

Section

2

# Mesopotamian Civilization

## Get Ready to Read!

### What's the Connection?

In Section 1, you learned about early humans settling in towns. Some settled in Mesopotamia, an area called the "cradle of civilization."

### Focusing on the Main Ideas

- Civilization in Mesopotamia began in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. (page 17)
- Sumerians invented writing and made other important contributions to later peoples. (page 20)
- Sumerian city-states lost power when they were conquered by outsiders. (page 22)

### Locating Places

Tigris River (TY•gruhs)

Euphrates River (yu•FRAY•teez)

Mesopotamia

(MEH•suh•puh•TAY•mee•uh)

Sumer (SOO•muhr)

Babylon (BA•buh•luhn)

### Meeting People

Sargon (SAHR•GAHN)

Hammurabi (HA•muh•RAH•bee)

### Building Your Vocabulary

civilization

(siv•vuh•luh•ZAY•shuhn)

irrigation (ir•uh•GAY•shuhn)

city-state

artisan (AHR•tuh•zuhn)

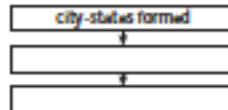
cuneiform (kyoo•NEE•uh•swuh)

scribe (SKRYB)

empire (EHM•peer)

### Reading Strategy

**Sequencing Information** Use a diagram to show how the first empire in Mesopotamia came about.



## When & Where?



3000 B.C.

3000 B.C.  
City-states  
arise in Sumer

2340 B.C.

c. 2340 B.C.  
Sargon conquers  
Mesopotamia

1792 B.C.

c. 1792 B.C.  
Hammurabi rules  
Mesopotamia

## Mesopotamia's Civilization

**Main Idea** Civilization in Mesopotamia began in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

**Reading Focus** Do you live in a region that receives plenty of rain or in a region that is dry? Think about how that affects you as you read how the Sumerians' environment affected them.

Over thousands of years, some of the early farming villages developed into civilizations. **Civilizations** (siv•vuh•luh•ZAY•shuhns) are complex societies. They have cities, organized governments, art, religion, class divisions, and a writing system.

**Why Were River Valleys Important?** The first civilizations arose in river valleys because good farming conditions made it

easy to feed large numbers of people. The rivers provided fish and freshwater, and also made it easy to travel and to trade. Trade provided a way for goods and ideas to move from place to place. It was no accident, then, that cities grew up in these valleys and became the centers of civilizations.

As cities took shape, so did the need for organization. Someone had to make plans and decisions about matters of common concern. People formed governments to do just that. Their leaders took charge of food supplies and building projects. They made laws to keep order and assembled armies to fend off enemies.

With fewer worries about meeting their basic needs, people in the river valleys had more time to think about other things. They developed religions and the arts. To pass on

**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC** **Ancient Mesopotamia** **Motion**

**KEY**  
Fertile Crescent

**Using Geography Skills**  
A number of great civilizations developed in Mesopotamia.  
1. Into what body of water do the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers flow?  
2. Why do you think the region of Mesopotamia was so well suited for the growth of civilization?

**Sculpture of chariot from Mesopotamia**

information, they invented ways of writing. They also created calendars to tell time.

Early civilizations shared another feature—they had a class structure. That is, people held different places in society depending on what work they did and how much wealth or power they had.

**The Rise of Sumer** The earliest-known civilization arose in what is now southern Iraq, on a flat plain bounded by the **Tigris River** (TY•gruh) and the **Euphrates River** (yu•FRAY•teez). Later, the Greeks called this area **Mesopotamia** (MEH•suh•puh•TAY•mee•uh), meaning “the land between the rivers.” Mesopotamia lay in the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent, a curving strip of land that extends from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Mesopotamia had a hot, dry climate. In the spring, the rivers often flooded, leaving behind rich soil for farming. The problem was that the flooding was very unpredictable. It might flood one year, but not the next. Every year, farmers worried about their crops. They came to believe they needed their gods to bless their efforts.

Over time, the farmers learned to build dams and channels to control the seasonal floods. They also built walls, waterways, and ditches to bring water to their fields. This way of watering crops is called **irrigation** (ih•uh•GAY•shuhn). Irrigation allowed the farmers to grow plenty of food and support a large population. By 3000 B.C., many cities had formed in southern Mesopotamia in a region known as **Sumer** (SOO•muh).

## Sumerian Ziggurat

The top of the ziggurat was considered to be a holy place, and the area around the ziggurat contained palaces and royal storerooms. The surrounding walls had only one entrance because the ziggurat also served as the city's treasury.

*How did people reach the upper levels of the ziggurat?*



▲ Statues of Sumerians praying



**What Were City-States?** Sumerian cities were isolated from each other by geography. Beyond the areas of settlement lay mudflats and patches of scorching desert. This terrain made travel and communication difficult. Each Sumerian city and the land around it became a separate **city-state**. It had its own government and was not part of any larger unit.

Sumerian city-states often went to war with one another. They fought to gain glory and to control more territory. For protection, each city-state surrounded itself with a wall. Because stone and wood were in short supply, the Sumerians used river mud as their main building material. They mixed the mud with crushed reeds, formed bricks, and left them in the sun to dry. The hard

waterproof bricks were used for walls, as well as homes, temples, and other buildings.

**Gods and Rulers** The Sumerians believed in many gods. Each was thought to have power over a natural force or a human activity—flooding, for example, or basket weaving. The Sumerians tried hard to please the gods. Each city-state built a grand temple called a ziggurat (ZIH•guh•ur) to its chief god. The word ziggurat means “mountain of god” or “hill of heaven.”

With tiers like a giant square wedding cake, the ziggurat dominated the city. At the top was a shrine, or special place of worship that only priests and priestesses could enter. The priests and priestesses were powerful and controlled much of the land. They may even have ruled at one time.



▲ A portion of the Royal Standard of Ur, a decorated box that shows scenes of Sumerian life

◀ These ruins are from the Sumerian city-state of Uruk. **What was a city-state?**

Later, kings ran the government. They led armies and organized building projects. The first kings were probably war heroes. Their position became hereditary. That is, after a king died, his son took over.

**What Was Life Like in Sumer?** While Sumerian kings lived in large palaces, ordinary people lived in small mud-brick houses. Most people in Sumer farmed. Some, however, were **artisans** (AHR•tuh•zuhns), or skilled workers who made metal products, cloth, or pottery. Other people in Sumer worked as merchants or traders. They traveled to other cities and towns and traded tools, wheat, and barley for copper, tin, and timber—things that Sumer did not have.

People in Sumer were divided into three social classes. The upper class included kings, priests, and government officials. In the middle class were artisans, merchants, farmers, and fishers. These people made up the largest group. The lower class were enslaved people who worked on farms or in the temples.

Enslaved people were forced to serve others. Slaveholders thought of them as property. Some slaves were prisoners of war. Others were criminals. Still others were enslaved because they had to pay off their debts.

In Sumer, women and men had separate roles. Men headed the households. Only males could go to school. Women, however, did have rights. They could buy and sell property and run businesses.

**Reading Check** Explain How did Mesopotamians control the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers?

## A Skilled People

**Main Idea** Sumerians invented writing and made other important contributions to later peoples.

**Reading Focus** Do you like to read? If so, you owe a debt to the Sumerians, because they were the first to invent writing. Read about this achievement and others.

The Sumerians left a lasting mark on world history. Their ideas and inventions were copied and improved upon by other peoples. As a result, Mesopotamia has been called the “cradle of civilization.”

**Why Was Writing Important?** The people of Sumer created many things that still affect our lives today. Probably their greatest invention was writing. Writing is important because it helps people keep records and pass on their ideas to others.

People in Sumer developed writing to keep track of business deals and other events. Their writing was called **cuneiform** (kyoo•NEE•uh•AWWŏm). It consisted of hundreds of wedge-shaped marks cut into damp clay tablets with a sharp-ended reed. Archaeologists have found thousands of these cuneiform tablets, telling us much about Mesopotamian life.

Only a few people—mostly boys from wealthy families—learned how to write. After years of training, they became **scribes** (SKRYBS), or record keepers. Scribes held honored positions in society, often going on to become judges and political leaders.

**Sumerian Literature** The Sumerians also produced works of literature. The world’s oldest known story comes from Sumer. It is called the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (GIHL•guh•mŏsh). An epic is a long poem that tells the story of a hero. The hero Gilgamesh is a king who travels around the world with a friend and performs great deeds. When his



▲ Sumerian cuneiform

friend dies, Gilgamesh searches for a way to live forever. He learns that this is possible only for the gods.

**Advances in Science and Math** The Mesopotamians' creativity extended to technology too. You read earlier about Sumerian irrigation systems. Sumerians also invented the wagon wheel to help carry people and goods from place to place. Another breakthrough was the plow, which made farming easier. Still another invention was the sailboat, which replaced muscle power with wind power.

Sumerians developed many mathematical ideas. They used geometry to measure fields and put up buildings. They also created a number system based on 60. We have them to thank for our 60-minute hour, 60-second minute, and 360-degree circle.

In addition, Sumerian people watched the skies to learn the best times to plant crops and to hold religious festivals. They recorded the positions of the planets and stars and developed a 12-month calendar based on the cycles of the moon.

**Reading Check Identify** What kind of written language did the Sumerians use?

## Linking Past & Present

### Education

**THEN** In ancient Mesopotamia, only boys from wealthy and high-ranking families went to the *edubba*, which means "tablet house." At the *edubba*—the world's first school—boys studied reading, writing, and mathematics and trained to be scribes. For hours every day, they copied the signs of the cuneiform script, trying to master hundreds of words and phrases.



▲ Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet

▼ Students today



**NOW** Today, both boys and girls go to school. They study reading, writing, and mathematics, but also many other subjects. As students advance in their education, they have a great number of career choices and are able to choose the career that fits their talents.

*In what way is education different today than it was in Mesopotamia?*

## Sargon and Hammurabi

**Main Idea** Sumerian city-states lost power when they were conquered by outsiders.

**Reading Focus** Have you heard of the Roman Empire, the Aztec Empire, or the British Empire? The rise and fall of empires is an important part of history. Read on to learn about the first empires in the world.

Over time, conflicts weakened Sumer's city-states. They became vulnerable to attacks by outside groups such as the Akkadians (uh•KAY•dee•uhnz) of northern Mesopotamia.

The king of the Akkadians was named **Sargon** (SAHR•GAHN). In about 2340 B.C., Sargon conquered all of Mesopotamia. He set up the world's first empire. An **empire** (EHM•ree) is a group of many different lands under one ruler. Sargon's empire lasted for more than 200 years before falling to invaders.

In the 1800s B.C., a new group of people became powerful in Mesopotamia. They built the city of **Babylon** (BA•buh•luhn) by the Euphrates River. It quickly became a center of trade. Beginning in 1792 B.C., the Babylonian king, **Hammurabi** (HA•muh•RAH•bee), began conquering cities to the north and south and created the Babylonian Empire.

Hammurabi is best known for his law code, or collection of laws. (See pages 24 and 25.) He took what he believed were the best laws from each city-state and put them in one code. The code covered crimes, farming and business activities, and marriage and the family—almost every area of life. The code forced everyone in Babylon to follow the same laws. It also influenced later laws, including those of Greece and Rome.

**Reading Check** Explain Why was Sargon's empire important?

## Section 2 Review

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### Reading Summary

Review the **Main Ideas**.

- In time, farming villages developed into civilizations with governments, art, religion, writing, and social class divisions. The first city-states developed in Mesopotamia.
- Many important ideas and inventions, including writing, the wheel, the plow, and a number system based on 60, were developed in the region of Mesopotamia.
- Several empires, including the Babylonian Empire, took control of Mesopotamia.

### What Did You Learn?

1. What is a civilization?
2. What was the Code of Hammurabi?
3. **Summarize Information** Draw a chart like the one below. Use it to list the achievements of Mesopotamian civilization.
4. **Geography Skills** How was the geography of Mesopotamia suited for the growth of population and creation of a civilization?
5. **Science Link** Why did the Sumerians record the positions of stars and planets and develop a calendar?
6. **Persuasive Writing** Imagine you are living in a city-state in ancient Sumer. Write a letter to a friend describing which Mesopotamian idea or invention you believe will be the most important to humanity.

Achievements of Mesopotamian Civilization