

Mesopotamian Clothing

 *Fashion, Costume, and Culture, 2013*

The civilizations that developed in [Mesopotamia](#) near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers between 3000 and 300 B.C.E. developed impressive skills for fashioning [clothing](#). The evidence of these civilizations' clothing remains on sculptures, pottery, and in writings left on tablets and royal tombs. It indicates that a thriving textile or fabric industry existed in the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, which included the [Sumerians](#) (3000–2000 B.C.E.), the Akkadians (2350–2218 B.C.E.), the Babylonians (1894–1595 B.C.E.), the Assyrians (1380–612 B.C.E.), and the Persians (550–330 B.C.E.). Textiles were used for trade purposes and were also given as gifts to [kings](#) and queens.

Although the earliest civilizations used animal skins to protect themselves from the environment, people soon learned how to pound wool and goat hair into felt or weave it into cloth. Wool was the most common fabric used to make clothing in Mesopotamia and was used for practically every type of garment from cloaks to shoes. Looms for weaving fabric were in use as early as 3000 B.C.E. The skill of early weavers is extraordinary. Some fragments of linen discovered in royal tombs are almost as finely woven as modern-day linen fabric. Linen was a more luxurious fabric and was woven for the clothing of the wealthy, priests, and to adorn statues of gods. Other finely woven fabrics also became available for the wealthiest in Mesopotamia. Soft cotton was introduced in [Assyria](#) around 700 B.C.E., and silk became available later.

The surviving evidence does not show the colors of clothing made in Mesopotamia, but archeologists, scientists who study past civilizations,



have discovered letters that describe how dyes, appliqués, embroidery, and beads were used to beautify garments. As early as 1200 B.C.E. a type of shell known as Maoris produced a highly prized dye called Tyrian purple. Artifacts found in royal tombs provide evidence of fitted sewn garments, gold appliqués, and elaborately decorated clothes.

What they wore

The earliest evidence of civilization in Mesopotamia is identified as Sumerian. Early Sumerian men typically wore waist strings or small loincloths that provided barely any coverage. However, later the wraparound skirt was introduced, which hung to the knee or lower and was held up by a thick, rounded belt that tied in the back. These skirts were typically decorated with fringe or pieces of fabric cut in a petal shape. All classes of men seem to have worn these skirts. Early Sumerian women seem to have worn only a shawl wrapped around their bodies. These shawls were often decorated with simple border patterns or all-over patterns. Later Sumerian women typically wore sewn outfits covered with tiers of fringe. These included skirts much like those worn by men and shawls or tops that were also fringed. By the end of Sumerian rule around 2000 B.C.E. both men and women wore skirts and shawls.

There is less evidence about what men and women wore during Babylonian rule from 1894 to 1595 B.C.E. The scant evidence available suggests that Babylonians wore skirts and shawls very similar to the Sumerians, although some men during Babylonian rule did wear loin skirts with a hemline that slanted from the upper knee in the front to the calf in the back. Evidence does suggest that the fringe on garments became more elaborate during this time. One painting discovered shows a king wearing a skirt with tiered fringe that is alternately colored red, gray, gold, and white. No evidence of female attire exists except for pictures that depict [goddesses](#). In these illustrations, goddesses are shown wearing sleeved dresses with fitted bodices, V necks, and straight skirts.

The Assyrians, who ruled from 1380 to 612 B.C.E., continued to wear fringed garments. Both men and women wrapped fringed shawls over their shoulders and around their waists to cover themselves from their shoulders to nearly their ankles. These were held in place by belts. Around 1000 B.C.E. Assyrian men began wearing belted knee-length tunics with short sleeves. Men of high status, such as kings and military officers, also wore woolen cloaks dyed blue, red, purple, or white. After the Assyrians were conquered in 612 B.C.E., the Persian Empire began to prosper and people in Mesopotamia adopted Persian trousers into their wardrobes.

For More Information

Hynson, Colin. *Mesopotamia*. Milwaukee, WI: World Almanac Library, 2006. Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Fringe

Across all the civilizations living in Mesopotamia (the region centered in present-day Iraq near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) from 3000 to 300 B.C.E., fringe was a popular and important decorative adornment for the clothing of both men and women. It is believed that fringe was worn by all classes of people. The evidence for how fringe was used and what it looked like is found on sculptures, statues, and described in the writings left by

these civilizations.

Fringe adorned the two most basic garments worn in Mesopotamia: the skirt and the shawl. These garments were made out of woven wool or linen, and later, for the wealthiest people, cotton or silk. The hems, or edges, of skirts and shawls were decorated with fringe that either hung straight or was knotted into elaborate designs. Fringe could be cut from the whole piece of cloth that made up the skirt or shawl or it could be a separate piece sewn onto the garment.

In later civilizations of Mesopotamia the fringe on garments became more and more decorative and elaborate. Fringe could be dyed many colors and layered in tiers to cover entire garments. Some men would use the fringe of their shawls as a type of signature for contracts. Instead of using a seal to impress their mark on a clay contract, men would use their unique fringe. Fringe has been used for decoration at other points in human history, notably as decoration on the leather clothes of cowboys in the American West and as a brief [fashion](#) trend in the 1970s.

SEE ALSO [Volume 5, 1961–79: Fringe](#)

For More Information

Bancroft-Hunt, Norman. *Living in Ancient Mesopotamia*. New York: Thalmus Publishing, 2009.

Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Shawl

For the men and women living in Mesopotamia (the region centered in present-day Iraq near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) from 3000 to 300 B.C.E., a fringed shawl was a typical garment. Unlike modern-day shawls that are worn over the shoulders and head, the shawls of Mesopotamia were wrapped around the hips like long skirts or wrapped around the torso with one end tossed over the left shoulder, covering the body to the feet like a dress. Whether worn as a skirt or a dress, shawls were held in place with belts tied in the back.

The first depictions of shawls on statues and bas-reliefs, or wall carvings, on the remains of palace walls show rather plain fabric wraps. In time, however, the fringe and decorative borders of these shawls became more elaborate. Shawls were made most commonly out of wool, but wealthy people could afford finely woven linen, and after 700 B.C.E., perhaps even cotton or silk. The wealthiest people also wore embroidered shawls or shawls decorated with gold or precious stone beads.

For More Information

Hollar, Sherman. *Mesopotamia*. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2012. Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2013 Gale, Cengage Learning.

Source Citation

"Mesopotamian Clothing." *Fashion, Costume, and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear Through the Ages*. Ed. Sara Pendergast, et al. 2nd ed. Vol. 1: The Ancient World. Detroit: UXL, 2013. 55-59. *Student Resources in Context*. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.

Document URL

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=SUIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Reference&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=SUIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CCX2760000023&source=Bookmark&u=west89013tgps&jsid=cd76ba37c0e5133315d23ba6e124a0db

Gale Document Number: GALE|CX2760000023