In the Tigris-Euphrates valley of present-day Iraq lay the ancient Sumerian city-state of Ur. Between 1924 and 1934, an archaeological team led by Leonard Woolley conducted excavations that uncovered the ancient ruins. Among Woolley’s findings was an incredible discovery. In the tomb of Queen Shub-Ad, the team discovered the remains of more than 60 female skeletons. Clothing remnants and jewellery indicated the likelihood that they had been women of the court. Nearby were the remains of soldiers with their spears, a harpist clutching his harp, and oxen still harnessed to wagons. The hands of most of the skeletons were raised towards their mouths. Little clay cups were scattered on the floor of the tomb. What could have happened here?

Those observing the scene speculated that the servants of the dead queen had followed the body into the tomb. There, they had taken poison so that their mistress would not go on to the afterlife alone.

Ur was just one of the great city-states of Sumer, part of ancient Mesopotamia. Leonard Woolley’s discovery points to some remarkable characteristics of the city and its people. During the period of Queen Shub-Ad’s reign, Ur was the seat of a magnificent court and a highly sophisticated society with soldiers, court servants, musicians, and many others. The discovery also reveals an important aspect of Mesopotamian culture—a profound belief in an afterlife, and a desire to take some earthly belongings to the world after death.

For almost 3000 years, city-states and empires rose and fell in Mesopotamia. Among the empires were Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Chaldea. Although periods of disunity and war mark the history of ancient Mesopotamia, the peoples of the region made many important contributions that other civilizations in the ancient world would build upon. Today, we still consider Mesopotamia as a “cradle of civilization.”

**THE LAND BETWEEN THE RIVERS**

Ancient Mesopotamia lay in what we know today as Iraq, northeast Syria, and part of southeast Turkey. It stretched from the Persian Gulf northwest through the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The ancient Greeks were the first to call the region Mesopotamia. The Greek word *meso* means middle and *potamos* means river—thus it was “the land between the rivers.” Mesopotamia was part of an area known as the Fertile Crescent which stretched in an arc from the Persian Gulf through northeast Syria to the Mediterranean Sea and was
the site of some of the world’s first permanent farming villages.

Throughout its ancient history, Mesopotamia was home to different peoples and cultural groups. It lay at the crossroads of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Semitic, Asian, and Indo-European peoples all moved into the region at various periods. The mountains to the north and east were not high enough to isolate the area or protect it from invading or migrating peoples. Nomads living in the deserts to the west also attacked the river valley settlements periodically.

At first glance, the land and climate of the region hardly seem ideal for the development of a thriving civilization. The south was primarily a flat flood plain. Summers were very hot and dry; droughts could kill crops and cause famines. In spring, meltwaters from the nearby Zagros Mountains could cause flooding, and sudden downpours in winter could turn the plains to mud. The floods were unpredictable and posed a serious hazard to the river valley settlements. Sometimes floodwaters and sandbanks hindered travel and communication along the rivers as well.

The south had few natural resources such as minerals or forests and, except for clay, few building materials. Abundant fish and waterfowl lived in the marshes and rivers, however, and the silt deposited by the floodwaters was extremely fertile. As the people learned to control the flooding, drain the land, and irrigate the soil, the region produced excellent yields.

In the north, rainfall was more reliable and helped produce superb farmland. Because the banks and riverbeds of the Tigris and Euphrates are mostly rock in this area, rather than sand as they are in the south, the rivers run faster and rarely flood. Forests covering the foothills and mountains in this area teemed with animal life. Herds of wild cattle, gazelles, antelopes, and elephants roamed the plains, wild boars rooted through the valleys, and sheep

Figure 2-2
Marsh scene in southern Iraq

Figure 2-3
Mesopotamia. The shaded area is the Fertile Crescent
and goats grazed on the foothills of the mountains. The people of the north were also closer to the resources of the surrounding region, such as tin from the east and gold and silver from the west.

**Reflect and Analyze**

1. Referring to Figure 2.3, describe the location of Mesopotamia and the features of its surrounding area.
2. In a chart, outline the positive and negative features of the environment in southern Mesopotamia. Was the environment favourable to the development of a productive and secure civilization? Be prepared to defend your final position.
3. Was the environment of the north more favourable to the development of a productive civilization than the environment of the south? Explain your answer.
4. Suppose the area of Mesopotamia shown on the map in Figure 2.3 were to expand. In which direction do you think it would grow? Why? Draw a sketch map to illustrate your answer.

**Historical Overview**

Four main peoples dominated Mesopotamia in turn: the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Chaldeans.

**Sumer**

The Sumerians came down to the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers sometime around 3500 BCE from the mountains to the northeast. Their small farming communities eventually grew into the first great cities of the world. During the first thousand years of their history, the Sumerians lived in independent city-states, ruled by separate kings. Each city-state, which included the city and surrounding countryside, had its own government, laws, and military, and managed its own affairs independently from other city-states nearby.

The Sumerians considered Eridu, an ancient religious site in Sumer, to be the first city founded by their gods. By 3500 BCE, it had a population of about 4000. Over the next thousand years, other city-states developed, and several grew to be much larger than Eridu. Ur, for example, reached a population of 24,000 by 3000 BCE.

For centuries, the city-states of Sumer maintained their independence. On occasion, different city-states fought for control over land or irrigation rights, but these disputes did not develop into major wars as we understand the term. They were more like skirmishes that often continued only until one city succeeded in imposing its will over the other. As a result of these shifts in power, city-states in Sumer rose and fell. For example, as power declined in Kish, it rose in Erech. Finally, it shifted to Ur, and then to Lagash.

During times of conflict, the king of a Sumerian city-state acted as the head of the army, raising troops and training them. At first, these armies were quite small, consisting of the local men who were fit enough to wield an axe or throw a spear. Later, the Sumerians added wheeled chariots pulled by donkeys to their forces. (The Sumerians were the first people to develop and use the wheel.) The chariots held two men, a driver and a soldier who stood behind, equipped with a javelin to hurl at the enemy.

In about 2800 BCE, Etana of Kish managed to unite the city-states of Sumer, but his success was short-lived. After his death, the city-states vied again for control, leaving the weakened Sumerians ripe for conquest. Their wealth also made them attractive to outsiders. The Akkadians, Semitic mountain folk and desert nomads from the north, succeeded in overpowering the Sumerians. Sumer and Akkad were then united into the single empire known as the kingdom of Sumer, under Sargon of Akkad (2340 BCE—2305 BCE).

Sargon became known as Sargon the Great. He was a government official in Kish when he led a revolt to establish himself as king. As ruler, he attacked the Sumerian city-states to the south, capturing all of them, including the strongest, Ur. During his 35-year reign, he also invaded both Egypt and Ethiopia, extending his holdings from Palestine to the Persian Gulf and building the first true empire in history.

After the death of Sargon, Sumer fell into decline with only a brief resurgence during the reign of Naramsin (2291 BCE—2255 BCE). Only the city-state of Ur continued to thrive, enjoying one last century of prosperity. During the reign of Ur-Nammu (2112 BCE—2094 BCE), Sumerian culture
reached its peak. The Sumerians developed the first known form of writing, called cuneiform, made significant advances in scientific knowledge, created a vital mythology, and produced the first written literature. The Epic of Gilgamesh, which tells of a legendary Sumerian king who ruled Uruk around 2600 BCE, is the oldest known piece of literature in the world. All of these developments had a major influence on the later peoples of Mesopotamia. Although Ur finally fell captive to the Elamites from the east in approximately 2004 BCE, the Babylonians and the Assyrians adopted and spread many aspects of Sumerian culture.

**Perspectives on the Past**

**The Decline of Sumer**

Why did the city-states of Sumer decline? Two viewpoints are given below. Does one seem more likely to you than the other? Why or why not? Is there a definitive answer to the question of why the city-states declined?

**Viewpoint 1**

Following the death of Sargon, waves of invaders fought for the best settled lands and the empire began to fall apart. Even though Sargon’s grandson restored the empire to greatness for a short time, by about 2159 BCE Sumer had crumbled. It was unable to withstand the invasions.

**Viewpoint 2**

In an attempt to manage their environment, the Sumerians constructed hundreds of kilometres of canals to irrigate their fields. Unfortunately, these canals carried not only fertile silt to the fields, but also harmful salts that killed the plants. Eventually, the fields became so salty that nothing at all could be grown. Without an adequate food supply, the city-states of Sumer went into decline.
BABYLONIA
The decline of Sumer led to a shift in power northward, first to Babylonia and then to Assyria. The Babylonian period began when Semitic nomads from the west, the Amorites, established their kingdom at the city of Babylon. The city reached the height of its power during the time of the First Dynasty (ruling family), which lasted about 300 years. The most significant ruler of the First Dynasty was King Hammurabi (1792 BCE—1750 BCE), who created one of the world's first written codes of law. By conquering all of Sumer, Akkad to the north, and lands to the east and west, Hammurabi is also credited with establishing the empire of Babylonia. The Babylonians were great traders; their ships reached the distant shores of India and Africa, and their caravans travelled far into Persia and Asia Minor. The goods and ideas exchanged on these expeditions enriched both the Babylonians' culture and the cultures of those they met.

When Hammurabi died, he was succeeded by a number of weak kings who had difficulty holding the empire together. Wave after wave of Indo-European tribes invaded from the northern mountains. The Hittites invaded from Anatolia (Turkey) around 1595 BCE. Approximately 40 years later, the Kassites invaded Babylonia from the east, and established control over the valley. In about 1300 BCE, they were displaced by the powerful Assyrians.

ASSYRIA
The Assyrians took their name from their chief city of Ashur, located on the banks of the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia. Ashur was an important trading centre on the east-west caravan routes between Mesopotamia and the surrounding lands. With economic influence, the Assyrians gained political influence as well. Long under the control of Babylon, the Assyrians had absorbed Babylonian culture, just as the Babylonians had absorbed Sumerian culture. Through a long succession of wars and conquests, the Assyrians came to dominate all of Mesopotamia.

The Assyrians were among the fiercest and most warlike people in the region, known for committing wartime atrocities against unarmed civilians and treating conquered armies with cruelty. Their enemies were shown no mercy, as the Assyrians often tortured and killed their captives. Between 1100 BCE and 600 BCE, Assyrian power spread throughout western Asia, as a number of warrior kings set out on a terrifying path of conquest. Their efforts extended Assyrian influence west to the Mediterranean Sea and Egypt, south into Babylon, north into Syria, and east towards Persia.

Several factors contributed to this military success. Assyrian kings viewed professional armies as essential to conquest, and so they created large, skilled armies that were well organized into units of foot soldiers, charioteers, cavalry, and archers. Mercenaries, or hired foreign soldiers, were added to local armies, and officers were trained in combat strategies. The Assyrians had also learned the secret of making iron from the Hittites, and they used that knowledge to make arrows and lances of superior quality.

The Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745 BCE—727 BCE) began the period of expansion by taking Damascus in Syria. After his death, a power struggle for succession continued until Sargon II (722 BCE—705 BCE) seized the throne. Sargon II made Israel an Assyrian province and brought the Israelites into his empire. His son Sennacherib (705 BCE—681 BCE) conquered Sidon in Phoenicia, and then Esarhaddon (681 BCE—668 BCE) conquered Egypt. But the greatest Assyrian empire builder of them all was Ashurbanipal (668 BCE—626 BCE). He succeeded in ruling more of the known world than any other ruler before him. Even more important, he managed to hold the empire intact throughout his entire reign.

Ashurbanipal treated all conquered peoples, both civilian and military, with great cruelty. He plundered his conquered...
territories continuously to add to the richness of his own cities along the Tigris. His splendid palace at Nineveh was decorated with gold and ivory from Egypt, silver looted from Syria, lapis lazuli (a deep blue stone) from Persia, and the finest of Phoenician cedarwood.

Yet, with all his militarism and plunder, Ashurbanipal showed a keen interest in both science and mathematics. He constructed a garden and zoo at his palace, stocked from all parts of his empire, and established a library containing over 22,000 clay tablets that showed his special interest in science and mathematics.

At the peak of its power, the sprawling Assyrian empire spilled over the bounds of Mesopotamia, and a single ruler had great difficulty holding it together. As a result, the Assyrians began to experience serious attacks on their borders. At the same time, their conquered province of Babylonia, in southern Mesopotamia, struggled to gain its independence.

Shortly after the death of Ashurbanipal, the Babylonians and the foreign Medes united to overthrow Assyria. The capital, Nineveh, was captured and destroyed in 612 BCE. The Assyrians themselves, once so powerful, were killed or assimilated, and their empire disappeared.

**CHALDEA**

After the collapse of the Assyrian empire, Babylon once again became an important centre in Mesopotamia. The city had been prominent in the time of Hammurabi and had prospered once again in the 200 years
before the collapse of Assyria, but its glory was greatest during the 70 years after the destruction of Nineveh. During this period, it was ruled by the Chaldeans, a Semitic people who had settled in the fertile area of southern Babylonia near the Persian Gulf about 1000 BCE.

The Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar (604 BCE–562 BCE) transformed Babylon into one of the most beautiful cities of the world. Nebuchadnezzar, as noted in the Bible, was a warrior king. He conquered Judah, captured and destroyed Jerusalem, and took many Jews back to Babylon as prisoners. He only stopped his conquest of Egypt when he heard of his father’s death and his own succession to the throne. Many historians, however, note that Nebuchadnezzar fought fewer battles than the Assyrian kings and should be remembered as a great builder rather than as a warrior.

Like many empires of Mesopotamia, the Chaldean empire fell to invaders. By 549 BCE, the Chaldeans were challenged by a new alliance of the Medes and the Persian king Cyrus (550 BCE–529 BCE). Babylon withstood a siege for several years, but ultimately the Chaldeans were no match for Cyrus of Persia. According to legend, one night he had his army dig a ditch around Babylon to divert the Euphrates River from its normal course. The invaders then marched into the city up the old river bed, and proceeded to kill Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, and his palace guards. The city itself was spared, but the Persians became the new rulers of a growing international world.

**Reflect and Analyze**

1. Outline at least two major achievements of each of the following peoples in Mesopotamia: the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Explain why these achievements were important.
2. a) What factors contributed to the military strength of the Assyrians?
   b) Why did the Assyrian empire collapse? Which reason do you consider the most significant? Explain.
3. a) Suggest why Mesopotamia was invaded by so many different groups throughout its history.
   b) How do you think these invasions affected the development of Mesopotamian civilization? Outline both positive and negative effects.
4. Refer to the box on the next page. Write a short fictional account of a trader’s visit to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.
Why are the Hanging Gardens of Babylon considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world? What do the palace and gardens reveal about the culture and economy of the ancient Chaldeans?

The new Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar was the showplace of the east. The king ordered the construction of enormous defensive walls, covered with reliefs of griffins and lions, to protect the city. The walls were so broad that two chariots could drive along the top side by side. Magnificent gates and great arched passageways flanked by towers marked the entrance to the city. The most famous of the gates, the Ishtar Gate, was decorated with glazed brick of many colours. Ishtar was the great goddess of fertility.

The Hanging Gardens, in the midst of the palace grounds, were the glory of the city. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar built the gardens because of his deep love for his Median wife, Amyns, granddaughter of Cyaxares, king of Media. Amyns was troubled by her longing for the forested mountains of her homeland.

To ease her concern, Nebuchadnezzar ordered great hewn stones to be brought from the mountains of the plain. With the stones, his workers constructed a building with a series of vaulted terraces, one above the other. A moat flowed around the building and, inside, deep wells fed hydraulic pumps that raised water to a reservoir at the top of the structure. On each terrace, workers laid deep layers of rich soil for the gardens.

Moistened by the abundant water and warmed by the hot sun, the terrace gardens supported a profusion of flowers, vines, and flowering trees and shrubs. Beautifully decorated halls meandered through the terraces and housed the treasures of the empire. Visitors observed the finest fabrics of Phoenicia, silver from Asia Minor, and gold from Egypt. While reclining on divans and sipping the finest wines of Palestine, served to them by slaves, guests took in the beauty and scent of the magnificent Hanging Gardens.
GOVERNMENT

In the early history of Sumer’s city-states, free citizens elected an assembly to run the government. The assembly consisted of two houses: an upper house, which contained the wealthiest citizens, and a lower house, which contained soldiers. These elected members chose the judges, who were responsible for enforcing the laws, and selected the military leaders needed in time of war.

When wars between the city-states became more frequent and the threat of foreign invasion became a concern, the city states recognized the need for strong leaders. The assembly then created the additional role of king.

The kings in the Sumerian city-states were called *lugals*. Most considered themselves to be living representatives of a particular god, sent by that god as a steward or servant. Thus, the system of government in Mesopotamia was a *theocracy*.

The lugal’s major responsibility was to provide for the defence of the city-state. In addition, he and his government officials supervised the development and maintenance of the irrigation works, which were essential to the economic survival of the city-state.

The Sumerian kings kept a tight rein on their people. What the lugal said was law, and the common people were expected to comply with his wishes. Some kings developed codes of law to guarantee that citizens maintained peace and order. Ur-Nammu in Ur, for example, established one of the most important legal codes in Sumer.

The earliest kings in Sumer were elected, but later, when the people began to consider the lugals as gods, the crown passed from father to son. This development marked the beginning of dynasties or hereditary monarchies in Mesopotamia.

Like the Sumerians, the Assyrians saw the importance of strong government, but they took a different approach. In Assyria, religious leaders had less political power than they had in Sumer. Assyrian kings derived their authority from the god Ashur, and acted as his representative, but there was a clear separation between government (state) and religion. Temples, palaces, and monuments in Assyria were built for the use of the king, not for the honour of a particular god. Yet the Assyrian king was still bound by religious customs. For five days each month, for example, he was required to fast and perform certain religious ceremonies. On the first day of each new year, he had to go without food and water until the new moon rose in the evening.

The Assyrian kings were among the most powerful leaders in all of Mesopotamia. Since they eventually ruled an empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Nile River, their far-reaching authority was almost a necessity. They acted as first judge in the land, supervisor of all canal construction in Assyria, and protector of all farmers and shepherds within their territory. In times of war or conquest, they were present for all military campaigns and took personal charge of the operation.

The Sumerians and Assyrians also approached governing their expanding empires somewhat differently. When one Sumerian city-state was conquered by another, it was forced to accept the conqueror as ruler. In most cases, the king appointed a governor, or *ensi*, to look after the smaller towns while he focused on the needs of the main centre.

The Assyrians devised a similar system, but on a grander scale because they had to control a much larger territory. They divided their empire into provinces and appointed officials to govern each one. These governors were responsible for collecting taxes, raising troops for the army, and enforcing the king’s laws.

The Assyrians faced frequent rebellion from their subject peoples. One way they dealt with such rebellion was by resettlement: populations were forced from their lands and replaced by settlers from other parts of the empire. This policy kept conquered nationalities weak, and led to a mixing of peoples.

LAW AND JUSTICE

One of the Mesopotamians’ most significant contributions to the advance of civilization was in the field of law. Both the Sumerians and the Babylonians developed law codes. Basically, the codes were an
Hammurabi’s Law Code

Hammurabi’s law code was inscribed on an upright stone, or stela, that originally stood in Babylon’s temple of Marduk, the chief god. In 1901, the French archaeologist Jean-Vincent Scheil discovered the stela at the site of ancient Susa. It is now located in the Louvre in Paris.

At the top of the stone, we see King Hammurabi receiving the symbols of authority, a rod and ring, from the god Marduk. Below this portrayal, cuneiform writing outlines the code. The following are some of Hammurabi’s 282 laws.

Do you consider Hammurabi’s laws fair and just or harsh and unjust? What are the main differences between this code of laws and our own today?

If a noble has stolen the young son of another noble, he shall be put to death.

If a noble destroys the eye of another noble, they shall destroy his eye.

If a noble has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver.

If a noble has destroyed the eye of a noble’s slave or broken the bone of a noble’s slave, he shall pay one half the slave’s value.

If a noble has committed robbery and has been caught, that noble shall be put to death.

If a robber is not caught, the man who has been robbed should make claim to the city and the governor in whose territory and district the crime was committed, and they shall make good to him his lost property.

If a noble has accused another noble and brought a charge of murder against him, but has not proved it, the accuser shall be put to death.

If a noble has come forward with false testimony concerning grain or money, he shall bear the penalty of that case.

If a man has given his boat to a boatman on hire, and if the boatman has been careless, has grounded the boat or destroyed it, the boatman shall give a boat to the owner in compensation.

If a builder has built a house for someone and has not made his work strong, with the result that the house he has built has collapsed and has killed the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.

If the collapse of the constructed house has caused the death of a son of the owner of the house, they shall put the son of that builder to death.

If a physician has performed a major operation on a noble with a bronze lancet and has caused the noble’s death, or he has opened up the eye-socket of a noble and has destroyed the noble’s eye, they shall cut off his hand.

If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.
attempt to collect, organize, and record all existing laws so that there would be one common code for all citizens of the empire.

The ruler of Ur, Ur-Namma, developed an early code based on Sumerian tradition. It gave legal protection to peasants and commoners as well as to nobles, but the laws were applied differently to different classes of people. Nobles found guilty of committing a crime were treated more harshly since better behaviour was expected from them than from a commoner. Penalties usually took the form of fines or physical punishment.

Mesopotamia's most important legal legacy, however, is the law code established by Hammurabi, king of Babylonia. Hammurabi's code listed 282 different laws, organized under headings such as trade, family, labour, real estate, and personal property. The code distinguished between a minor crime and a major crime and established some important legal principles. It asserted that the state is the authority responsible for enforcing the law, and it confirmed that social justice should be guaranteed to all citizens. It also promoted the idea that the punishment should fit the crime. The basic principle behind the code was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." For example, if a house in Babylonia collapsed and killed the owner, the builder of the house would be put to death.

**REFLECT AND ANALYZE**

1. How did government evolve in ancient Sumeria?
2. Compare the power of a Sumerian king with that of an Assyrian king. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each system.
3. a) Why does a society need laws? What are the advantages of a written code of laws? On what do we base our laws?
   b) In groups, develop and record a code of ten basic laws for your class. Decide first on the principles that will inform your laws and the major issues the laws should deal with. Record and present your laws in an appropriate and creative format.