

Mesopotamian Civilization

Guide to Reading



History Social Science Standards

WH.6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

In Section 1, you learned how farming allowed people to settle in one place. Some people settled in an area called Mesopotamia.

Focusing on the **Main Ideas**

- Civilization in Mesopotamia began in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. (page 133)
- Sumerians invented writing and made other important contributions to later peoples. (page 136)
- Sumerian city-states lost power when they were conquered by outsiders. (page 139)

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)

Content Vocabulary

civilization (SIH•vuh•luh•ZAY•shuhn)

irrigation (IHR•uh•GAY•shuhn)

city-state

artisan (AHR•tuh•zuhn)

cuneiform (kyoo•NEE•uh•FAWRM)

scribe (SKRYB)

empire (EHM•PYR)

Academic Vocabulary

complex (kahm•PLEHKS)

consist (kuhn•SIHST)

code (KOHD)

Reading Strategy

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



NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

Where & When?



3000 B.C.

3000 B.C.

City-states arise in Sumer

2250 B.C.

c. 2340 B.C.

Sargon conquers Mesopotamia

1500 B.C.

c. 1792 B.C.

Hammurabi rules Mesopotamia



WH6.2.1 Locate and describe the major river systems and discuss the physical settings that supported permanent settlement and early civilizations. **WH6.2.2** Trace the development of agricultural techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power. **WH6.2.3** Understand the relationship between religion and the social and political order in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Mesopotamia's Civilization

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

Reading Connection 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** (SIH • 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 also provided fish and freshwater to drink, and made it easy to get from one place to another and to trade. Trade enabled 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 defend themselves from enemies.

With fewer worries about meeting their basic needs, people in the river valleys had more time to think about other things. They

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Ancient Mesopotamia





KEY

Fertile Crescent

Using Geography Skills

1. **Location** Into what body of water do the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers flow?
2. **Place** Why do you think the region of Mesopotamia was so well suited for the growth of civilization?



Sculpture of chariot ▶
from Mesopotamia

placed emphasis, or special importance, on religions and the arts. They also invented ways of writing and created calendars to tell time.

Early civilizations shared another feature—they had a class structure. That is, people held different ranks 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•gruhs) and the **Euphrates River** (yu•FRAY•teez). Later, the Greeks called this area **Mesopotamia** (MEH•suh•puh•TAY•mee•uh), which means “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.

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** (IHR•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•muhr).

Sumerian Ziggurat

The top of the ziggurat was considered to be a holy place, and the area around the ziggurat contained palaces and royal storehouses. 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



What Were City-States? Geography helped to isolate Sumerian cities from each other. 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**. Each city-state 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 their gods. Each city-state built a grand temple called a ziggurat (ZIH•guh•RAT) 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?**



WH6.2.2 Trace the development of agricultural techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power. **WH6.2.3** Understand the relationship between religion and the social and political order in Mesopotamia and Egypt. **WH6.2.9** Trace the evolution of language and its written forms.

Later, kings ran the government. They led armies and organized building projects. The first kings were probably war heroes. Their position became hereditary, which meant that 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. Generally, a person had to stay in the social class into which he or she was born. Only rarely could someone move up. The upper class included kings, priests, warriors, 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. Debts are money or goods owed to others.

In Sumer, women and men had separate roles. Men headed the households. They also could decide whom their children would marry. Only males could go to school. Women, however, did have some rights. They could buy and sell property and run businesses.

Reading Check Explain How did Mesopotamian control of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers benefit their society?

A Skilled People

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

Reading Connection 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•FAWRM). 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•MEHSH). 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 friend dies, Gilgamesh searches for a way to



live forever. He learns that this is possible only for the gods. This epic poem is still studied today.

Advances in Science and Math The Mesopotamians' creativity also extended to technology. 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 How did the use of mathematics benefit the Sumerians?

Linking Past & Present

Education

PAST 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



PRESENT Today, both boys and girls go to school. They study reading, writing, mathematics, and 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?*



WH6.2.2 Trace the development of agricultural techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power.

WH6.2.4 Know the significance of Hammurabi's Code.

HAMMURABI

Reigned c. 1792–1750 B.C.

Hammurabi was a young man when he succeeded his father, Sinmuballit, as king of Babylon. When Hammurabi became king, Babylon was already a strong kingdom in Mesopotamia. During his reign, however, Hammurabi transformed Babylon from a small city-state into a large, powerful state. He also united the other city-states of Mesopotamia under one rule.

Hammurabi was directly involved in the ruling of his kingdom. He personally directed projects, such as building city walls, restoring temples, and digging and cleaning irrigation canals. A great deal of planning went into his projects. City streets, for example, were arranged in straight lines and intersected at right angles, much like the way our cities are planned today.

One of Hammurabi's goals was to control the Euphrates River because it provided water for Babylon's farms and trade routes for cargo ships. He also needed to control the river's annual flooding so that villages and crops would not be washed away. Hammurabi did this by issuing laws controlling the use of irrigation ditches. His laws protected the area and helped bring water to the fields. That was one reason he developed a strict law code, or collection of laws: damaged irrigation channels could cause many people to be injured or even killed.

Hammurabi fought for many years against his enemies to control the river. He even used water to defeat them. Sometimes he would dam the river to withhold water needed for drinking and for crops, and then release a sudden damaging flood. Because of Hammurabi's efforts, the center of power in Mesopotamia shifted from Sumer in the south to Babylon in the north where it remained for the next 1,000 years.



▲ Hammurabi

Then and Now

Find a copy of the Code of Hammurabi, either online or in a reference book. Notice the kinds of situations and the punishments that are described. How do these compare with current laws and punishments that exist in the United States?



WH6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush.

WH6.2.4 Know the significance of Hammurabi's Code.

Sargon and Hammurabi

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

Reading Connection 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 creating the world's first empire. An **empire** (EHM•PYR) 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 140 and 141.) The code covered crimes, farming and business activities, and marriage and the family—almost every area of life. Before the law code, rulers could treat others nearly any way they wanted. The code forced all people to follow the law in how they treated others. Hammurabi's code influenced later law codes, including those of Greece and Rome.

Reading Check Explain Why was Sargon's empire important?

Section 2 Review

History online
Study Central Need help understanding the Sumerian civilization? Visit ca.hss.glencoe.com and click on Study Central.

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 Mesopotamians that helped improve their civilization's economy. **CA HI.6.**
4. **Geography Skills** How did the geography of Mesopotamia shape the growth of population and creation of a civilization? **CA CS.3.**
5. **The Big Ideas** How did the Sumerian religion affect Sumerian society? **CA HI.2.**
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. **CA 6WV.1.2**

Achievements of Mesopotamian Civilization



You Decide . . .



WH6.2.4 Know the significance of Hammurabi's Code.

Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Hammurabi's Laws: Fair or Cruel?

Fair

Around 1750 B.C., King Hammurabi wrote 282 laws to govern the people of Babylon. Historians and scholars agree that these ancient laws were the first to cover almost all aspects of society. However, historians and scholars do not agree whether Hammurabi's laws were fair or cruel.

Those who see the laws as just and fair give the following reasons. They say the laws

- stated what all people needed to know about the rules of their society
- brought order and justice to society
- regulated many different activities, from business contracts to crime.

King Hammurabi wrote an introduction to his list of laws. In that introduction, he says that the laws were written to be fair. His intention was **"to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil-doers, so that the strong should not harm the weak. . . ."**

Some of the laws reflect that fairness.

- Law 5: If a judge makes an error through his own fault when trying a case, he must pay a fine, be removed from the judge's bench, and never judge another case.
- Law 122: If someone gives something to someone else for safekeeping, the transaction should be witnessed and a contract made between the two parties.
- Law 233: If a contractor builds a house for someone and the walls start to fall, then the builder must use his own money and labor to make the walls secure.



Stone monument showing ►
Hammurabi (standing)
and his code



▲ Cuneiform tablet with the text of the introduction to the Code of Hammurabi

Cruel

Some historians and scholars think Hammurabi's laws were cruel and unjust. They say the laws

- called for violent punishments, often death, for nonviolent crimes
- required different punishments for accused persons of different social classes
- allowed no explanation from an accused person.

Some of the laws reflect this cruelty.

- Law 3: If someone falsely accuses someone else of certain crimes, then he shall be put to death.

- Law 22: If someone is caught in the act of robbery, then he shall be put to death.
- Law 195: If a son strikes his father, the son's hands shall be cut off.
- Law 202: If someone strikes a man of higher rank, then he shall be whipped 60 times in public.

You Be the Historian

DBQ Document-Based Questions

1. Why do some people think Hammurabi's laws were fair?
CA HR5.
2. Why do others think the laws were cruel? **CA HR5.**
3. Were the laws fair or cruel? Take the role of a historian. Write a brief essay that explains how you view Hammurabi's laws. Be sure to use facts to support your position. You can compare Hammurabi's laws to our modern laws to support your argument. **CA HR5. CA 6RC2.7**