

By the Rivers of Babylon

In the fertile valley where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet (in present-day Iraq), great ancient civilizations once flourished. One of the first peoples to settle in the valley were the Sumerians in about 4500 B.C. The Sumerians cleared the land for growing food and irrigated it by digging canals and draining swamps along the rivers. Because of irrigation and the fertility of the soil, the Sumerians had time to develop other aspects of their civilization.

During the time of Babylonian culture, which followed the Sumerian in about 1800 B.C., people kept digging canals. The water of the rivers became muddy, not just during the spring floods as in the past, but all the time. Deposits of silt settled in the canals and over time clogged them up. To keep the canals open to water the fields, people carried the silt out of the canals in baskets. Settlements grew around each system of canals, and each town had to be responsible for its own land and water, because to neglect either would mean starvation. Land and water were so important that the first Babylonian king, Hammurabi, decreed death to any person who wasted water or spoiled the land.

However, as the people of Babylon became prosperous and accustomed to luxury, they did not take as good care of the land. King Nebuchadnezzar, ruling more than a thousand years after Hammurabi, was recorded as saying: “That which no king before me had done, I did.... Great canals I dug and lined them with burnt brick laid in bitumen and brought abundant waters to all the people.... I paved the streets of Babylon with stone from the mountain.... Magnificent palaces and temples I have built.... Huge cedars from Mount Lebanon I cut down.... “

Because of erosion from canal digging, logging, and grazing, more and more silt kept washing down the rivers from the hills to the north. As the soil washed off the unprotected hills and settled in the irrigation canals of Babylonia, more and more people had to spend all their time maintaining the canals. War captives and slaves were even brought in to do the work.

Invasions by Alexander the Great and others in the fourth century B.C. meant that the soil and canals were neglected. As time went on and silt filled the valley, the land could support fewer and fewer people. About 700 years ago, the Babylonian canals were finally destroyed by the invasion of the Mongols who destroyed the irrigation system and allowed the land to return to desert.