

Mesopotamia 101

By Vickie Chao

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 Southwest 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 had two large rivers nearby.

At first, their settlements were small villages. But over time, they grew larger. Finally, they built the world's first cities. And they developed the world's first culture.

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 a day, 60 minutes an hour, and 60 seconds a minute.

Third, they created a set of wedge-shaped symbols called the 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.

To sum up, 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



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ask -- where exactly is "the land between the rivers"? Amazingly, most of it is at a place that we often hear on the news. It is Iraq!

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Questions

- _____ 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. Wheel
 - B. Paper
 - C. Pushcart
 - D. Law
- _____ 3. Where is "the land between the rivers"?
- A. Iran
 - B. Rome
 - C. Greece
 - D. Iraq
- _____ 4. How many minutes an hour did people in "the land between the rivers" say it had?
- A. 120
 - B. 90
 - C. 150
 - D. 60
- _____ 5. Into how many parts did people in "the land between the rivers" divide the sky?
- A. 12
 - B. 9
 - C. 3
 - D. 15
- _____ 6. The cuneiform was a system of wedge-shaped symbols used by people in "the land between the rivers" for writing.
- A. True
 - B. False

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- _____ 7. How did people in "the land between the rivers" describe the shape of the Earth?
- A. They thought it was like a ball.
 - B. They thought it was a giant tube.
 - C. They thought it was a big square.
 - D. They thought it was a flat disk.
- _____ 8. How did people in "the land between the rivers" move a heavy object?
- A. They put it on a truck.
 - B. They put it on an airplane.
 - C. They put it on a log roller.
 - D. They put it on a flying carpet.