

Excerpt from the book:

Cultures of the Past: Mesopotamia

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In the Beginning

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Most of Mesopotamia, away from its marshy rivers, is a flat, treeless plain, hot and dry with few natural resources. It doesn't seem a likely spot to give birth to civilization—and, in fact, ancient Mesopotamian culture began not on the plain but in the mountains north and east of the plain.

There green wooded hills enjoyed regular rainfall and supported a wide variety of plants and animals. The early people of the region were hunters and gatherers. They lived on game and wild plants, and they frequently had to move their homes to follow their food.

Around 10,000 B.C.E.* they made a revolutionary change in their lives. Some people discovered that instead of eating all the wild seed they collected, they could plant some near their homes. Then food plants would grow there next season, and they wouldn't have to travel far to collect them. The people also discovered that they could have meat when they wanted it by protecting some of the wild herds from dangers and keeping them grazing nearby.

This change allowed people to build permanent homes and acquire more possessions. After a time, however, intense farming or grazing on the same land wore out the soil. These early farmers then began moving down into the Mesopotamian plain.

Here the soil was thick and rich, and it was kept that way by the yearly flooding of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. During the late spring these rivers, swollen by melting snow from the Taurus and Zagros Mountains, overflowed their banks, turning the whole plain into a lake. Retreating waters left behind rich soil carried down from the mountains.