

# Exploring Four Empires of Mesopotamia

## 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, you read about the ancient civilization of Sumer. In this chapter, you will discover what happened to the Sumerians and who ruled Mesopotamia after them.

As you have learned, the city-states of Sumer were like independent countries. They often fought over land and water rights. They never united into one group. Their lack of unity left them open to attacks by stronger groups.

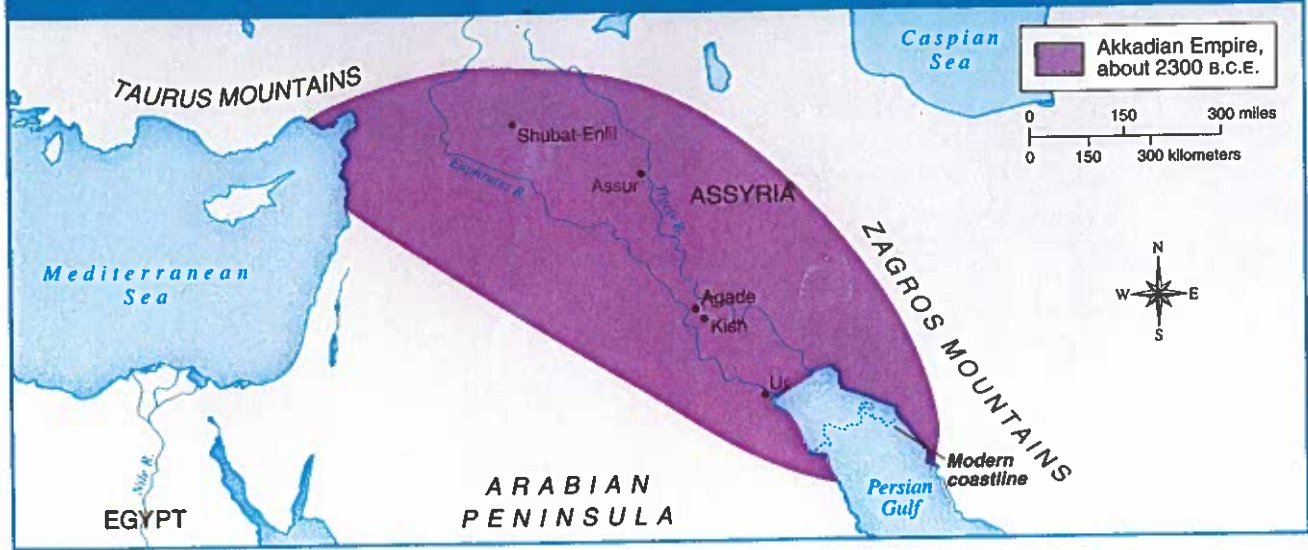
About 2300 B.C.E., a group called the Akkadians conquered Sumer. They made the Sumerian city-states a part of an empire. An **empire** is a large territory where several groups of people are ruled by a single powerful leader or government. Empire builders like the Akkadians first conquer other lands. Then they use their power to keep these lands under their control.

In this chapter, you will learn about four empires that rose up in Mesopotamia between 2300 and 539 B.C.E. They were the **Akkadian Empire**, the **Babylonian Empire**, the **Assyrian Empire**, and the **Neo-Babylonian Empire**.



Use this graphic organizer to help you remember the major achievements of the empires of Mesopotamia.

## The Akkadian Empire, About 2300 B.C.E.



### 6.2 The Akkadian Empire

For 1,500 years, Sumer was a land of independent city-states. Then, around 2300 B.C.E., the Akkadians conquered the land. The Akkadians came from northern Mesopotamia. They were led by a great king named Sargon. Sargon became the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire.

Sargon was both a strong king and a skilled general. He created his empire through powerful military strategies. First he assembled a large army. He taught his soldiers to fight in tight formations. Soldiers carrying shields stood at the front of the formation. Behind them stood soldiers carrying spears. The spear carriers extended their weapons between the shields.

Sargon used his military skills to win territory for his empire. After defeating the king of the city-state of Uruk, Sargon controlled all of Mesopotamia, including Sumer.

To keep control of his empire, Sargon used smart political strategies. He destroyed the walls of cities to make it harder for people to rebel. He also made sure the governors of city-states were loyal to him. If they were not, he replaced them with his own men. And he became the first king to demand that his sons rule after his death.

Sargon died in very old age. His name soon passed into legend. He and the Akkadians had created the world's first empire. This was their greatest achievement.

This metal sculpture is of the head of Sargon. Based on what you see, how would you describe this famous king?





## 6.3 Life Under Akkadian Rule

Sargon ruled his empire for 56 years. During that time, he made the city of Agade in northern Mesopotamia the empire's **capital**. He built up the city with **tributes**, or money and goods, collected from the people he conquered. Agade became a cultural center with many beautiful temples and palaces. It was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world.

The Akkadians ruled Sumer, but the Sumerians' culture lived on. The Akkadians used Sumerian irrigation techniques to farm. To record information, they used the Sumerians' system of cuneiform writing. They even worshiped the same gods and goddesses, although they called them by different names. Religion remained central to the social order, and kings continued to rule in the name of the gods.

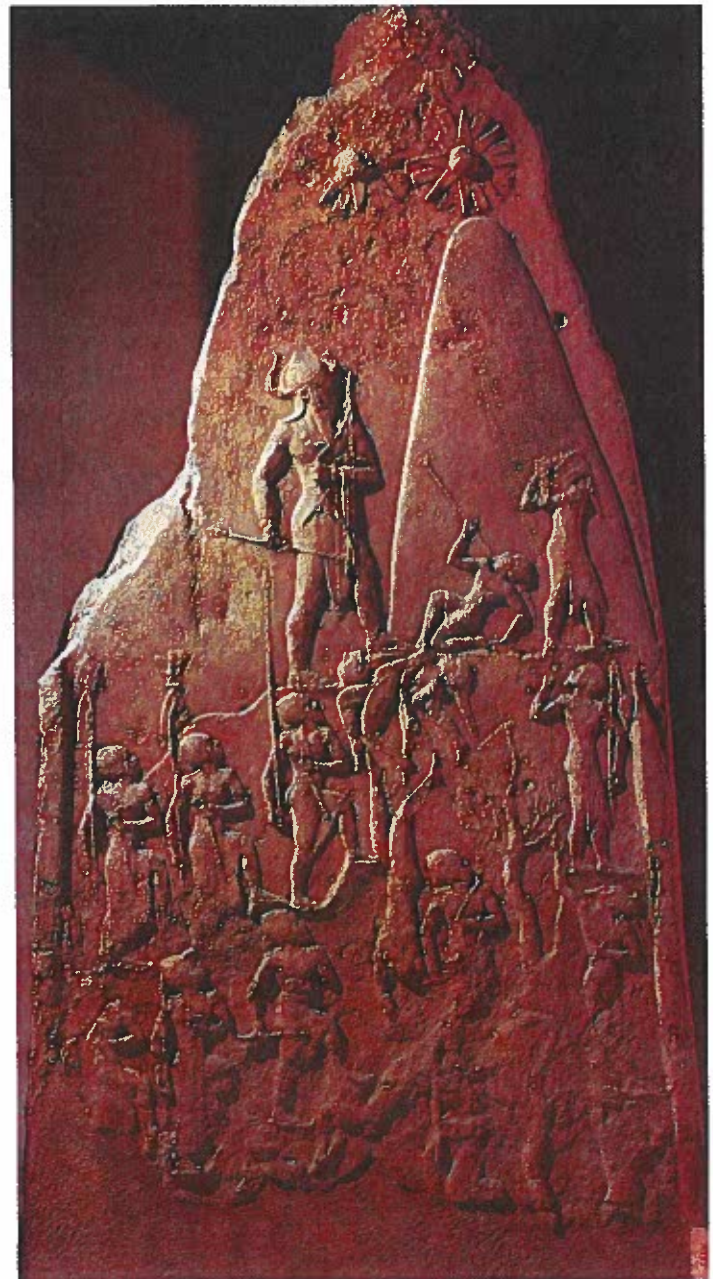
The Akkadians had cultural achievements of their own. Their language gradually replaced the Sumerian language. In art, they became especially well known for their beautiful three-dimensional sculptures. Craftspeople carved relief sculptures on stones. These carved stones are called *steles*. One famous example is called the Victory Stele. It was created to celebrate a military victory by Sargon's grandson, King Naram-Sin. The stele shows Naram-Sin leading his victorious army up the slopes of a mountain. Some of his enemies are crushed underfoot. Others die, flee, or beg for mercy.

Sargon had hoped that his empire would last for a thousand years. But later kings found it difficult to rule such a large territory. The empire became weaker and weaker. After about 200 years, the Akkadian Empire fell to new invaders from the north.

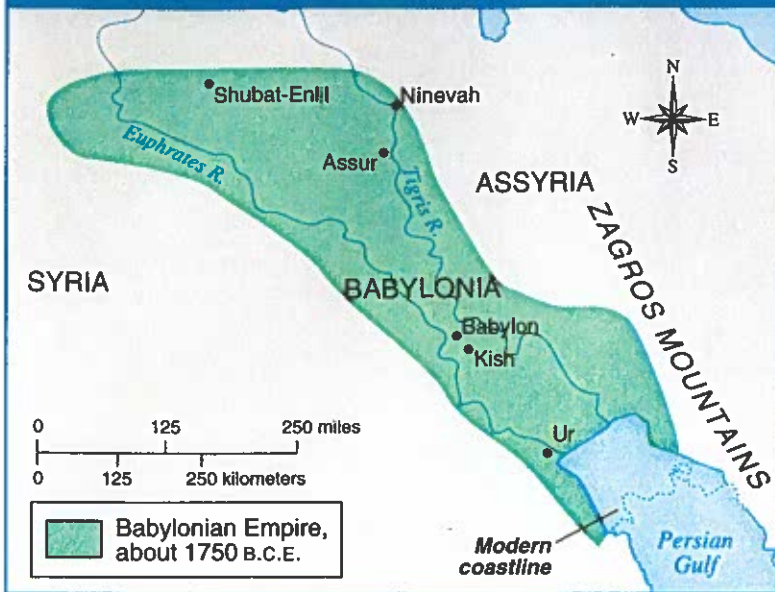
On the Victory Stele, King Naram-Sin is pictured as taller than the other men. He wears a horned crown to make him look like a god.

**capital** a city that is the center of government

**tribute** wealth sent from one country or ruler to another as a sign that the other is superior



The Babylonian Empire, About 1750 B.C.E.



## 6.4 Hammurabi and the Babylonian Empire

For a time after the fall of the Akkadians, Sumer was once again a collection of city-states. The next ruler to unite all of Mesopotamia was a king named Hammurabi.

Hammurabi was the king of Babylon, a small city-state in central Mesopotamia. After conquering the rest of Mesopotamia, he made Babylon the capital of his empire. The region under his rule became known as Babylonia.

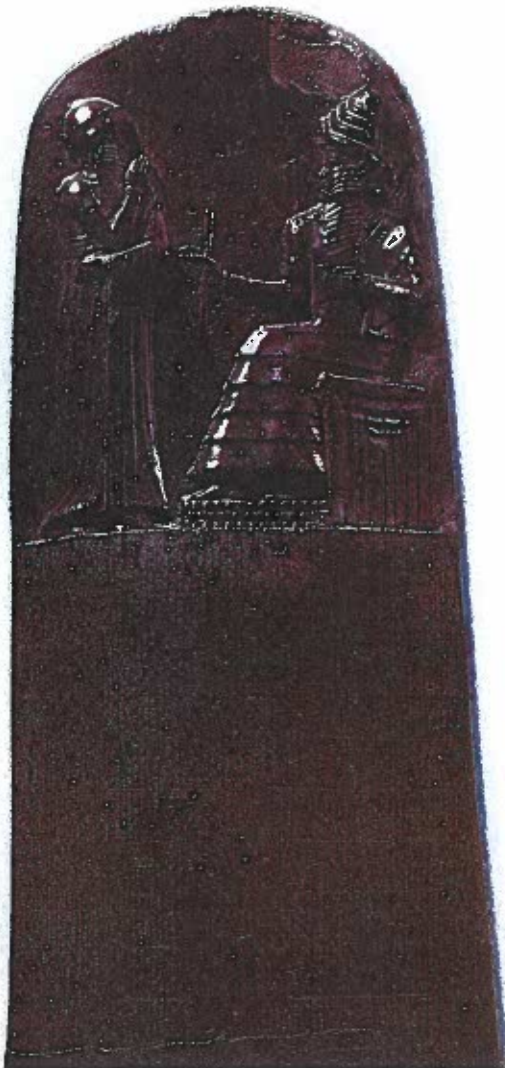
Hammurabi is best known for his code of laws, which he wrote from

1792 to 1750 B.C.E. Hammurabi used the code of laws to unify his empire and to preserve order. He based the laws not just on his own authority, but on the word of the gods. He claimed that the gods had told him to create laws that applied to everyone in the empire. Because they were based on the gods' will, the laws could never be changed. The code of laws was written on a stele and placed in a temple for everyone to see.

Hammurabi's code was very detailed. It covered many situations, such as trade, payment for work, marriage, and divorce. The code spelled out punishments for stealing, causing injury, and other crimes. For example, a builder who sold a poorly built house that collapsed and killed its owner could be put to death. If the owner's son rather than the owner was killed in the collapse, the builder's son could be put to death.

Laws like this one seem harsh to us now. Yet Hammurabi's code was an important achievement. Although it did not treat all people equally in terms of laws and punishments, it was the first code of laws to apply to everyone.

Hammurabi's code was carved on a stele so that all people would know their rights and responsibilities.





## 6.5 Life in the Babylonian Empire

Babylonia thrived under Hammurabi. He worked to unite the people of his empire. He made the Babylonian god, Marduk, supreme over other gods. He built roads and created a postal service.

Agriculture and trade flourished. Hammurabi carefully kept irrigation systems working properly, so the land remained fertile and provided plenty of food. The city of Babylon was on the banks of the Euphrates River, and it became an important center of trade. Babylonians traded with people all along the Persian Gulf. They traded grain and woven cloth for wood, gold, silver, precious gems, and livestock (animals).

Trade helped the empire's economy. Many kinds of craftspeople used materials brought from distant lands. The arts also flourished. Writers wrote historical poems that survive to this day.

Most important, Babylonian society was unusually fair for its time. The laws treated different classes differently, but even slaves had some rights. Slaves could work elsewhere and keep their wages. They could own property. If they saved enough money, they could even buy their freedom.

Women also had more rights than they did in most ancient societies. Even though their fathers chose their husbands, women could own property. They could also keep money of their own.

Hammurabi was proud of his achievements. He once wrote:

*I rooted out the enemy above and below.*

*I made an end of war.*

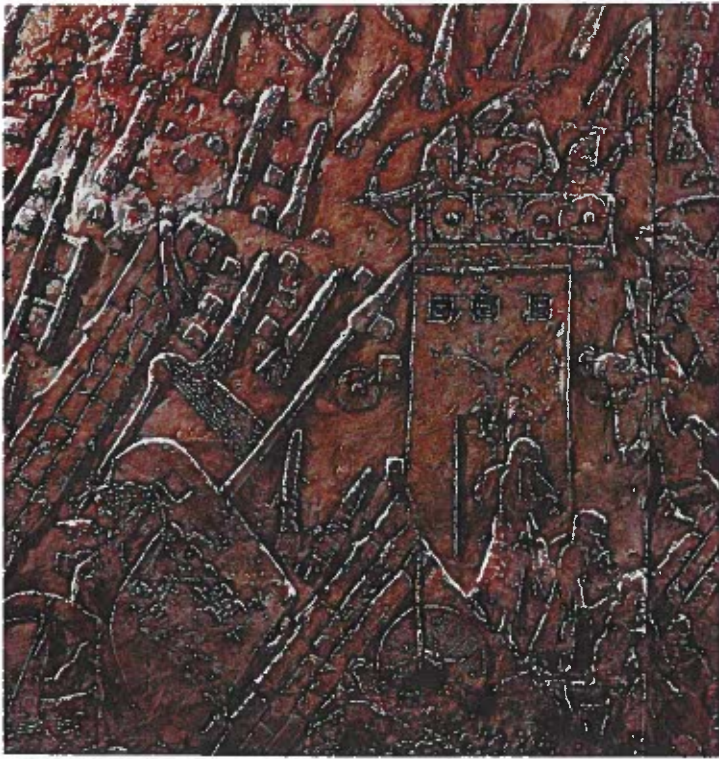
*I promoted the welfare of the land....*

*I have governed the people in peace.*

*I have sheltered them in my strength.*



This woman is weaving cloth on a simple loom. One end of the loom is tied around a tree or post, and the other end is tied around her back.



This carving shows an army breaking through the walls of a city with a battering ram.

## 6.6 The Assyrian Empire

The line of kings begun by Hammurabi did not rule Babylonia for long. Over the next several hundred years, a number of groups ruled parts of Babylonia. The next great empire in Mesopotamia was created by a warlike people called the Assyrians.

Assyria lay to the north of Babylon. The Assyrians had lived in Mesopotamia for a long time. They had even briefly had their own empire before being conquered by Hammurabi. They rose to power again toward 900 B.C.E., when a series of rulers began training them for war. With their trained army, the

Assyrians began to expand their territory.

The Assyrians were feared for their military might and their cruelty. Their greatest achievements were their new weapons and war strategies. They perfected the use of horses and iron weapons in battle. They also became extremely good at siege warfare. In a **siege**, an army camps outside a city and attacks it over and over again until the city falls. The Assyrians developed new ways of attacking cities. They were the first to use battering rams. These were long poles on wheels that were used for punching holes in walls. The Assyrians also built moveable towers that could be

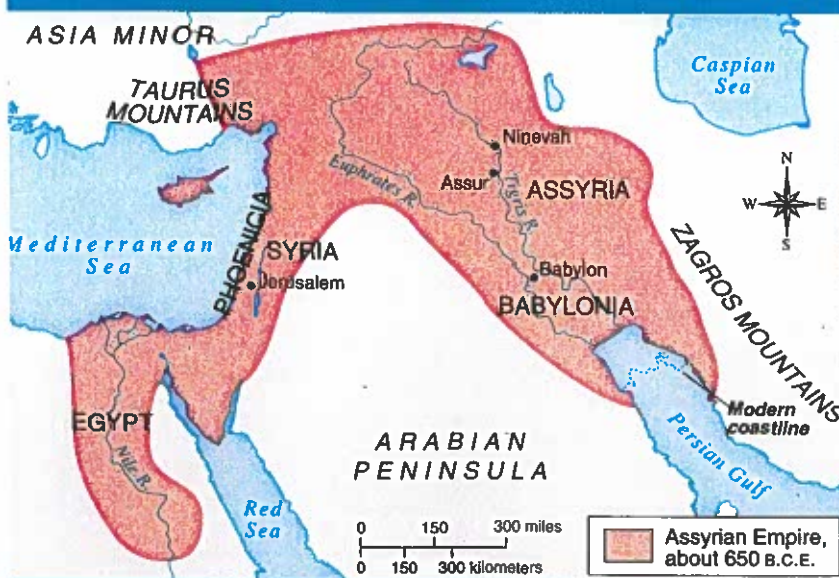
**siege** a military blockade and attack on a city to force it to surrender

rolled up to a city's walls. Soldiers used the towers to climb over the walls.

The Assyrians were often ruthless. They made entire populations leave conquered areas.

The Assyrians spread tales of their cruelty far and wide. Creating fear among their enemies was part of their military strategy. One such tale was that after cutting off the heads of enemy leaders, they forced defeated soldiers to march barefoot wearing their leaders' heads around their necks.

The Assyrian Empire, About 650 B.C.E.





## 6.7 Life Under the Assyrians

The Assyrian Empire was ruled by powerful kings. Religion, however, remained very important in the social and political order. Even kings were obliged to obey the gods.

The Assyrians believed that kings were special beings. So it's not surprising that they built beautiful palaces for them. The great palace in the capital city of Nineveh had many, many rooms. Some palaces were built on tall mounds so they were higher than all the surrounding buildings. Huge sculptures of winged and human-headed bulls or lions stood at the entrances.

While the kings ruled, ordinary people farmed the land. Like other groups in Mesopotamia, the Assyrians dug canals to irrigate their land and keep it fertile. They also built some of the earliest **aqueducts**. A system of canals and aqueducts brought drinking water to Nineveh from 30 miles away.

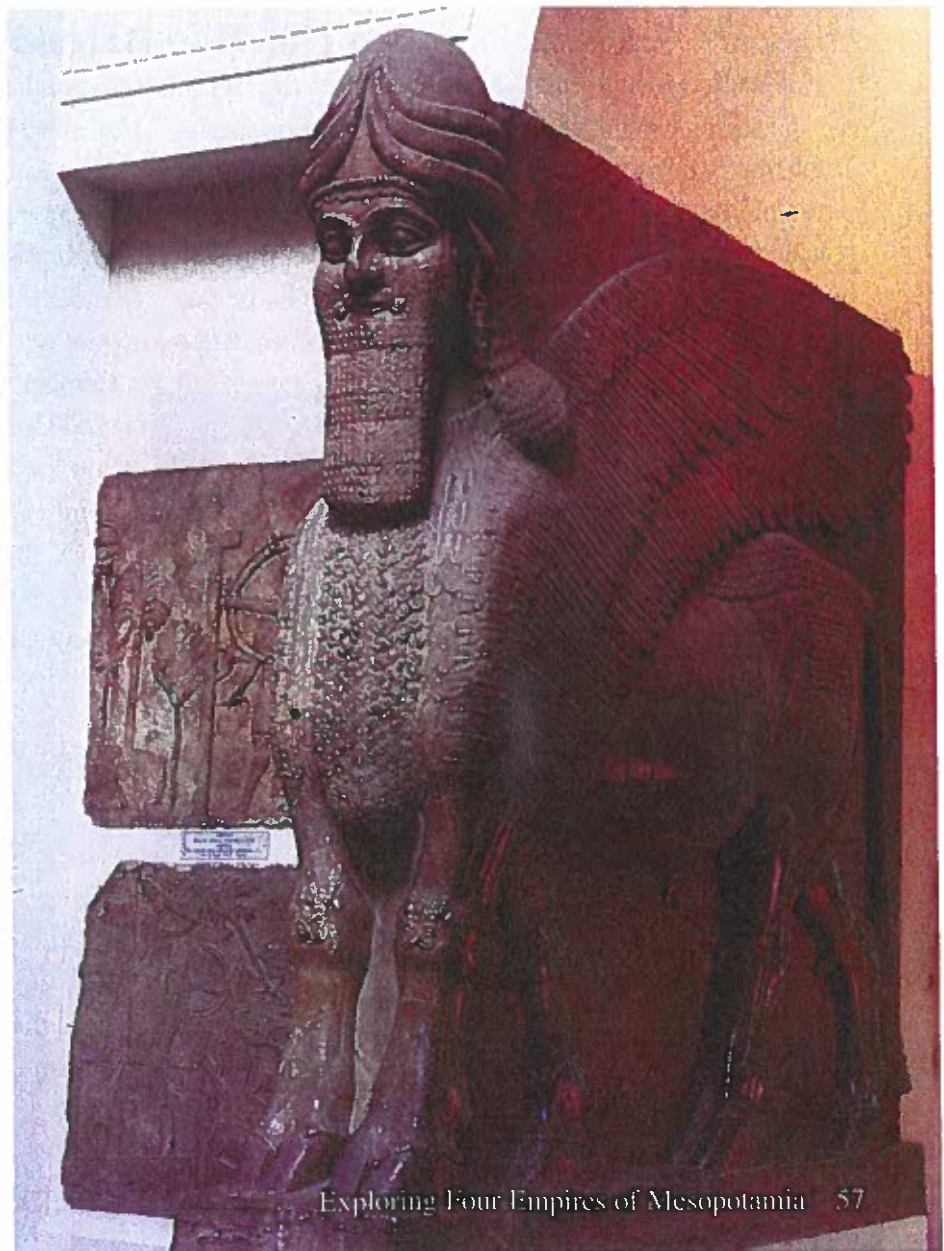
Assyrian craftspeople were known for their two-dimensional sculptures called **bas-reliefs**. Many of their most famous bas-reliefs were on palace walls. They were amazingly realistic. Often they showed the king hunting, fighting in battle, or enjoying family life. The Assyrians also used ivory to decorate thrones, beds, chairs, and doors.

The Assyrian Empire lasted about 300 years. At its height, it stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. In the end, this vast territory proved too big to control. The army was stretched thin, and the Assyrians could not fight off neighbors who rose up against them. In 612 B.C.E., Nineveh was plundered by a combined army of Babylonians, Scythians, and a group called the Medes. The Assyrians' power was broken forever.

**aqueduct** a pipe or channel that brings water from distant places

**bas-relief** a sculpture in which the image projects out from a flat surface

This winged bull with five legs stood guard before a palace of an Assyrian king.





## The Neo-Babylonian Empire, About 600 B.C.E.



### 6.8 The Neo-Babylonian Empire

After the fall of Nineveh, the Babylonians regained control over Mesopotamia. They established a new empire, the Neo-Babylonian Empire. (*Neo* means “new.”)

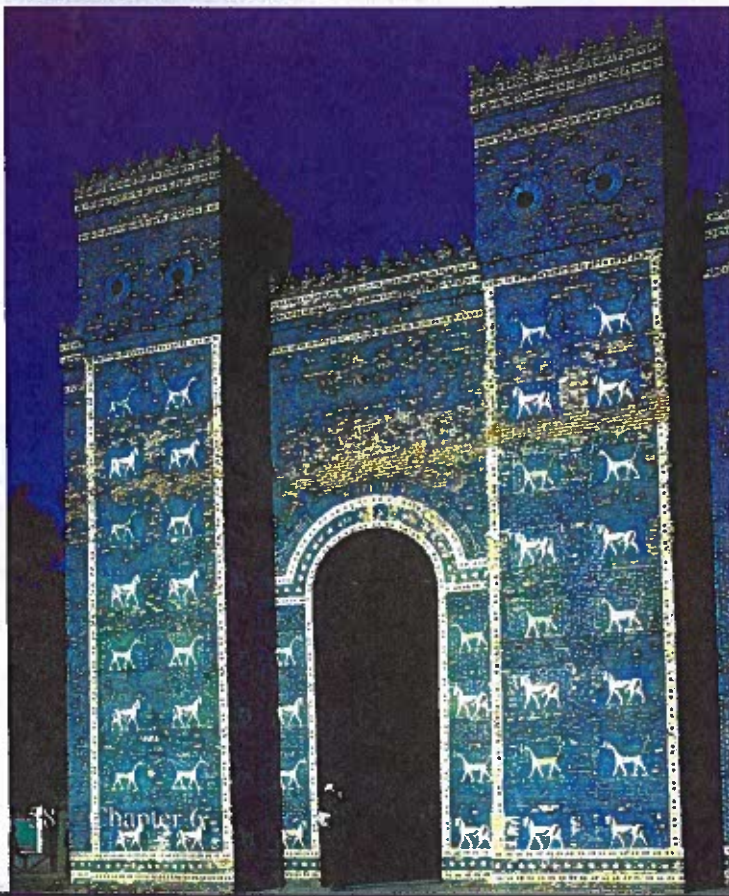
The new empire’s most famous king was Nebuchadrezzar II. A ruthless military leader, he reigned from 605 to 562 B.C.E.

Nebuchadrezzar expanded his empire whenever he could. He drove the Egyptians out of Syria. He also conquered part of

Canaan (present-day Israel), the home of the Hebrews. When the Hebrews rebelled, he took most of them captive and carried them off into Babylonia. Many of them never returned to their homeland.

As a military leader, Nebuchadrezzar knew it was important to keep his capital city, Babylon, safe. He built an inner wall and an outer wall around the city. The walls were so thick that two chariots could pass each other on top of them. Towers were placed on the walls for archers to stand on. Finally, a moat was dug around the outer wall and filled with water. During peacetime, people used bridges to cross the moat and enter the city. In times of war, the bridges were taken down.

The Ishtar Gate was one of the gates into Babylon. Each gate was dedicated to a Babylonian god or goddess. Ishtar was the goddess of war and love.





## 6.9 Life in the Neo-Babylonian Empire

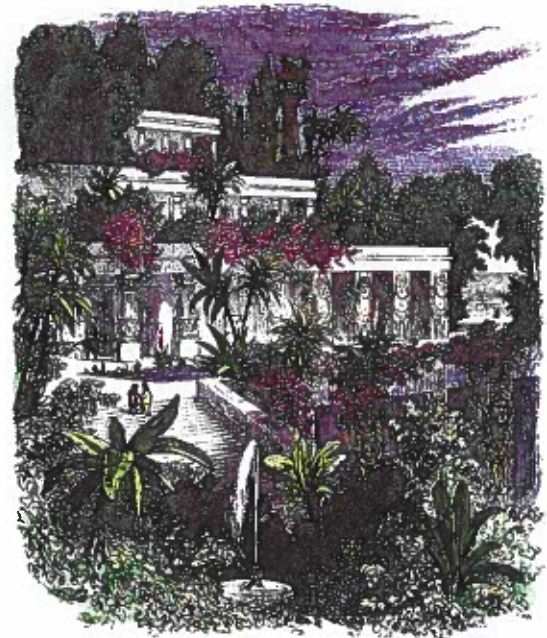
Nebuchadnezzar worked hard to give Babylon the splendor it had enjoyed under Hammurabi. From 605 to 562 B.C.E., he rebuilt the city's ziggurat. This huge structure was several stories high. The Babylonians called it the "House of the Platform Between Heaven and Earth."

Nebuchadnezzar decorated his palace with fabulous gardens. They became famous as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The gardens were planted on rooftops and tall terraces so that lush greenery hung down over the walls. A watering system kept the gardens fresh and green. They were one of the great wonders of the ancient world.

The Babylonians were also skilled in mathematics and **astronomy**. They created the first sundial, a device for telling time using the sun. They made discoveries that led us to the 60-minute hour and the 7-day week.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire lasted only 75 years. In 539 B.C.E., a new conqueror swept into Babylon from the east. His name was Cyrus, and he was the leader of the Persian Empire.

The Persians came from the land we now call Iran. For about 200 years, they ruled the most powerful empire in the world. Later you will learn how the Persians themselves were conquered by a man named Alexander the Great.



The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the wonders of the ancient world. The sight of so many trees and bushes rising above the desert landscape was stunning.

**astronomy** the study of stars and planets

## 6.10 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about four empires that once ruled Mesopotamia. Each of these empires had its own achievements. And each had its own problems that eventually led to its fall.

Outside Mesopotamia, other cultures developed during this time. In the next unit, you'll explore the cultures of the ancient Egyptians, the people of Kush, and the Hebrews.

### Four Empires of Mesopotamia

