

The Ancient Near East

The ancient Near East was home to many cultures, vast trade networks, and great innovations. At its heart is the Fertile Crescent with its mineral-rich soil. It extends in a semi-circle from the Nile Valley along the eastern Mediterranean and down to the Persian Gulf. In this area, the earliest civilizations were born. Abundant water supply and fair weather encouraged the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. In fast succession came innovations like the invention of writing and the wheel, law and administration, literature, metallurgy, stone carving, and monumental architecture.

The ancient Near East is bounded by the river valleys of the eastern Mediterranean to the west, the Taurus and Zagros mountains and steppe-lands in the north and east, and the Arabian desert to the south. Within this expanse, there was no geographical unity, no permanent capital city, no cultural uniformity. This lack of consistency is vital in understanding the ancient Near East. Early cultures traded goods and material that led to technological change. Cities grew into regional centers, propelled by the economic and social power of their temples. Kingdoms headed by charismatic rulers fought against each other. Empires conquered and fell, leaving a vacuum to be filled by another kingdom. Each culture left a mark and its objects tell the story.

