

California and Mesopotamia - Similarities and Differences

by ReadWorks



It may seem at first glance that California and the ancient land of Mesopotamia have very little in common. Mesopotamia, located in modern-day Iraq, is considered the cradle of Western civilization, and first became home to an economic power in 3100 B.C. California, on the Pacific Coast of North America, did not achieve status as an economic power until almost 5,000 years later, at the end of the 1800s. In spite of these differences of time and place, it is important to realize that both regions were able to rise to economic power because of their unique geographical landscapes.

Let's first look at Mesopotamia. It was bordered on either side by two rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates. These rivers had many different branches, or tributaries, feeding into them, creating a vast network of streams and canals. The canals provided a built-in transportation system for the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples who first settled the place. Using the simple canoes and log rafts they built, they could communicate and trade. This ability to trade was especially important since Mesopotamia did not have its own supply of resources such as timber, metals or semi-precious stones, and had to import all of these things. Water routes allowed Mesopotamia to import the materials needed to become an economic power.

Water transport also greatly increased the speed of communication in Mesopotamia. Overland transportation at that time was painfully slow and clunky, via simple wheeled pushcarts, or pack animals such as donkeys or camels. With water transport, settlers could use downstream river

currents to ship goods much faster. Raw materials arrived at the bigger towns with greater frequency, which meant that these towns and cities could grow and develop faster. Knowledge and news from other regions could also come in quicker, allowing the Mesopotamians to become savvy and cosmopolitan. So we see that the speedy input of goods and knowledge via the waterways allowed the Mesopotamians a distinct advantage over competing regions, and allowed their economic and cultural life to flourish.

Mesopotamia was also blessed with especially rich soil. Diverse elevations (there are both high hills and low-lying marshlands) and climatic variations in the region allowed for the evolution of many types of edible seeds and plants, as well as a variety of farm animals. Mesopotamia is considered the birthplace of agriculture-it is here where the first species of wheat, barley, flax, chick pea and lentil were first cultivated by man for human consumption. In looking at the development of farming in Mesopotamia, we see that it was a combination of Mesopotamia's geographical advantage (specifically, its abundance of plant and animal species) and the intelligence of its human settlers that made it all possible. With so many crops, the settlers of Mesopotamia could be well-nourished, which gave them the physical strength to thrive, and also gave them many products to trade with other regions. It is no surprise, then, that historians have dubbed Mesopotamia as "The Fertile Crescent," due to its productive soil.

While the great city of Babylon was thriving in Mesopotamia in 3100 B.C., California remained rather insignificant as a trade or cultural center. It was inhabited by nomadic tribes who lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Life in these tribes was simply a matter of day-to-day survival, and no deeper developments, such as writing or advanced technological inventions, were able to take place. Unlike tribes in other parts of North America, the California Indians never built great settlements or amassed significant wealth. This is partly because for a long time California Indians were geographically isolated-cut off by the Sierra Nevada mountains on one side, the vast Pacific Ocean on the other, and desert to the south. They could not easily communicate with tribes outside of California. Also, they could not cultivate crops because the land was for the most part too dry. When João Rodrigues Calbrilho, a Portuguese explorer, arrived with his crew in California in the early 1500s (they were the first Europeans to do so), the crew abandoned the place, thinking it was too isolated from the world's other trade points.

It was only in the mid-1800s, when American settlers from the East discovered precious gold buried under California soil that the region finally started to become an important economic center. The natural resources hidden in California's land, in the form of gold and oil, motivated the Americans to somehow overcome the region's isolation. First attempts to do this were the Pony Express and the Overland Express, companies that used horses to relay communication from California to other parts of America. Then came the telegraph, and soon after that the transcontinental railroad, which ended California's isolation issue once and for all.

With the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, California's natural geographical advantages could finally be exploited, and by 1900, the area was in full economic boom. The American settlers who had built the railroads quickly replaced the nomadic native tribes. They opened up commerce along the 840 miles of Pacific shoreline, which soon became full of bustling ports that brought labor and trade goods across the Pacific Ocean from China and Japan. The American settlers also built large aqueducts to irrigate inland California, which previously had been too dry to cultivate crops. Thanks to the state's temperate, Mediterranean-like climate, a large variety of crops could flourish, now that there was sufficient water. Like Mesopotamia 5,000 years earlier, California became an

agricultural giant, and today it is America's prime producer of almonds, walnuts, avocados, grapes, melons, peaches, strawberries, and wine. Hollywood, another major economic asset to California, formed around Los Angeles in the early 1900s because the area's geography was suited to filmmaking. Southern California had large natural spaces and year-round good weather, both helpful conditions for making films. California continues to be an economic powerhouse today thanks to its geographical assets-natural resources, good climate, and fertile soil. California ranks as the world's 12 largest economy.

We now see that, like Mesopotamia, California has certain geographical advantages that have made it a power player on the world stage. California did not have it as easy as Mesopotamia did-it had several geographical disadvantages to conquer before its advantages could really shine. Technology had to evolve so that communication between California and other parts of the world was not so difficult and slow. Aqueducts needed to be built to irrigate the dry inland areas, making them lush and fertile like the ancient Mesopotamian soil. But once these changes were in place, the other, significant geographical advantages of California could be enjoyed, and the state could assume its place in world history, alongside ancient Mesopotamia, as one of the great centers of economic power. The examples of California and Mesopotamia show us that no matter what time of history we are in, geography will play a key role in determining its economic promise.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which place is considered the cradle of Western civilization?

- A. California
- B. Egypt
- C. South Africa
- D. Mesopotamia

2. How does the author compare California and Mesopotamia?

- A. Both are geographically isolated.
- B. Both were home to ancient advanced cultures.
- C. Both rose to power because of their unique geographical landscapes.
- D. Both had fertile soil to easily grow crops.

3. Water transportation was crucial for the economical development of Mesopotamia.

What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A. "Raw materials arrived at the bigger towns with greater frequency, which meant that these towns and cities could grow and develop faster."
- B. "Overland transportation at that time was painfully slow and clunky, via simple wheeled pushcarts, or pack animals such as donkeys or camels."
- C. "The canals provided a built-in transportation system for the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples who first settled the place."
- D. "These rivers had many different branches, or tributaries, feeding into them, creating a vast network of streams and canals."

4. Man-made constructions needed to be developed before people could enjoy the geographical benefits of the area. This statement is true about which area?

- A. Mesopotamia
- B. California
- C. both Mesopotamia and California
- D. America

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A. how ancient Mesopotamians invented writing
- B. the economic benefits of the California gold rush
- C. similarities and differences between Mesopotamia and California
- D. why California became a filmmaking superpower

6. Read the following sentence: "In looking at the development of farming in Mesopotamia, we see that it was a combination of Mesopotamia's geographical advantage (specifically, its **abundance** of plant and animal species) and the intelligence of its human settlers that made it all possible."

What does "**abundance**" mean?

- A. large amount
- B. small amount
- C. lack of
- D. affluence

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Native American tribes in California were geographically isolated; _____, they were unable to communicate easily with other tribes outside of California.

- A. moreover
- B. namely
- C. ultimately
- D. as a result

8. Why were nomadic Native American tribes in California unable to develop advanced technological inventions at the same time as Mesopotamia?

9. How did the settlers who came to California after the construction of the transcontinental railroad overcome California's geographic challenges? Give two examples from the passage.

10. What are the major differences between ancient California and Mesopotamia? Use information from the text to support your answer.