

# Mesopotamia 101

By Vickie Chao

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Do you know where the world's oldest culture was?

It was at a place called "the land between the rivers."

Thousands of years ago, people came across an open field in southwestern Asia. They liked the area a lot. One reason was because its soil was very rich. It was great for farming. Another reason was because it was near two large rivers.

At first, their settlements were small villages. But over time, the villages grew larger. Finally, the world's first cities were built there. The world's first culture grew up there.

People in "the land between the rivers" were very smart. They invented and discovered many things. Here are three good examples.

One, they knew that it would be easier to move a heavy object if they placed it over a log roller. As time went by, they made three big changes to the design. First, they put a sledge atop the log roller to help them drag the object. Second, they cut deep grooves into the log roller to help them carry the object farther. Third, they used wooden pegs to fix the sledge to the log roller. The final result was the world's first set of wheels and pushcart. The earliest of its kind dated back about 5,500 years.

Two, they laid down the ground rules for marking time. Their methods are why there are 24 hours in a day, 60 minutes in an hour, and 60 seconds in a minute.

Third, they created a set of wedge-shaped symbols called cuneiform. It was the oldest written language on Earth. With it, people in "the land between the rivers" jotted down their thoughts. They looked at the sky and carefully recorded what they saw. Through their writing, we know that they divided the sky into twelve parts. They gave a name to each of the twelve parts. Later on, those names were translated into Greek and Latin. They became the zodiac we know today. Watching the sky was a very important task for people in "the land between the rivers." That was because they believed that the gods lived in the heavens. By gazing at the stars, they searched for clues that might tell them the gods' will. They would use the zodiac to predict a baby's fortune. And since they were very good at calculation, they could even plot out the future movement of the sun, moon, and stars for long periods. The only thing they got wrong at the time was the shape of the Earth. They thought it was a flat disk.

The culture created by people in "the land between the rivers" had a great impact on our modern cultures. They set up the world's first banking system. They performed the world's first brain surgery. They created the world's first symbol for zero. They published the world's first laws. The list for their achievements is endless. It is simply impossible to describe them all!

So now that we know what a major role "the land between the rivers" played in history, we must ask -- where exactly is "the land between the rivers"? Amazingly, most of it is in a place that we often hear about on the news. It is Iraq!



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Mesopotamia 101

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about "the land between the rivers" is correct?
- A. It was in Southeast Asia.
  - B. People in "the land between the rivers" believed that the Earth looked like a ball.
  - C. The bulk of it is in Iran.
  - D. People in "the land between the rivers" set up the world's first banking system.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following was NOT first created by people in "the land between the rivers"?
- A. paper
  - B. pushcarts
  - C. laws
  - D. wheels
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Where is "the land between the rivers"?
- A. Iran
  - B. Iraq
  - C. Greece
  - D. Rome
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. How many minutes did people in "the land between the rivers" say an hour had?
- A. 60
  - B. 90
  - C. 120
  - D. 150
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Into how many parts did people in "the land between the rivers" divide the sky?
- A. 12
  - B. 15
  - C. 3
  - D. 9
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Cuneiform was a system of wedge-shaped symbols used by people in "the land between the rivers" for writing.
- A. true
  - B. false
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. How did people in "the land between the rivers" describe the shape of the Earth?
- A. They thought it was a big square.
  - B. They thought it was a flat disk.
  - C. They thought it was a giant tube.
  - D. They thought it was like a ball.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. How did people in "the land between the rivers" move a heavy object?
- A. They put it on a flying carpet.
  - B. They put it on a log roller.
  - C. They put it on an airplane.
  - D. They put it on a truck.

## Medicine in Mesopotamia

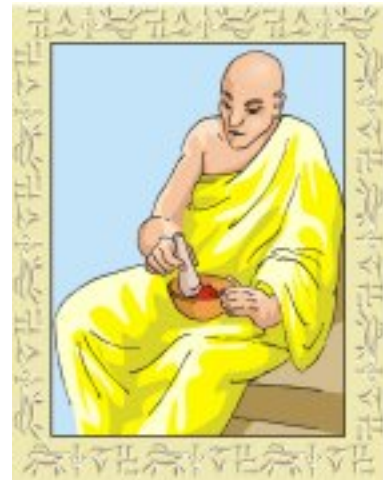
By Vickie Chao

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In Greek, Mesopotamia (pronounced "mes-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh") meant "the land between the rivers." Nestled between the Tigris and the Euphrates, this stretch of land was home to the world's oldest culture. (The bulk of it was in present-day Iraq.) As a matter of fact, because of its ancient status, Mesopotamia was often called the cradle of civilization.

People began to move into Mesopotamia more than 9,000 years ago. Since very early on, they had shown a great interest in medicine. They wanted to know why people got sick. They wanted to know how to make them better. They did a lot of research on this matter. And they kept a detailed account of their findings.

Thanks to their excellent records, we know that there were two types of healers in Mesopotamia. The first was called *ashipu*. An *ashipu* was like a sorcerer or a witch doctor. He saw patients and determined the causes of their ailments. Back in those days, people believed that evil spirits made people sick. To recover, they had to please the gods they had upset earlier. And that was when an *ashipu* came into play. When a man fell ill, an *ashipu* would pay him a visit. He would tell the man which god was angry with him. He would tell the man what he had to do to make amends. For example, the man might need to say a certain prayer or chant to drive out the evil spirit. He might need to sacrifice an animal. Or he might need to perform some magic rituals. Sometimes, when necessary, an *ashipu* would refer his patient to see the second kind of healer called *asu*. An *asu* was a specialist in herbal remedies. He wrote prescriptions to cure diseases. Occasionally, he would perform surgeries, too. Shocking as it may be, people in Mesopotamia were already advanced enough to perform eye or even brain surgery.



Of course, undergoing surgery was a big deal in Mesopotamia. The risk was very high. To protect the patients and the healers, there were specific laws in the Code of Hammurabi governing the use of a knife. If a surgery went as planned, the patient was obligated to pay the *asu* for his work. But if it went wrong, the *asu* would be held liable for the mistake. The amount of money or the type of punishment an *asu* got depended solely on the status of his patient. For example, if an *asu* successfully treated a nobleman, he would get 10 shekels of silver. For the same service, he would get 5 shekels for treating a commoner or 2 for a slave. Likewise, if an *asu* killed a nobleman on an operating table, one of his hands would be cut off. Suppose the unlucky patient was a slave; the *asu* simply had to repay the owner the cost of the slave.

By all accounts, people in Mesopotamia did not have very accurate notions when it came to medicine. Nevertheless, they studied the human body carefully and knew how it worked. As a result, they made many important discoveries. Those findings were critical to our modern science!

Medicine in Mesopotamia

### Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about medicine in Mesopotamia is correct?
- A. An *ashipu* would never refer his patients to see an *asu*.
  - B. People in Mesopotamia went to see *ashipus* to get magic spells and chants.
  - C. People in Mesopotamia went to see *ashipus* to get prescriptions.
  - D. People in Mesopotamia did not believe in witchcraft.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. In the minds of people in Mesopotamia, what were the causes of ailments?
- A. Evil spirits
  - B. Viruses
  - C. Germs
  - D. Water
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. In Mesopotamia, who could perform brain surgery?
- A. An *ashipu*
  - B. An *asu*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. What would happen if a patient of high social status died on an operating table in Mesopotamia?
- A. The surgeon had to pay for the funeral.
  - B. The surgeon had to pay 10 shekels of silver.
  - C. One of the surgeon's hands would be cut off.
  - D. Nothing would happen to the surgeon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. What did *ashipus* do in Mesopotamia?
- A. They treated wounds with herbs.
  - B. They performed brain surgeries.
  - C. They prescribed herbal remedies.
  - D. They performed witchcraft.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Where was Mesopotamia?
- A. In present-day Iran
  - B. In present-day Iraq
  - C. In present-day Saudi Arabia
  - D. In present-day Egypt
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. In Mesopotamia, what determined how much a surgeon got paid?
- A. All surgeons in Mesopotamia charged the same fee.
  - B. The surgeon's status in society
  - C. The patient's status in society
  - D. The surgeon's reputation
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Which king in Mesopotamia made laws governing the practice of surgeries?
- A. Nebuchadnezzar
  - B. Hammurabi
  - C. Sumuabum
  - D. Nabopolassar