Mesopotamia: Crash Course World History #3

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=sohXPx_XZ6Y
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/sohXPx_XZ6Y

=====Intro (0:00)=====

Hi there, I'm John Green. You're watching Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about...

[globe] Iraq.

No! you purportedly smart globe. We're going to talk about Mesopotamia! I love Mesopotamia, because it helped create two of my favorite things: writing and taxes. Why do I like taxes? Because before taxes, the only certainty was death.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, did you know you're referencing Mark Twain?

Present John: I'm not referencing Mark Twain, Me from the Past. I'm referencing Benjamin Franklin, who was probably himself referencing the unfortunately named playwright Christopher Bullock. Listen, you may be smart, kid, but I've been smart longer.

By the way, today's illustration points out that "an eye for an eye" leaves the whole world monocular.

[intro music]

So about 5000 years ago, in the land “meso,” or between, the Tigris and Euphrates “potomoi,” or rivers, cities started popping up, much like they had in our old friend the Indus River valley. These early Mesopotamian cities engaged in a form of socialism where farmers contributed their crops to public storehouses, out of which workers, like metalworkers, or builders, or male models, or whatever, would be paid uniform wages in grain. So basically...

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, were there really male models? Can you do Blue Steel?

Present John: Oh, younger version of myself, how I hate you. [John laughs] Oh, the humiliation I suffer for you people. That was my best Blue Steel. That was as close as I can get.

So anyway, if you lived in a city, you could be something other than a shepherd, and thanks to this proto-socialism, you could be reasonably sure you that you'd eat.

Stan! Is there anyway we can get another globe in here? I feel like this shot is inadequately globed. Yes! Much better. You know, you can tell the quality of a historian by the number of his or her globes.

But even though you could give up your flock, a lot of people didn't want to. And one of the legacies of Mesopotamia is the enduring conflict between country and city. You see this explored a lot in some of our greatest art, like The Beverly Hillbillies, and Deliverance, and the showdown between Enkidu and Gilgamesh in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh is one of the oldest known works of literature, and I'm not going to spoil it for you, there's a link to the poem in the video info. But suffice it to say that in the showdown between country and city, the city wins.

So what were these city-states like? Well let's take a look at one such city-state, Gilgamesh's hometown of Uruk, in the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (2:20)=====

Uruk was a walled city with an extensive canal system and several monumental temples, called ziggurats. The priests of these temples initially had all the power because they were able to communicate directly with the gods, and that was a useful talent, because Mesopotamian gods were moody and frankly pretty mean. Like according to Gilgamesh, they once got mad at us because we were making too much noise while they were trying to sleep, so they decided to destroy all of humanity with a flood.

The Tigris and Euphrates are decent as rivers go, but Mesopotamia is no Indus Valley, with its on-schedule flooding and easy irrigation. A lot of slave labor was needed to make the Tigris and Euphrates useful for irrigation. They are also difficult to navigate and flood unpredictably and violently. Violent, unpredictable, and difficult to navigate; oh, Tigris and Euphrates, how you remind me of my college girlfriend.

So I mean, given that the region tends to yo-yo between devastating flood and horrible drought it follows that one would believe that the gods are kind of random and capricious, and that any priests who might be able to lead rituals that placate those gods would be very useful individuals. But about 1000 years after the first temples, we find in cities like Uruk, a rival structure begins to show up: the palace. The responsibility for the well-being and success of the social order was shifting, from gods to people. A power shift that will see-saw throughout human history until... probably forever, actually.

But in another development we'll see again, these kings, who probably started out as military leaders or really rich landowners, took on a quasi-religious role. How? Often by engaging in "sacred marriage," specifically, skoodilypooping with the high priestess of the city's temple. So the priests were overtaken by kings, who soon declared themselves priests. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Writing (4:03)=====

So how do we know that these kings were skoodilypooping with the lady priests? Because they made a skoodilypooping tape and put it on the internet? No! Because there's a written record! Mesopotamia gave us writing, specifically a form of writing called cuneiform, which was initially created not to like, woo lovers or whatever, but to record transactions, like how many bushels of wheat were exchanged for how many goats. I'm not kidding by the way: a lot of cuneiform is about wheat and goats.

I don't think you can overestimate the importance of writing, but let's just make three points here:

First, writing and reading are things that not everyone can do, so they create a class distinction, one that in fact survives to this day. Foraging social orders were relatively egalitarian but the Mesopotamians had slaves and they played this metaphorically resonant sport that was like polo, except instead of riding on horses, you rode on other people. And written language played an important role in widening the gap between classes.

Two, once writing enters the picture, you have actual history instead of just a lot of guesswork and archaeology.

And three, without writing I would not have a job. So I'd like to personally thank Mesopotamia for making it possible for me to work while reclining in my La-Z-Boy.

So why did this writing happen in Mesopotamia? Well, the Fertile Crescent, while it is fertile, is lacking pretty much everything else. In order to get metal for tools or stone for sculpture, or wood for burning, Mesopotamia had to trade. This trading eventually led

Mesopotamia to develop the world's first territorial kingdom, which will become very important and will eventually culminate in some extraordinarily inbred Habsburgs.

The city-state period in Mesopotamia ended around 2000 BCE, probably because drought and a shift in the course of rivers led to pastoral nomads coming in and conquering the environmentally weakened cities, and then the nomads settled into cities of their own as nomads almost always will, unless... wait for it... you are the Mongols. [Mongoltage]

These new Mesopotamia city-states were similar to their predecessors in that they had temples and writing and their own self-glorifying stories, but they were different in some important ways:

First, that early proto-socialism was replaced by something that looked a lot like private enterprise, where people could produce as much as they would like as long as they gave a cut, also known as taxes, to the government. We talk a lot of smack about taxes but it turns out they're pretty important to create stable social orders.

Things were also different politically because the dudes that had been the tribal chiefs became like full blown kings who tried to extend their power outside of cities and also tried to pass on their power to their sons. The most famous of these early monarchs is Hammurabi, or as I remember him from my high school history class, The Hammer of Abi. Hammurabi ruled the new kingdom of Babylon from 1792 BCE to 1750 BCE.

Hammurabi's main claim to fame is his famous law code, which established everything from like the wages of ox drivers to the fact that the punishment for taking an eye should be having an eye taken. Hammurabi's law code can be pretty insanely harsh, like if a builder builds a shoddy building, and then the owner's son dies in a collapse, the punishment for that is the execution of the builder's son! The kid's like, "That's not fair! I'm just a kid. What did I do? You should kill my dad."

All of which is to say that Hammurabi's law code gives a new meaning to the phrase "tough on crime". But it did introduce the presumptions of innocence. And in the law code, Hammurabi tried to portray himself in two roles that should sound familiar: shepherd and father. “I am the shepherd who brings peace. My benevolent shade was spread over the city. I held the peoples of Sumer and Akkad safely on my lap.”

So again we see the authority for the protection of the social order shifting to men, not gods, which is important, but don't worry. It'll shift back.

Even though territorial kingdoms like Babylon were more powerful than any cities that had come before, and even though Babylon was probably the world's most populous city during Hammurabi's rule, it wasn't actually that powerful. And keeping with the pattern, it was soon taken over the formerly nomadic Cassites.

The thing about territorial kingdoms is they relied on the poorest people to pay taxes and provide labor and serve in the army, all of which made you not like your king very much, so if you saw any nomadic invaders coming by, you might just be like, 'hey, nomadic invaders, come on in, you seem better than the last guy!'

Well, that was the case until the Assyrians came along anyway. The Assyrians have a deserved reputation for being the brutal bullies of Mesopotamia. But the Assyrians did give us an early example of probably the most important and durable form of political organization in world history, and also Star Wars history, the Empire.

The biggest problem with empires is that, by definition, they're diverse and multi-ethnic, which makes them hard to unify. So beginning around 911 BCE, the neo-Assyrian Empire grew from its hometowns of Ashur and Nineveh to include the whole of Mesopotamia, the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and even, by 680 BCE, Egypt.

They did this thanks to the most brutal, terrifying, and efficient army the world had ever seen. More adjectives describing my college girlfriend. For one thing, the army was a meritocracy - generals weren't chosen based on who their dads were, they were chosen based on if they were good at general-ing. Stan, is general-ing a word?

[bell dings]

John: It is! Also, they were super mean, like they would deport hundreds of thousands of people to separate them from their history and their families and also moved skilled workers around where they were most needed. Also, the Neo-Assyrians loved to find would-be rebels and lop off their appendages, particularly their noses for some reason. And there was your standard raping and pillaging and torture, all of which was done in the name of Ashur, the great God of the Neo-Assyrians, whose divine regent was the King.

Ashur, through the King, kept the world going, and as long as conquest continued, the world would not end. But if conquest ever stopped, the world would end and there would be rivers of blood and weeping and gnashing of teeth, you know how apocalypses go. The Assyrians spread this worldview with propaganda, like monumental architecture and readings about how awesome the King was at public festivals, all of which was designed to inspire awe in the Empire's subjects. Oh, that reminds me, it's time for the open letter!

=====Open Letter (9:53)=====

An open letter to the word 'awesome'. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, Stan, is this yellowcake uranium? You never find that in Mesopotamia.

Dear 'Awesome',

I love you. Like most contemporary English speakers, in fact, I probably love you a little too much. The thing about you, 'Awesome,' is that “awesome” is just so awesomely awesome at being awesome, so we lose track of what you really mean, 'Awesome,' you're not just cool, you're terrifying and wonderful. You're knees-buckling, chest-tightening, fearful encounters with something radically other, something that we know could both crush and bless us.

That is awe, and I apologize for having to water you down, but seriously, you're awesome.

Best wishes, John Green

=====What happened to the Assyrians? (10:40)=====

So what happened to the Assyrians? Well first, they extended their empire beyond their roads, making administration impossible, but more importantly, when your whole worldview is based on the idea that the apocalypse will come if you ever lose a battle, and then you lose one battle, the whole worldview just blows up. That eventually happened, and in 612 BCE, the city of Nineveh was finally conquered and the Neo-Assyrian empire had come to its end.

But the idea of 'empire' was just getting started. Next week, we'll talk about mummies! Oh, I have to talk about other things, too? Crap, I only want to talk about mummies. Anyway, we'll be talking about...

[Smart Globe] Sudan

No, dang it! We'll actually be talking about...

[Smart Globe] Egypt

Thank you, Smart Globe. See you next week.

=====Outro (11:23)=====

Today's episode of Crash Course was produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, with some help from myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "better boyfriend"; if you want to take a guess at this week's phrase of the week, you can do so in comments, where you can also suggest new phrases of the week and, if you have any questions about today's show, leave them in comments, and our team of semi-professional quasi-historians will endeavor to answer them.

Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.