

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Mesopotamia was one area in which civilization began. The Tigris and Euphrates River valley supported agriculture and encouraged trade. Mesopotamians developed complex economic, political, and social structures. They invented a written language, built empires, and codified their laws.

The Fertile Crescent

GUIDING QUESTION *What role did the physical environment play in the development of Sumerian civilization?*

Fertile river valleys could support many people in permanent settlements. These farming villages grew into culture hearths, early centers of culture whose ideas and practices spread to surrounding areas. Highly organized societies then evolved in these regions.

The ancient Greeks spoke of the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as Mesopotamia, the land “between the rivers.” Mesopotamia was at the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent, an arc of land from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. Rich soil and abundant crops allowed the land to sustain an early civilization.

Mesopotamia had little rain, but over the years its soil had been enriched by layers of silt—material deposited by the two rivers. In late spring, the Tigris and Euphrates often overflowed their banks and deposited their fertile silt. This flooding was unpredictable. It depended on the melting of snows in the upland mountains where the rivers began. People in the valley could not predict the timing and size of the floods. Therefore, they learned to control the flow of the rivers. By using irrigation and drainage ditches, farmers were able to grow crops regularly. An abundance of food allowed many people to live together in cities, and civilization emerged.

Mesopotamian civilization refers to the achievements of people from three general areas: Assyria, Akkad, and Sumer. The Sumerians were the creators of the first Mesopotamian civilization.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing How did people in the Fertile Crescent adapt their environment?

City-States of Ancient Mesopotamia

GUIDING QUESTION *How did religious beliefs influence the organization of Sumerian society?*

By 3000 B.C., the Sumerians had established a number of independent cities in southern Mesopotamia, including Eridu, Ur, and Uruk. As the cities expanded, they gained political and economic control over the surrounding countryside. They formed city-states, the basic units of Sumerian civilization.

Sumerian cities were surrounded by walls. Uruk, for example, was encircled by a wall six miles (10 km) long, with defense towers located every 30 to 35 feet (9 to 10 m) along the wall. It is estimated that Uruk had a population of around 50,000 people by 2700 B.C., making it one of the largest city-states.

City dwellings, built of sun-dried bricks, included both the small houses of peasants and the larger buildings of the city officials, priests, and priestesses. Although Mesopotamia had little stone or wood for building purposes, it did have plenty of mud. Mud bricks, easily shaped by hand, were left to bake in the hot sun until they were hard enough to use for building. People in Mesopotamia were remarkably creative with mud bricks. They invented the arch and the dome, and they built some of the largest brick buildings in the world.

Religion and Rulers

In Mesopotamia, people looked to religion to answer their questions about life. To them, powerful spiritual beings—gods and goddesses—permeated all aspects of the universe. The Mesopotamians identified nearly 3,000 gods and goddesses. Their religion was polytheistic because of this belief in many gods. According to the beliefs of the Mesopotamians, humans were supposed to obey and serve the gods. By their nature, humans were inferior to the gods and could never be sure what the gods might do to them or for them.

The most prominent building in a Sumerian city was the temple dedicated to the chief god or goddess of the city. This temple was often built atop a massive stepped tower called a ziggurat. The Sumerians believed that gods and goddesses owned the cities. The people devoted much of their wealth to building temples and elaborate houses for the priests and priestesses who served the gods. The temples and related buildings served as the center of the city physically, economically, and even politically. The temples also served as storehouses for surplus food and crafts, which could then be distributed or traded.

The priests and priestesses who supervised the temples held a great deal of power. The Sumerians believed that the gods ruled the cities, making the state a theocracy—a government established by divine authority. Even when power passed into the hands of kings, Sumerians believed that these rulers derived their power from the gods and were the agents of the gods.

Regardless of their origins, kings held great power. They led armies, supervised the building of public works, and organized workers for the irrigation projects on which farming depended. The army, the government, and the priests and priestesses all aided the kings in their rule. As befitted their power, Sumerian kings and their families lived in large palaces.

Economy and Society

Although the Sumerian city-states had a traditional economy based chiefly on farming, trade and industry became important as well. The peoples of Mesopotamia made woolen textiles and pottery, but they were particularly well known for their metalwork.

Copper, gold, and silver were already being used for jewelry and some tools. The Sumerians discovered that when tin is added to copper, it makes bronze. Bronze has a lower melting point, which makes it easier to cast than copper. Bronze is also a harder metal than copper and corrodes less.

The Sumerians bartered, or exchanged, wool, barley, dried fish, wheat, and metal goods for imported copper, tin, and timber. Sumerian traders traveled by land to the eastern Mediterranean in the west and by sea to India in the east. The invention of the wheel, around 3000 B.C., led to wheeled carts, making the transport of goods much easier.

Sumerian city-states contained three major social groups: nobles, commoners, and slaves. Nobles included royal and priestly officials and their families. Commoners worked for palace and temple estates and as farmers, merchants, fishers, and craftspeople. Probably 90 percent or more of the people were farmers. Slaves belonged to palace officials, who used them mostly in building projects. Temple officials most often used female slaves to weave cloth and to grind grain. Rich landowners also used slaves to farm their lands.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Evaluating Did the Sumerians have an advanced economy relative to their time and place? Explain your answer.

The Creativity of the Sumerians

GUIDING QUESTION *Based on their achievements, why do we consider the Sumerians to be innovative?*

The Sumerians created many inventions that still affect our lives today. Probably their greatest invention was their system of writing. In addition, historians credit them with many technological innovations.

Writing and Literature

Around 3000 B.C., the Sumerians created a cuneiform (“wedge-shaped”) system of writing. Using a reed stylus (a tool for writing), they made wedge-shaped impressions on clay tablets, which were then baked or dried in the sun. After they dried, these tablets lasted a very long time. Several hundred thousand tablets have been found. They have been a valuable source of information for modern scholars.

Mesopotamian peoples used writing primarily for record keeping. Cuneiform texts, however, were also used in schools to train scribes, who served as copyists, teachers, and jurists. Men who began their careers as scribes became the leaders of their cities, temples, and armies. Scribes came to hold the most important positions in Sumerian society.

Writing was important because it allowed a society to keep records and to pass along knowledge from person to person and from generation to generation. Writing also made it possible for people to communicate ideas in new ways. This is especially evident in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic poem from Mesopotamia that records the exploits of a legendary king named Gilgamesh. Part man and part god, he befriends a hairy beast named Enkidu. Together, they set off to do great deeds. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh feels the pain of death and begins a search for the secret of immortality. His efforts fail, and Gilgamesh remains mortal, showing that “everlasting life” is only for the gods.

Technology

The Sumerians invented several tools and devices that made daily life easier and more productive. They developed the wagon wheel, for example, to help transport people and goods from place to place. The sundial to keep time and the arch used in construction are other examples of Sumerian technology. The Sumerians were the first to make bronze out of copper and tin, creating finely crafted metalwork. The Sumerians also made outstanding achievements in mathematics and astronomy. In math, they devised a number system based on 60. They used geometry to measure fields and to erect buildings. In astronomy, the Sumerians charted the heavenly constellations. A quick glance at your watch and its division of an hour into 60 minutes should remind you of our debt to the Sumerians.

Thinking Like a Historian

Calendars and Periodization

Societies developed calendars to measure time and to record significant events. Most societies have adopted the Gregorian calendar for civil affairs. This Christian calendar was introduced in the late 1500s. On this calendar, the era after the birth of Jesus is labeled A.D., Latin for *anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord.” The years before Jesus’ birth are referred to as B.C., for “before Christ.” Alternatively, some label those eras, or large divisions of time, as B.C.E. “Before the Common Era” and C.E. “Common Era.” Scientists divide the past into time periods to help categorize information. Archaeologists often describe the past based on tool-making technology. For example, they named the Bronze Age for its prominent use of bronze tools. Historians often analyze the past by dividing time into fixed periods and periods based on events, such as the Age of the Enlightenment. They describe the world in terms of decades, periods of ten years, and centuries, periods of 100 years. For example, a historian might refer to the 1910s as the second decade of the twentieth century.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Hypothesizing Given what you have learned about the Sumerians, develop a hypothesis on how or why they created a system of writing.

Reviewing Vocabulary

1. **Paraphrasing** In your own words, explain what a ziggurat was and how it was used.

Using Your Notes

2. **Gathering Information** Use the notes you took and other information in this lesson to describe the city-states and society of Mesopotamia.

Answering the Guiding Questions

3. **Drawing Conclusions** What role did the physical environment play in the development of Sumerian civilization?

4. **Analyzing** How did religious beliefs influence the organization of Sumerian society?

5. **Gathering Information** Based on their achievement, why do scholars consider the Sumerians to be innovative?

Writing Activity

6. **Argument** In a fully developed paragraph, argue that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* either reflects aspects of Mesopotamian life or that it is a universal story with a universal theme.