

What would it have been like to live in Mesopotamia, one of the earliest human civilizations? Almost 6,000 years ago, a complex society grew in present-day Iraq and Syria, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The word *Mesopotamia* means “land between the rivers.” Mesopotamia was the center of the Fertile Crescent, an area known for its rich, moist soil. This fertile land produced abundant crops. Over time, the people of the region were able to produce enough crops to feed themselves and trade the extra food they produced. Mesopotamia grew in size and power, helped along by the trade of its rich agricultural resources.

The weather in Mesopotamia was known for extremes: much of the year experienced hot and dry weather, broken up by a yearly flood cycle. Though the floods were destructive, this important civilization could not have existed without the unique environment of the region, specifically the yearly flood cycle.

Mesopotamia owed its prosperity in large part to the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the spring. Rain was not always plentiful in the region. The only consistent source of freshwater came from the floods. The Mesopotamians relied on the water brought by the floods for drinking, for their livestock, and for watering their crops. The floods also brought fish and waterfowl to the Fertile Crescent, which were sources of food for the Mesopotamians.

The floods in Mesopotamia improved the soil in the area, allowing for more widespread agriculture. Most of the soil in the region was salty and sandy and not suitable for farming. The floods brought silt, which made the soil fertile. The silt from the floods contained nutrients and minerals that helped crops to thrive. Fertile soil meant larger crop yields, which in turn meant more crops available to trade. As farming became increasingly profitable, farming settlements grew into villages, which then grew into cities. The new cities created a demand for new types of goods and services. Thus, Mesopotamia’s economic growth depended, in large part, on the silt brought by the floods.

Although the floods were important for the soil, they could also be quite devastating. In the spring, when melted snow from nearby mountains flowed into the Tigris and Euphrates and the rivers overflowed their banks, the crops that were ready for harvest could be destroyed. Often, the floods ruined an entire



Mesopotamia developed in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Each year, powerful floods helped enrich the soil but also caused destruction.

harvest. Livestock, including cows, pigs, and sheep, were often drowned by the floodwaters. In winter, when heavy rains could cause the rivers to overflow, newly planted crops would be washed away. Even though the rivers were vital to trade and transportation, if the people lost their crops, they had nothing to trade. It was quite a gamble to live near these sometimes-dangerous rivers.

The rivers were not just destructive to crops and livestock. People could also see their homes damaged or even washed away by the raging floodwaters. There were few natural resources in Mesopotamia with which to build homes, so the loss of a home was incredibly costly. Because there were not many trees in the area, people often constructed homes out of bricks formed from mud. This material was readily available but required a lot of work and time to form into houses. If a farmer needed to rebuild his house, that meant he had less time to focus on the more important work of farming.

The Mesopotamians could not stop the floods, but they did develop ways to help control the floodwaters. In this way, the Mesopotamians controlled their environment, instead of being controlled by it. This resulted in the creation of one of the most important advances in civilization: irrigation. The Mesopotamians figured out a way to preserve their land, its fertility, and their yearly harvests by taking control of the floodwaters. Over the course of many years, they developed levees and reservoir basins to hold water. These kept the floodwaters from drowning the crops. They also developed a canal system that took the water from the basins to irrigation ditches. The irrigation ditches distributed the water to the fields for watering the crops. These systems also provided freshwater for livestock. Without the yearly floods and the need to control the water, the Mesopotamians would not have developed irrigation systems. These irrigation systems made them more successful at farming—yet another reason why the floods were important to this civilization.

It is easy to see why the ancient Mesopotamians were of two minds about the flooding—although it could be beneficial, it also caused much destruction. The floods improved the soil but could destroy homes and crops. The waters could cause massive losses, but they also led to the development of irrigation systems. Consider your thoughts on the floods in the Fertile Crescent. Do you think that the benefits of the yearly floods outweighed the costs of the floods?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** In which of the following present-day countries did the ancient Mesopotamian civilization develop?
 - A.** Iraq and Syria
 - B.** Iran and Iraq
 - C.** Turkey and Iraq
 - D.** Egypt and Syria

- 2.** When did the floods take place in the Fertile Crescent?
 - A.** winter
 - B.** spring
 - C.** summer
 - D.** fall

- 3.** Which of the following is a benefit of the yearly floods?
 - A.** Houses were often washed away.
 - B.** The soil was rich and fertile.
 - C.** Harvests were wiped out.
 - D.** Livestock was drowned.

- 4.** How did the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers contribute to the development of ancient Mesopotamia? Provide details to support your answer.