

Mesopotamia

3000 B.C. to 500 B.C.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• How does geography influence the way people live? • Why does conflict develop?



networks

There's More Online about the lives and customs of the Sumerians.

CHAPTER 22

Lesson 1

The Sumerians

Lesson 2

Mesopotamian Empires

The Story Matters . . .

Have you ever watched a large subdivision of homes being built? Did you notice solid structures beginning to appear on what was once only flat land? Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II built such a project during his reign from 883–859 B.C. He took the small town of Nimrud and made it his capital. When he was finished, the city occupied about 900 acres. Around it, Ashurnasirpal II built a wall 120 feet thick, 42 feet high, and 5 miles long. The gates were guarded by two huge human-headed winged bulls. Parts of these gates can be seen in the New York Metropolitan Museum today. When he finished the city, the king held a festival attended by about 70,000 people. Here, he said, were “the happy people of all lands together. . . .”

◀ *Relief sculpture of Ashurnasirpal II, Assyrian king from 883–859 B.C.*

Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis

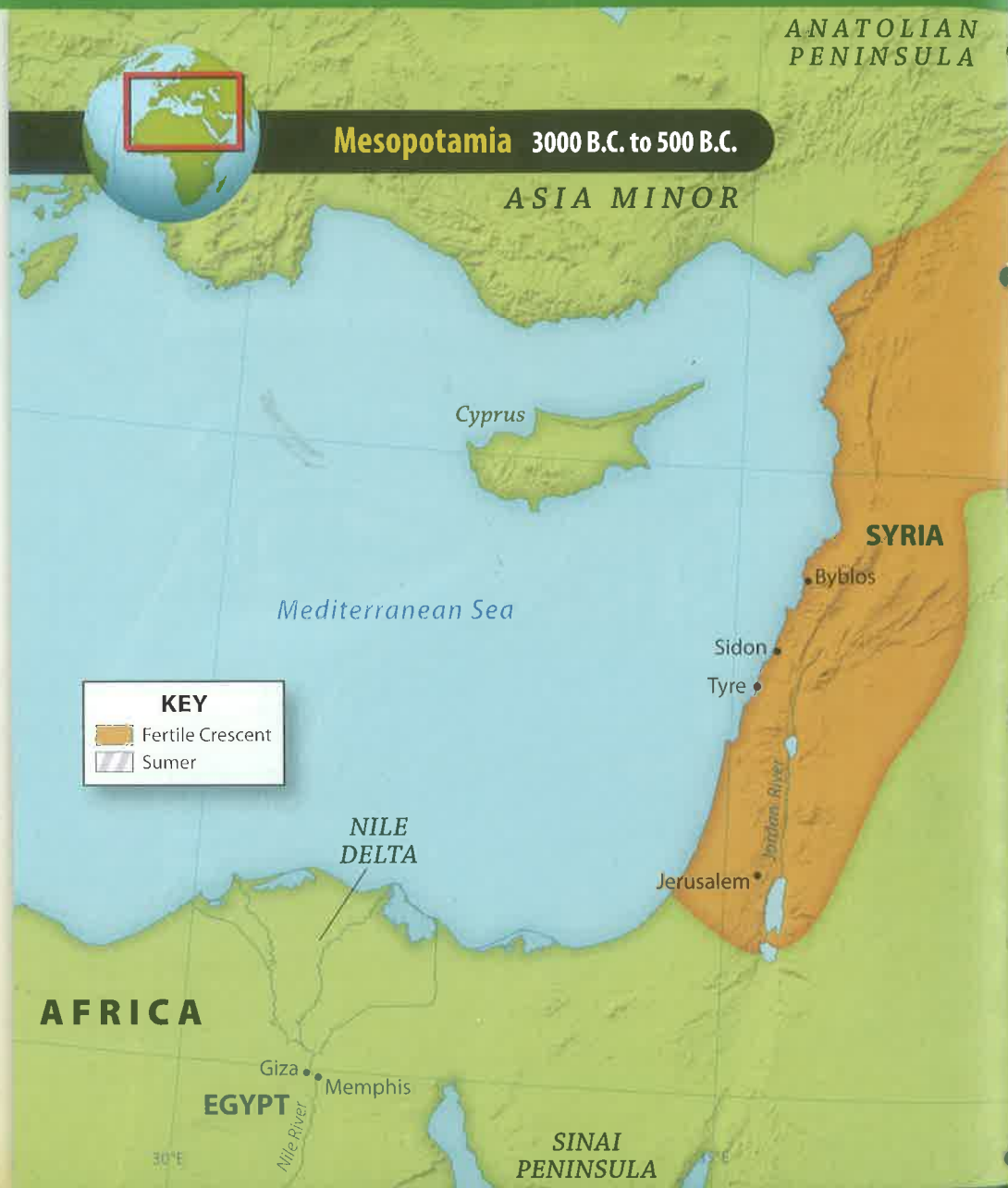
Place and Time: Mesopotamia 3000 B.C. to 500 B.C.

Mesopotamia extended from the Tigris River to the Euphrates. The Sumerians were the first settlers in the region. They are the people who developed the world's first civilization. Soon several civilizations appeared in Mesopotamia. This area was called the fertile crescent because of its shape.

Step Into the Place

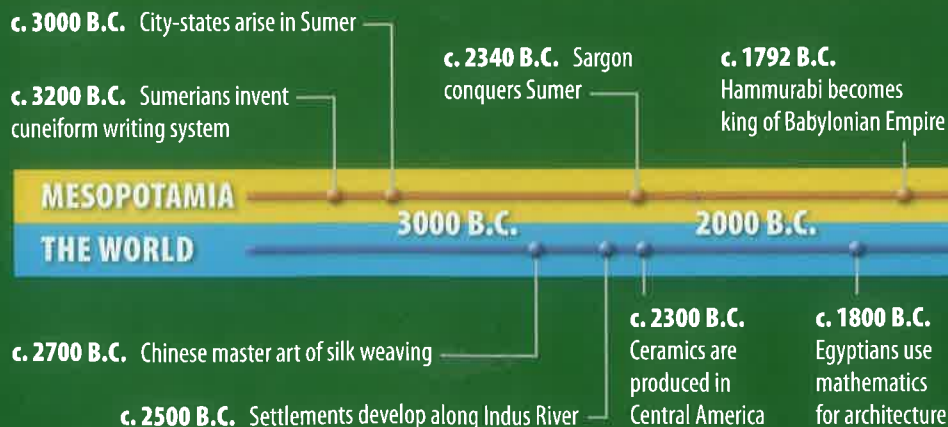
MAP FOCUS There were many Mesopotamian cities that arose along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

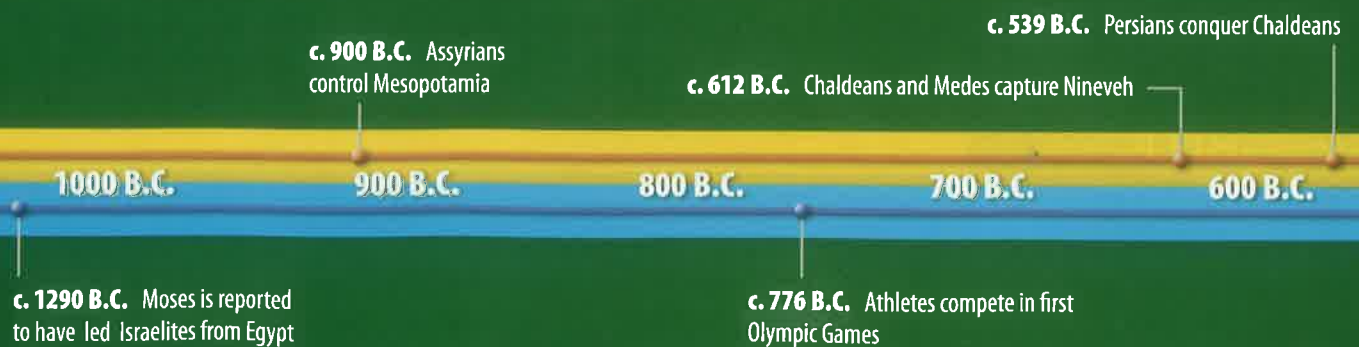
- 1 PLACE** What river flowed through the western side of Mesopotamia?
- 2 LOCATION** What is the approximate distance from Nineveh to Ur?
- 3 MOVEMENT** To what larger body of water did the people living along these rivers sail?
- 4 CRITICAL THINKING**
Making Inferences Why do you think many cities in Mesopotamia developed near rivers?



Step Into the Time

TIME LINE Place these events in order, starting with the earliest: Assyrians control Mesopotamia, settlements develop along the Indus River, Sumerians invent cuneiform, and first Olympic Games.





✓ **GRAPHIC ORGANIZER**
Sumerian Inventions

✓ **IMAGE**
Cuneiform

✓ **SLIDE SHOW**
• Irrigation Methods
• Ziggurats
• Sumerian Jewelry



Lesson 1

The Sumerians

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How does geography influence the way people live?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Sumerians made important advances in areas such as farming and writing that laid the foundation for future civilizations.

The First Civilizations in Mesopotamia

GUIDING QUESTION Why did people settle in Mesopotamia?

Civilizations first developed about 3000 B.C. in the river valleys of Mesopotamia (MEH • suh • puh • TAY • mee • uh), Egypt, India, and China. Throughout history, the need to have water for drinking and growing crops influenced where people settled. Although there were differences among the early civilizations, they were alike in many ways. As these early civilizations developed, people formed social classes. The social class people belonged to partly depended on their occupations. They did specialized types of work. Using improved technology, they made more and better goods. They set up governments to pass laws, defend their land, and carry out large building projects. The people of these civilizations also developed systems of values and beliefs that gave meaning to their lives.

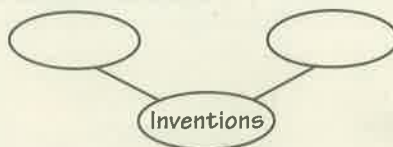
The Two Rivers

Mesopotamia, the earliest known civilization, developed in what is now southern Iraq (ih • RAHK). Mesopotamia means “the land between the rivers” in Greek. The civilization began on the plain between the Tigris (TY • gruhs) and the Euphrates (yu • FRAY • teez) rivers.

Reading HELPDESK

Taking Notes: Identifying

On a diagram like this one, identify two major inventions of the Sumerians.



Content Vocabulary

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| • silt | • city-state | • cuneiform |
| • irrigation | • polytheism | • scribe |
| • surplus | • ziggurat | • epic |

These rivers run about **parallel** to each other and flow more than 1,000 miles (1,600 km). They run southeast from the mountains of southeastern Asia to the Persian (PUR•zhuhn) Gulf.

Mesopotamia itself was located in the eastern part of the larger Fertile Crescent. This curving strip of good farmland extends from the Mediterranean (mehd•uh•tuh•RAY•nee•uhn) Sea to the Persian Gulf. The Fertile Crescent includes parts of the modern countries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan.

Early Valley Dwellers

For thousands of years, clues to Mesopotamia's history lay buried among its ruins and piles of rubble. In the 1800s, archaeologists began to dig up many buildings and artifacts. These finds revealed much about early Mesopotamia.

Historians believe that people first settled Mesopotamia about 7000 B.C. The first settlers were hunters and herders. By about 4000 B.C., some of these groups had moved to the plain of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. They built farming villages along the two rivers.

Taming the Rivers

Early Mesopotamian farmers used water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to water their fields. However, the farmers could not always rely on the rivers for their needs. Little or no rain fell in the summer. As a result, the rivers were often low. The farmers did not have enough water to plant crops in the fall.

During the spring harvest, rains and melting snow from the northern mountains caused rivers to overflow their banks. This flooded the plains. Sometimes, unexpected and violent floods swept away crops, homes, and livestock.

Yet farmers in Mesopotamia knew that the floods were also helpful. Flooded rivers were filled with **silt**, or small particles of soil. When the floods ended, silt was left on the banks and plains. The silt proved to be a very good soil for farming.

Over time, people in Mesopotamia learned to build dams to control the seasonal floods. They dug canals that let water flow from a water source to their fields. This method of watering crops is called **irrigation** (IHR•uh•GAY•shuhn).



Irrigation canals help farmers grow crops in areas that would otherwise be dry and not suitable for farming.

silt fine particles of fertile soil

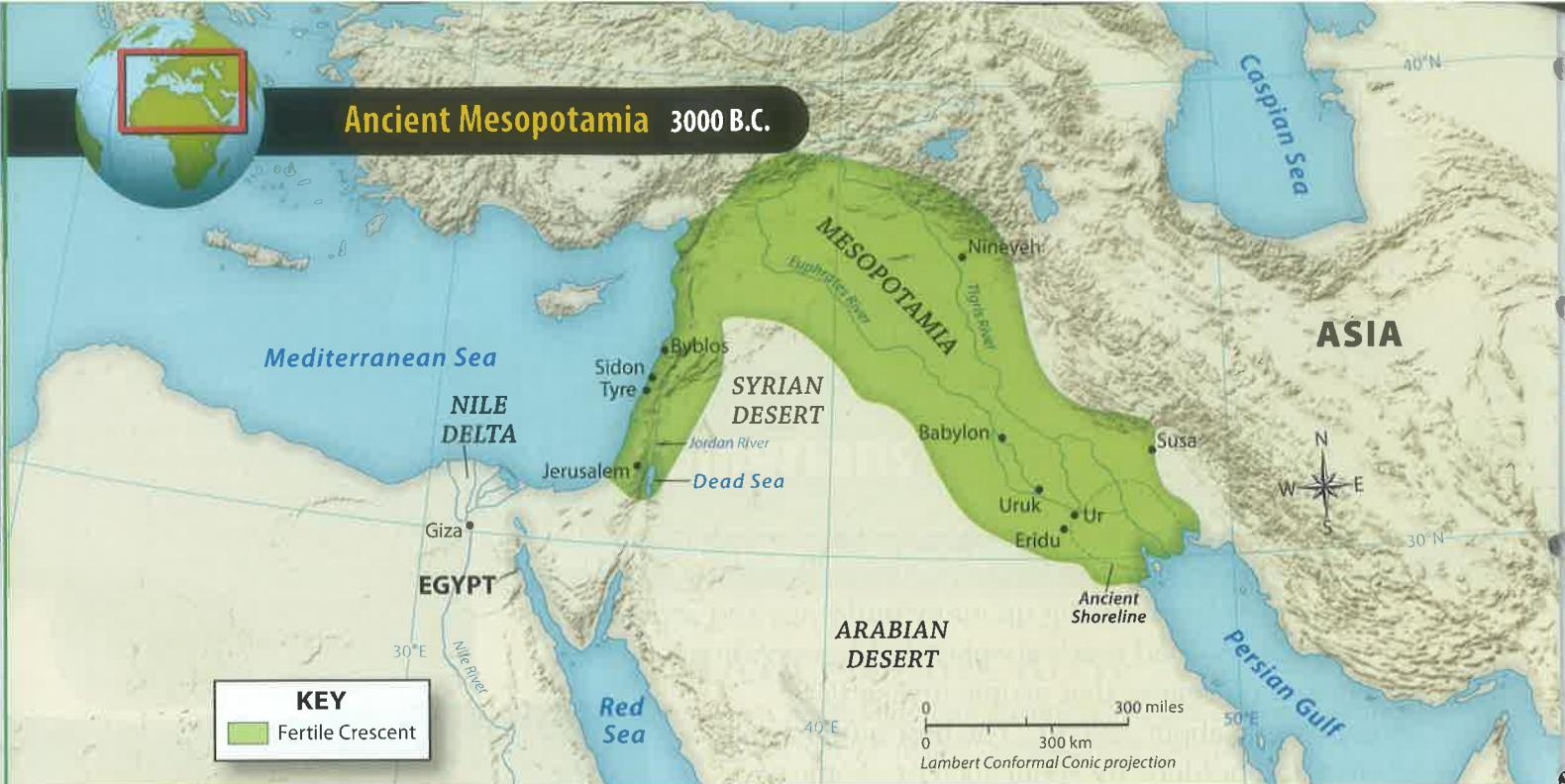
irrigation a system that supplies dry land with water through ditches, pipes, or streams

Academic Vocabulary

parallel moving or lying in the same direction and the same distance apart



Ancient Mesopotamia 3000 B.C.



GEOGRAPHY CONNECTION

A number of great civilizations developed in Mesopotamia.

1 LOCATION What city was located in northern Mesopotamia?

2 CRITICAL THINKING
Making Inferences Why do you think Mesopotamia was a good location for the growth of civilization?

Irrigation let these early farmers grow **surpluses** (SUHR•plus•ehz)—or extra amounts—of food. Farmers stored the surpluses for later use.

When food was plentiful, not all people needed to farm. Some became artisans, or skilled workers. They specialized in weaving cloth and making pottery, tools, and weapons.

As artisans made more goods, people's lives changed. People began to live together in places that favored trade. Small farming villages grew into cities. By 3000 B.C., several cities developed in Sumer (SOO•mer), a region in southern Mesopotamia.

PROGRESS CHECK

Explaining How did floods sometimes help farmers?

Sumer's Civilization

GUIDING QUESTION *What was life like in Sumer?*

Sumer's people were known as Sumerians. They built the first cities in Southwest Asia, including Ur (uhr), Uruk (OO•rook), and Eridu (ER•i•doo). These cities became centers of civilization that controlled the lower part of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys.

Reading **HELP**DESK

surplus an amount that is left over after a need has been met

city-state a city that governs itself and its surrounding territory

polytheism a belief in more than one god

City-States Arise

Sumer's cities were surrounded by mudflats and patches of scorching desert. The harsh landscape made it hard to travel by land and communicate with other groups. This meant that each city was largely cut off from its neighbors.

As a result, Sumerian cities became independent. The people of each city raised their own crops and made their own goods. As the cities grew, they gained political and economic control over the lands around them. By doing this, they formed **city-states**. Each city-state had its own government and was not part of any larger governing state. The population of the city-states ranged from about 5,000 to 20,000 people.

Historians think that each Sumerian city-state was protected by a large city wall. Ruins and artifacts have been found by archaeologists that support this theory. Because stone and wood were in short supply, the Sumerians used mud from the rivers as their main building material. They mixed mud with crushed reeds, formed bricks, and left them in the sun to dry. The gates of the wall stayed open during the day but were closed at night for protection. The ruler's palace, a large temple, and other public buildings were located in the center of the city.

Often, these city-states went to war with one another over resources and political borders. Sometimes, they fought to win glory or to gain more territory. During times of peace, city-states traded with each other. They also agreed to help each other by forming alliances (uh•LY•uhns•uhs) to protect their common interests.

Gods, Priests, and Kings

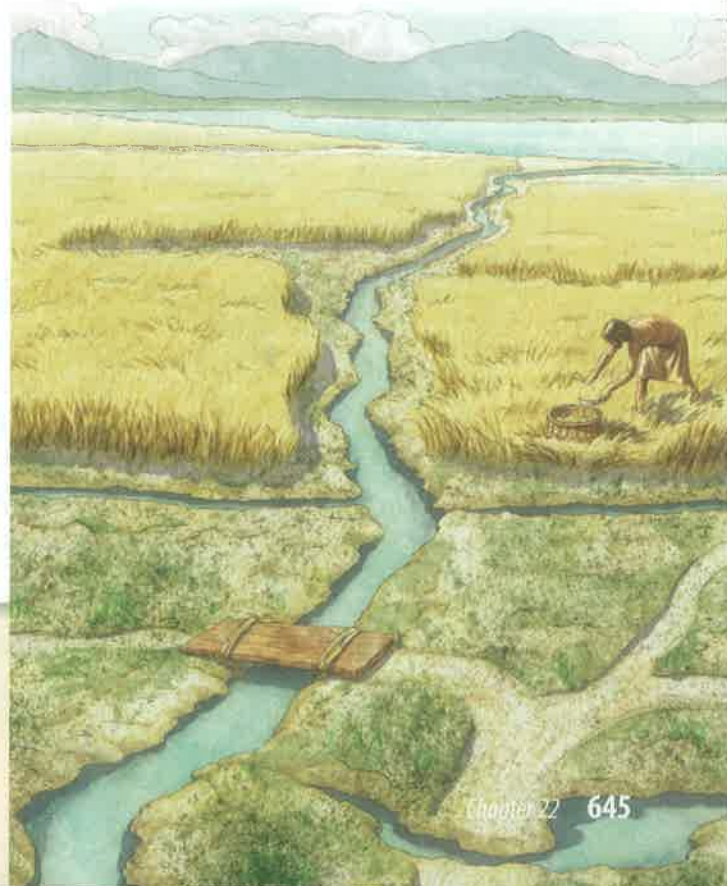
The Sumerian people worshipped many gods, a type of belief known as **polytheism** (PAH•lee•thee•ih•zuhm). These multiple gods played different roles in Sumerian life. The Sumerians thought that some gods had power over parts of nature, such as the rain or the wind. They also believed that some gods guided the things that people did, such as plowing or brick-making. They honored whatever god would help their activity.

Although Sumerians honored all the gods, each city-state claimed one as its own.

In areas where there was little rainfall, farmers watered their fields using irrigation channels.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Analyzing What other water sources were available in addition to the river?





The ziggurat was built to be visible throughout the city-state. The walls of the ziggurat enclosed the royal warehouses and the city's treasury.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Speculating Why do you think the Sumerians would want the ziggurat to be highly visible?

To honor its god, a city-state often included a large temple called a **ziggurat** (ZIG•oo•rat). The word *ziggurat* means “to rise high” in the ancient Akkadian (uh•KAY•dee•uhn) language. The very top of the ziggurat was a holy place. It was the god’s home, and only special priests were allowed to go there. In the early days, priests of the ziggurat ruled the city-states. Groups of important men helped them govern. Later, Sumerian city-states became monarchies.

Sumerian kings claimed they received their power to rule from the city’s god. The first kings were most likely war heroes.

Over time, their rule became hereditary. This meant that after a king died, his son took over. In most cases, the wives of kings did not have political power. However, some controlled their own lands.

Social Groups

People in Sumer were divided into social classes. Generally, people remained in the social class into which they were born. Kings, priests, warriors, and government officials belonged to the upper class. The middle class **consisted** of merchants, farmers, fishers, and artisans. The middle class was Sumer’s largest social group. Enslaved people made up Sumer’s lowest class. Most of these workers had been captured in war. Also, criminals and people who could not pay their debts often were enslaved. Enslaved men and women worked for the upper class.

Women and men had different roles in Sumerian society. The basic unit of society was the family. Men were the head of the home. Boys went to school and were trained for a specific job. Sumerian women ran the home, taught their daughters to do the same, and cared for the children. Women had a few civil rights. Some owned businesses. Sumerian law required parents to care for their children. The law also required adult children to care for their parents if their parents needed help.

Reading HELPDESK

ziggurat a pyramid-shaped structure with a temple at the top

Academic Vocabulary

consist to be made up of

Reading Strategy: Summarizing

When you summarize, you find the main idea of a passage and restate it in your own words. Read the paragraph under the heading “Social Groups.” On a separate sheet of paper, summarize the paragraph in one or two sentences.

Farmers and Traders

If you lived in Sumer, you were most likely a farmer. Each farmer had a plot of land located in the area around a city-state. Dams and waterways ran through this farmland. Wheat, barley, and dates were the major crops. Farmers also raised sheep, goats, and pigs.

Trade was another key part of Sumer's economy. The Sumerians did not have some of the goods that they needed. For example, even though many Sumerians were skilled metalworkers, they had to trade with other peoples to obtain most of their metals. Trade routes linked Sumer to places as far away as India and Egypt.

Sumerian merchants went to other lands. They traded wheat, barley, and tools for timber, minerals, and metals. The minerals and metals were then used to make jewelry or tools. For jewelry making, Sumerians valued a red stone called carnelian from India's Indus Valley. They also searched for a blue stone known as lapis lazuli from what is now Afghanistan. Traders returned with iron and silver from present-day Turkey.

✓ PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing Why do you think the Sumerians built cities with walls around them?

Sumerian Contributions

GUIDING QUESTION *What ideas and inventions did Sumerians pass on to other civilizations?*

The Sumerians created the first civilization that had a great influence on history. Later civilizations copied and improved many of the ideas and inventions that began in Sumer. As a result, Mesopotamia has been called the "cradle of civilization." It was the beginning of organized human society.

Writing

Of all the contributions made by Sumerians to the world, writing is perhaps the most important. The writing system they developed was the earliest known system in the world.

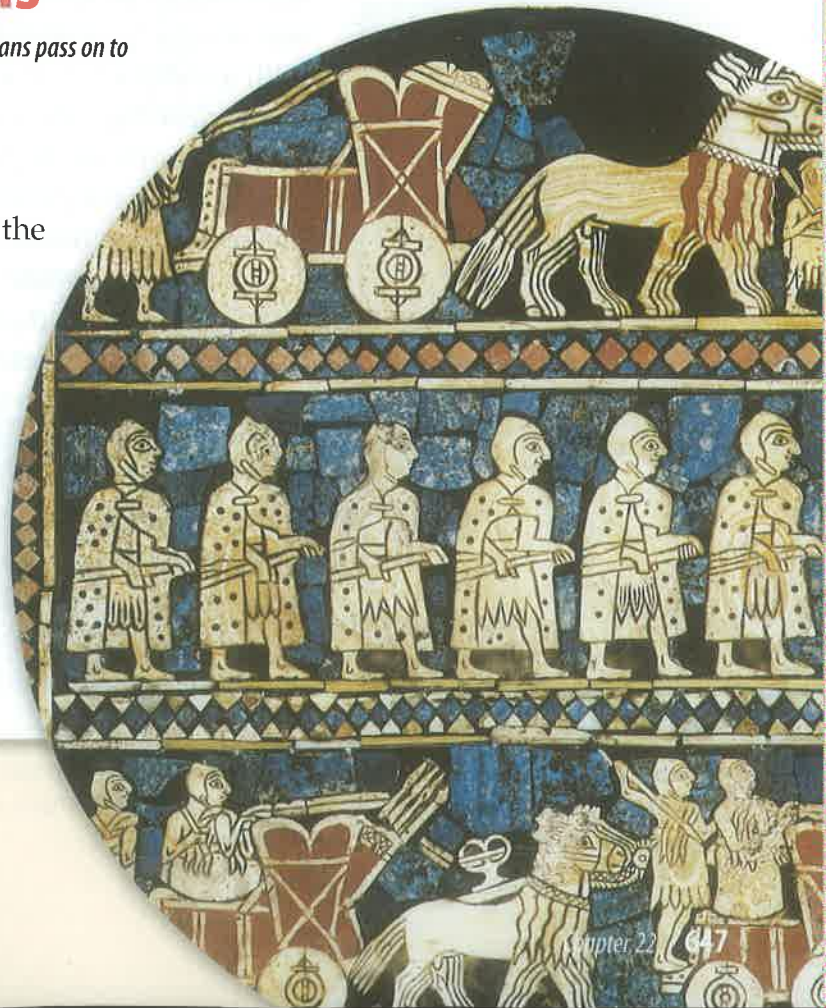


Sumerian artisans produced a variety of goods, including jewelry. This piece is made of gold and lapis lazuli.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Speculating If you were an artisan in ancient times, what would you produce?

This Royal Standard of Ur—the royal design—shows scenes of everyday life in Sumer. Which methods of travel are shown on this standard?





Sumerians needed materials for building and making tools. They sailed to other lands to trade for wood logs to take home.

Writing was a way for Sumerians to keep records of their lives and their history. Writing was also a way to share information. They could pass on their ideas to later generations.

Sumerians created a way of writing called **cuneiform** (kyoo • NEE • uh • FAWRM). The cuneiform writing system was made up of about 1,200 different characters. Characters represented such things as names, physical objects, and numbers. Cuneiform was written by cutting wedge-shaped marks into damp clay with a sharp reed. The name *cuneiform* comes from a Latin word meaning “wedge.” Sumerians wrote on clay because they did not have paper. Archaeologists have found cuneiform tablets that have provided important information about Mesopotamian history.

Only a few people—mostly boys from wealthy families—learned how to read and write cuneiform. After years of training, some students became **scribes** (SKRYBS), or official record keepers. Scribes wrote documents that recorded much of the everyday life in Mesopotamia, including court records, marriage contracts, business dealings, and important events. Some scribes were judges and government officials.

Sumerians told stories orally for centuries. After developing writing, they were able to record these stories. Their tales praised the gods and warriors for doing great deeds. The world’s oldest known story is from Sumer. Written more than 4,000

Reading **HELP**DESK

cuneiform a system of writing developed by the Sumerians that used wedge-shaped marks made in soft clay

scribe a person who copies or writes out documents; often a record keeper

epic a long poem that records the deeds of a legendary or real hero

years ago and still studied today, this story is called the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (GIHL•guh•MEHSH). An **epic** is a long poem that tells the story of a hero.

Technology and Mathematics

The people of Mesopotamia also made many useful inventions. For example, the Sumerians were the first people to use the wheel. The earliest wheels were solid wood circles made from carved boards that were clamped together. A Sumerian illustration from about 3500 B.C. shows a wheeled vehicle. They built the first carts, which were pulled by donkeys. They also introduced vehicles into military use with the development of the chariot.

For river travel, Sumerians developed the sailboat. They invented a wooden plow to help them in the fields. Artisans made the potter's wheel, which helped to shape clay into bowls and jars. Sumerians were also the first to make bronze out of copper and tin. They used bronze to craft stronger tools, weapons, and jewelry.

The Sumerians also studied mathematics and astronomy. They used geometry to measure the size of fields and to plan buildings. They created a place-value system of numbers based on 60. They also devised tables for calculating division and multiplication. The 60-minute hour, 60-second minute, and 360-degree circle we use today are ideas that came from the Sumerians. Sumerians watched the positions of the stars. It showed them the best times to plant crops and to hold religious ceremonies. They also made a 12-month calendar based on the cycles of the moon.

PROGRESS CHECK

Explaining Why did the Sumerians invent a writing system?

Sumerian writing etched on stone has been found by archaeologists.



Thinking Like a HISTORIAN

Classifying and Categorizing Information

The Sumerians invented or improved many items and methods. To classify these, look for topics with broad characteristics, such as *farming* or *communication*. Under each broad classification, you can divide the topic into narrower categories. Under farming, for example, include the category *irrigation*. Create a chart to organize broad topics and categories for the Sumerians' inventions and present your information to the class. For more about classifying and categorizing, read the chapter *What Does a Historian Do?*

LESSON 1 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. How were *polytheism* and *ziggurats* related in Sumerian civilization?

Answer the Guiding Questions

2. **Describing** Where is the Fertile Crescent located? Where is Mesopotamia located?
3. **Comparing** How were the social classes of Sumer organized?

4. **Identifying** What was the most common role for women in Sumerian society?
5. **Describing** Why were scribes important in Sumerian society?
6. **PERSUASIVE WRITING** Sumerians developed many inventions. Choose the invention that you think is the most significant and explain why you made this choice.

THE WORLD'S LITERATURE

Epic of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh ruled Uruk in southern Mesopotamia sometime around 2000 B.C. According to mythology, he was a god and a human. It is believed that Gilgamesh was a harsh ruler until his friendship with Enkidu (EN • kee • doo) taught him to be fair and kind. In this epic poem, Gilgamesh faces many challenges. He suffers many losses and must confront his biggest fear: death. Eventually, Gilgamesh learns he cannot avoid death.

This excerpt tells the story of when Gilgamesh and his friend, Enkidu, decide to become heroes. They set out to kill Humbaba (hum • BAH • bah), a monstrous giant who ruled the cedar forest where gods lived. Humbaba has the face of a lion and his breath ignites fire, while his roar unleashes floods.

“Don’t be afraid, said Gilgamesh. We are together. There is nothing We should fear”

—from *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*
tr. Herbert Mason



Gilgamesh (c. 2000 B.C.)



PRIMARY SOURCE

“ Enkidu was afraid of the forest of Humbaba
And urged him [Gilgamesh] not to go, but he
Was not as strong as Gilgamesh in argument,
And they were friends:

They had **embraced** and made their vow
To stay together always,
No matter what the **obstacle**.
Enkidu tried to hold his fear ...

Don't be afraid, said Gilgamesh.
We are together. There is nothing
We should fear.

I learned, Enkidu said, when I lived
With the animals never to go down
Into that forest. I learned that there is death
In Humbaba. Why do you want
To raise his [Humbaba's] anger? ...

After three days they reached the edge
Of the forest where Humbaba's watchman stood.
Suddenly it was Gilgamesh who was afraid,
Enkidu ... reminded him to be fearless.

The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba.
The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate.

When Enkidu touched the gate his hand felt numb,
He could not move his fingers or his wrist,
His face turned pale like someone's witnessing a death[.]

He tried to ask his friend for help
Whom he had just encouraged to move on,
But he could only **stutter** and hold out
His paralyzed hand.”

—from *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*, tr. Herbert Mason



The Gilgamesh epic was written on 12 tablets and discovered in Nineveh, in present-day Iraq. The tablets were found in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (ah • shur • BAH • nuh • puh), who reigned 668–627 B.C.

TEXT: A Verse Narrative: Gilgamesh by Herbert Mason. © 1970 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
PHOTO: www.BibleandPictures.com/Alamy

Vocabulary

embrace to hug with arms around

obstacle something that stands in the way

stutter an uneven repetition of sounds and words

Analyzing Literature DBQ

- 1 **Identifying** How many times is death mentioned in this excerpt?
- 2 **Describing** How do you know that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are friends?
- 3 **Speculating** Enkidu is left in a risky situation. What do you think happens to him?