Ancient Near East Cultures: 
Sumeria, Babylonia, Judea

The Fertile Crescent, where agriculture began in 8000 BCE

Female figurines: Terra cotta 5000 BCE

Sites yield an abundance of terra cotta figures of woman with exaggerated hips and breasts, indicating concerns of fertility as a fundamental principle of survival for agro-pastoral communities.

This type of fertility symbol (mother goddess) appeared in the Near East at the end of the 9th millennium and continued for several more millennia.

Gaston Lachaise
Standing Woman
(Heroic Woman)
1932 (cast 1981)
History of Horticulture: Lecture 9

Chronology of Mesopotamian civilization

3000 BCE to the current era (birth of Christ) in comparison to Palestine, Egypt, and Greece.

5000 BCE
Ubaid

4000 BCE
Jemdet Nasr

3100 BCE
Early Dynastic III

2900 BCE
Early Dynastic II

2350 BCE
Akkadian

2100 BCE
Ur III

Note: Dates, based principally on radiocarbon determinations, are approximate.

Sumeria 3500–2000 BCE

Lost Culture—Unknown to Herodotus (484–425 BCE)
City of Ur
Writing Developed 3000 BCE (cuneiform)

Sumer and Akkad, 3500–2000 BCE

Uruk Man

Sumerian Agriculture
Canals and Irrigation Systems
Ziggurats

An early shaduf, Akkadian period, 3rd millennium BCE
Source: Singer et al. (1954)

Uruk Vase
3500–3000 BCE
Writing is inextricably associated with the evolution of agriculture. These 5 Sumerian clay tablets dating to 3000 BCE appear to be associated with crops and livestock.
2100 BCE
Oldest Prescription

The Disputation Between the Hoe and the Plow

Hoe picked a quarrel with the Plow.
Hoe and Plow—this is their dispute.

Hey! Hoe, Hoe, Hoe, tied up with string;
Hoe, made from poplar, with a tooth of ash;
Hoe, made from tamarisk, with a tooth of sea-thorn;
Hoe, double-toothed, four-toothed;
Hoe, child of the poor, bereft even of a loin-cloth;
Hoe cried out to Plow
“O Plow, you draw furrows—what is your furrowing to me?
You make clods—what is your clod making to me?
You cannot dam up water when it escapes.
You cannot heap up earth in the basket.
You cannot press clay or make bricks.
You cannot lay foundations or build a house.
You cannot put a roof on a man’s house.
O Plow, you cannot straighten a street.
O Plow, you draw furrows—what is your furrowing to me?
You make clods—what is your clod-making to me?”

The Plow cries out to the Hoe
“I, I am Plow, I was fashioned by the great powers, assembled
by noblest hands!
I am the mighty registrar of God Enlil!
I am the faithful farmer of Mankind!
At the celebration of my harvest-festival in the fields,
Even the King slaughters cattle for me, adding sheep!
He pours out libations for me, and offers the collected liquids!
Drums and tympanos sound!
The king himself takes hold of my handle-bars;
My oxen he harnesses to the yoke;
Great noblemen walk at my side;
The nations gaze at me in admiration,
The Land watches me in Joy!

Terra Cotta Wagons 2500 BCE
Two-wheeled carts drawn by asses or oxen were developed
at the end of the 4th millennium for use on flat land.
Over uneven terrain goods were transported on the backs of
asses which could cover 20 km per day.
Semitic king
23rd century BCE

Ur-Nammu: The First Moses

The Legendary Sargon I (2334–2279 BCE)

Founded the Akkadian-Summerian Empire

“The river bore me away and bore me to Akki the irrigator (who) received me in the goodness of his heart and reared me in boyhood. Akki, the irrigator made me a gardener. My service as a gardener was pleasing to Istar and I became King”
Babylonian scratch plow with seed drill.

Drinking beer through tubes from a Syrian seal.

Terra cotta and kitchen imprints from city-state of Mari (1800 BCE)

Moulds may have been used in the production of bread and pastries, and perhaps for cheese.
Hammurabi (1795–1750 BCE)
King of Babylon
Code of Hammurabi
Nebuchadnezzar
(villain in the Book of Daniel)

A Sampling of Laws Relating to Agriculture

64 If a man gives his orchard to a gardener to pollinate (the date palms), as long as the gardener is in possession of the orchard, he shall give to the owner of the orchard two thirds of the yield of the orchard, and he himself shall take one third.

65 If the gardener does not pollinate the (date palms in the) orchard and thus diminishes the yield, the gardener [shall measure and deliver] a yield for the orchard to the owner of the orchard in accordance with his neighbor’s yield.

The Laws of Hammurabi
God pollinating the date palm


Assyrian Dam of rough masonry and mortared rubble, curved to withstand the flow of the river Khosr above Nineveh

Raising river water with shaduf using a double lift.
The shadufs, on mud uprights, stand at two levels on the
river bank utilizing a brick platform built out into the
water.
From the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Mesopotamia
7th Century BCE.

Ziggurat of Quaf, 1400 BCE

Hanging Gardens of Babylon.
A 19th century conception.

Map of fields and irrigation canals near Nippur,
Mesopotamia from cuneiform tablet, ca 1300 BCE (left).
Translation (right).
Primitive drawing  Date palm  “Symbolic” palm

Source: Gothein 1966.

Wild grape trained on a tree, relief from Nineveh

Ivory plaque 800 BCE in Syria (left) based on Egyptian presence. Compare with Egyptian painting (right).

The Nile gods of Upper and Lower Egypt symbolically binding stalks of papyrus into the same bundle to represent the unification of Egypt.
And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard, and he drank of wine. (Genesis 9:20–21)

...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)