Contact and Conflict

Like the history of all civilizations, Mesopotamia’s history can be described as a series of contacts and conflicts. Each of the four major civilizations - Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, and Chaldea - rose to power, thrived, and then declined.

Mesopotamia Thrives

Because there was plenty of food in Mesopotamia, some people could make a living by creating goods or selling their services in exchange for surplus food. People began to develop skills in leatherwork, pottery, carpentry, weaving, and metalwork. They learned to make gold rings, statuettes covered with lapis lazuli [LAH-pis LAH-zuh-ly] (a blue gemstone), and shell containers for make-up. By trading these goods, people could make a good living - the economy thrived.

With its many rivers and canals, the region soon became a centre of trade. The Sumerian traders sailed up and down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in small boats made of reeds with goatskin sails. They also traded with their neighbours throughout the Mediterranean. Caravans and long ships powered by square sails and oars carried building stone from Africa, copper from Cyprus, gold from Egypt, and cedar from Lebanon. In trade, the Sumerians offered wool, cloth, jewellery, oil and grains.

Babylon thrived as a trading centre because it lay at the centre of the main trade routes. Babylonian caravans travelled to Persia and Asia Minor. Their ships traded along the rivers and along the coasts of Arabia and India.

Trade with nearby lands brought more than goods. People also learned about one another’s language, religion, and inventions. For example, new ways of making pottery and new tools for farming spread quickly through the Mediterranean after they appeared in Mesopotamia. This “trade” in ideas helped the Mesopotamian society flourish.

The Babylonians were one of the first peoples to exchange money for goods. The shekel [SHEK-ul] was a silver, copper, or gold coin that weighed the same as 180 grains of barley. A mina [MEE-uh] was worth 60 shekels, and a talent was worth 60 minas. How many grains of barley was a talent worth?

The Sumerians used a barter system to buy and sell goods. Goods were exchanged for their value in sacks of grain.

Scribes, people who sell their writing skills for a living, kept records and accounts on clay tablets.

Mesopotamia’s vast network of irrigation canals made it easy for traders to travel.

Try this to test your knowledge of what you’ve read so far.