

The Ancient Near East: A Very Short Introduction

By Amanda H. Podany

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- How did the invention of writing change the human experience in the ancient Near East?
- How would life in an ancient Mesopotamian city have differed from life in a modern city? In what ways would the experience have been similar?
- The definition of “civilization” often includes a writing system. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What would have been the difficulties of running an empire in ancient times? In spite of these difficulties, why did kings aspire to rule empires? What were some of the techniques they developed to control their subjects and to assert their right to rule?
- What possible future archaeological finds (such as of capital cities, documents, shipwrecks) might change or improve our understanding of ancient Near Eastern history?
- Sargon and Gilgamesh were both remembered as heroes by ancient peoples. In what ways did their stories address significant questions of human existence?
- The Mesopotamians and Syrians believed that humans had been created to serve the gods. How might this have affected their view of other aspects of the world and their place in it?
- What types of contacts took place between ancient Near Eastern kingdoms? What would have been the advantages and difficulties in maintaining these contacts? How did international interactions differ from their equivalents today?
- Some Mesopotamian kings emphasized that they protected poor and weak people in society; given that they were not elected, what might have been the reasons for their assertions?
- In a society in which few people could read and write, which roles and professions would have required literacy? How do you think most kings managed to rule without being literate?
- Why do you think that royal inscriptions and law codes included curses on anyone in the future who removed or defaced the inscriptions? What does this (and other evidence) suggest about the Mesopotamian view of the future and of the power of the written word?
- How do modern explanations of events in Mesopotamian history differ from the ways in which the ancients explained these events? How might you account for these differences?
- How did people who believed in polytheistic religions and came from different regions view one another’s gods and religious beliefs? Why do you think this was true?
- What were some of the ways in which the Mesopotamians imposed order on their universe (social, political, economic, religious, and so on)? How was writing important to the creation of order? What aspects of their lives might have seemed chaotic?
- How were ancient Near Eastern laws, treaties, and contracts different from their modern equivalents? In what ways were they similar?

- How did geography and climate affect various events in the history of the ancient Near East?
- How did the people in the ancient Near East try to influence the gods, and how did they believe that the gods communicated with them? What does this suggest about how they viewed their relationship with the gods?
- How did the Akitu festival reflect Babylonian beliefs about the universe, about their empire, and about the relationship between the gods and the people (including the king)?

Other Books by Amanda H. Podany

Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East (Oxford University Press, 2010)

The Ancient Near Eastern World (with Marni McGee) (Oxford University Press, 2005) [For secondary school students]

Further Reading

Bryce, Trevor, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Clarendon Press, 1998)

Chavalas, Mark W., (Ed.) *The Ancient Near East*. (Blackwell, 2006) [A collection of documents in translation.]

Dalley, Stephanie, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Snell, Daniel C., *Life in the Ancient Near East* (Yale University Press, 1997)

Van de Mieroop, Marc, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II* (Blackwell, 2007)