Mesopotamia was located between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the present-day country of Iraq. It is often called the Cradle of Civilization, because the first-known cities in history developed there.

The Sumerians were the first to settle in Mesopotamia. In the beginning, they were farmers who lived in small rural villages. Then around 3000 BCE, they began to form large, well-governed city-states along the rivers. (A city-state is an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory.)

Sumerian City-States

Each Sumerian city-state was independent and highly organized. The chief cities were Ur, Kish, and Erech. Each city-state had its own defensive walls, surrounding villages, and farmland. Each also had its own ziggurat (temple) and a special god that protected the people of that town.

Religion was so important in Sumerian life that religion and government were combined. Sumerians had a unique government structure with both a priest-king and a large assembly of officials that made sure the rules of the city were obeyed. The assembly
selected the king and the king appointed government officials to help him enforce the rules of the city-state.

Like any other society, Mesopotamia had its share of crime. Burglary was common. If a person stole goods belonging to the ziggurat, he was put to death. A person who received stolen goods was also killed. A thief caught attempting to loot a burning house was thrown into the fire.

**New Forms of Government**

Sumerian city-states often went to war against each other over boundary disputes. Occasionally one city-state would attack another to prove its strength. The warring Sumerian city-states were conquered by the Elamites sometime between 2530 and 2450 BCE. Later they were united by King Sargon I of the Akkadians, who ruled from 2334 to 2279 BCE.

Sargon established the world’s first-known empire. He also established a hereditary monarchy. This means that when a king died, his oldest son inherited the throne and position as king. If a king had no children upon his death, then the king’s oldest brother would become king.

Sargon appointed governors to administer the conquered city-states. He developed a trade-based empire, with connecting roads and a postal system. Sargon’s Akkadian Empire was short-lived, lasting about 100 years. Eventually the city-states again became independent. The high point of this final era of Sumerian civilization was the reign of the third dynasty of Ur, under King Ur-Nammu.

**The First Written Laws**

The legal code established by King Ur-Nammu was the first set of written laws in history. He ordered honest weights and measures for the merchant class and established welfare for widows and orphans. The laws dictated punishment for runaway slaves, too. These written laws became an important part of Mesopotamian society.

Later, when King Hammurabi of Babylon ruled the Mesopotamian region, he also created a legal code in approximately 1780 BCE. According to Hammurabi’s laws, it did not matter if you were rich or poor. Those who were found guilty of breaking the law were punished. The Code of Hammurabi contains 282 laws.

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