay, Mesopotamians constructed great cities including temples and palaces.
About 3500 B.C.E. the Sumerians moved into Mesopotamia. They built better roads, created wheels and put them on carts, and introduced new farming methods.
Better Living

- With improved irrigation, farmers produced more food than townspeople could eat. In their new carts, they carried it to be stored for the next season. Traveling over new roads, they exchanged extra food with neighboring people for wood, metal and stone.
More jobs were created:
- Bakers-made bread for families
- Weavers-spun wool and wove it into cloth
- Leather crafters-made sandals
The towns begin to grow into cities where thousands of people lived and worked. These cities did not belong to one nation. Each one was a city-state (separate country).
The people of Mesopotamia were great traders. At first, deals were made by bartering. They exchanged barley, sleeping mats, tools and pottery.

Around 2500 B.C.E. wealthy people started paying their bills with silver coins called “hat” or “ring money”. A shekel, about the weight of three pennies was worth a month’s labor.
To get silver, they traded with people as far away as India. Eventually they sent armies to conquer them.
The Invention of the Wheel

- Mesopotamian traders built rafts out of cedar logs, loaded them with cargo and floated downstream. Carrying grain, pottery, and cloth up the mountain was hard. They needed a land vehicle.
Eventually, they came up with an idea for a wheel. Later, axles were fastened to the bottom of carts and made the wheel turn. Traders could then carry more and travel farther. Soldiers in chariots could carry more weapons.
Writing Assignment: Page 18

List 5 ways your life would be different without the wheel.

Out of those things, which one would affect your life the most? Why?
People needed a way to keep track of things they traded. Drawing pictures took a long time and not everyone drew the same way. People who were good at drawing became known as scribes and began to get hired to keep records for people.
As decades passed, pictures and numbers became lines pressed in clay. Important documents were enclosed on envelopes with special signatures stamps called “Cylinder Seals.” During this time, most people including the King were illiterate. This was a good way for them to sign their name.
Mesopotamian Schools

- Only rich children were allowed to go to school.
- The classes were long and no fun. Students had to copy the same thing over and over again and if they didn’t do it, they would get beaten.
All students learned Cuneiform. Cuneiform began as pictures, but over the years they were sorted into over 500 symbols that stood for sounds and ideas.
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Mesopotamia was not all one flat desert. The north was hilly. It was closer to sources of metal, wood, and wild game. The south had palm trees and rich fishing grounds on the Persian gulf.
Babylonia vs. Assyria

- As the centuries passed, the people in northern and southern Mesopotamia developed separate cultures. They became rivals.
Babylonia vs. Assyria

In 2000 B.C.E. Assyria and Babylon inherited the fertile crescent. In the north, the Assyrians, already master hunters became masters of war. In the south, Babylon became a cultural center, continuing many of the old traditions.
Babylonia vs. Assyria

At first, the Babylonians controlled most of Mesopotamia. Around 1300 B.C.E. the Assyrians started to gain power. They conquered Mesopotamia, parts of Egypt and Anatolia. They had many slaves. The Assyrians built temples and palaces. They created great sculptures and libraries of clay tablets.
Babylonia vs. Assyria

- Meanwhile, the Babylonians formed alliances with Assyria’s enemies. They destroyed the Assyrian capitol, Nineveh. Then, they rebuilt Babylon which Assyria had leveled.
Make a Venn Diagram on page 19 of your notebook comparing Assyria and Babylon. Write three things in each category.
Ziggurats

- The Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians believed their Gods liked to live in the mountains close to the sky. They made their temples as high as possible.
- A powerful leader named Ur-Nammu was the first to build “temple mountains” or Ziggurats.
The Law: Hammurabi

• In 1750 B.C.E. a King named Hammurabi rose to power in Babylon. He united much of Mesopotamia under one rule for the first time in centuries.

• He was a powerful military leader and was known as a “lawgiver”.
Before Hammurabi, laws were written on clay tablets which crumbled. He had his laws engraved on a column of polished black rock that was over seven feet high. It was set up in the city and had 282 laws.

There were no police and victims had to drag wrong-doers into court.
The Law: Hammurabi

- The phrase “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” came from one of Hammurabi’s punishments—it means exact revenge.
For example, if a builder used poor materials and the house fell down and killed someone, he could be executed.

Some offenses were punished by fines, jails were not mentioned.
The New Year’s Festival in Babylon

The New Year’s festival (Akitu) was held every spring in the Babylonian month of Nissan, it celebrated the beginning of the growing season.
Fun Facts

- If a wealthy patient died in surgery, the doctor had his hand cut off.
- Wood was so expensive, when they moved houses, they took their door with them.
Fun Facts

- Rabid dogs were a serious problem in Ancient Mesopotamia.
- On hot nights, they slept on the roof.
- We still use the Mesopotamian base 60 system for counting minutes in an hour.
Ancient Mesopotamians are responsible for creating the World’s first cities, irrigation systems, the wheel and the written word.