

## Mesopotamia

### The Land Between Two Rivers

**Mesopotamia** is a Greek word that means “between two rivers.” The two rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They begin in what is now Turkey, flow southeast, come together in the southeast in what is now Iraq, and empty into the Persian Gulf. The hot, dry climate of Mesopotamia was mixed with seasonal flooding, which made farming a challenge. Farmers in ancient Mesopotamia learned to build levees to control the floods and develop irrigation systems in order to produce wheat, barley, sesame, and flax. They were also able to produce many different kinds of fruits and vegetables.

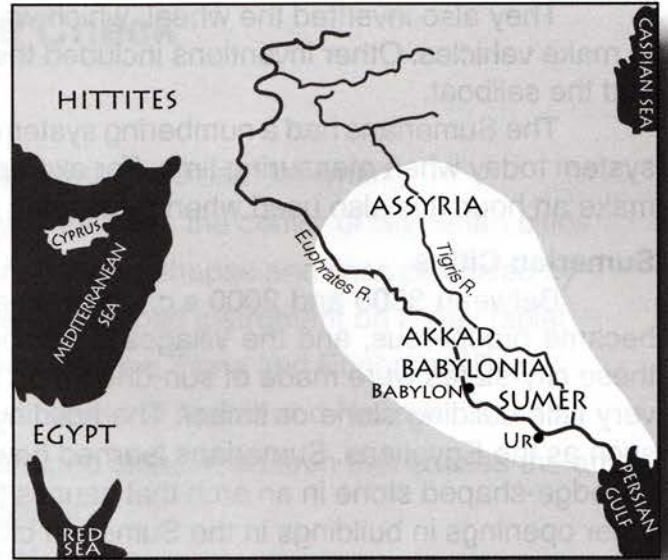
Mesopotamia was actually an area, not a civilization. It was composed of several independent city-states, each with its own religion, laws, language, and government. Many civilizations have existed in Mesopotamia, some of them at the same time. Some of the cultures that have existed in this area are Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, and Iraq.

### The Sumerians

The first group of people to inhabit Mesopotamia were the **Sumerians**. They originally lived in the mountains but moved to the Plain of Shinar near the Persian Gulf to take advantage of the fertile soil. First, they drained the marshes and then controlled the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers by building levees and irrigation canals. As a result, the Sumerians had a stable food supply, and not everyone was needed to farm, hunt, or fish. Some Sumerians became tradesmen, merchants, soldiers, priests, government officials, and artisans. Their country was called **Sumer**.

### Sumerian Inventions

The Sumerians are given credit for many inventions. One of the most important was the invention of a written language. Writing was invented so the Sumerians could keep records. Their writing was very simple. It was composed of pictures called **pictographs**. **Scribes**, who were professional writers, drew the pictures on clay tablets using a wedge-shaped instrument, or **stylus**. Over a period of time, the writing became more sophisticated. The pictures were replaced with shapes and lines. This type of writing is called **cuneiform**.



### SUMERIAN CIVILIZATION AT A GLANCE

**WHERE:** In the Middle East, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

**WHEN:** 3500 B.C.–2000 B.C.

#### ACHIEVEMENTS:

- The world's first civilization where people lived together in a city-state
- Invented a written language
- Developed science and mathematics to a high degree; were able to divide the year and the circle into 360 parts
- Developed a twelve-month calendar based on lunar cycles
- Used the wheel and made vehicles
- Invented the plow and the sailboat



Cuneiform Written on a Clay Tablet

They also invented the wheel, which was developed for making pottery, but was later used to make vehicles. Other inventions included the water clock, the twelve-month calendar, the plow, and the sailboat.

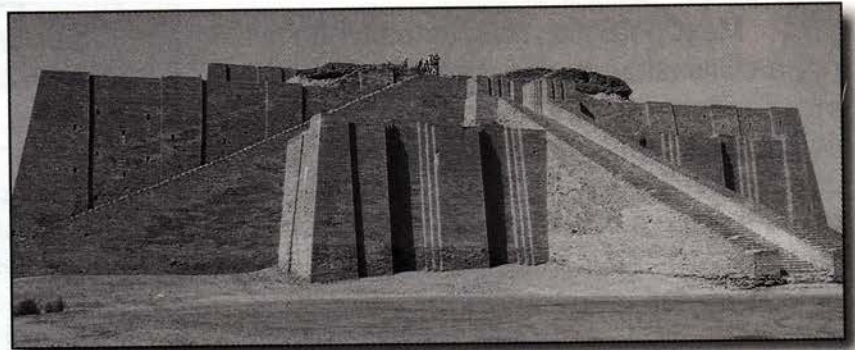
The Sumerians had a numbering system based on the number 60. We still use the Sumerian system today when measuring time. For example, sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. It is also used when measuring a circle with 360 degrees.

### Sumerian Cities

Between 3500 and 2000 B.C., the Sumerians were living in large villages. Eventually they became prosperous, and the villages developed into self-governing city-states. The buildings in these city-states were made of sun-dried mud bricks. There was plenty of mud from the rivers but very little building stone or timber. The buildings in Sumer were different from other civilizations, such as the Egyptians. Sumerians learned how to use a keystone to make arches. A **keystone** is a wedge-shaped stone in an arch that causes the arch to lock together. The doorways, gates, and other openings in buildings in the Sumerian cities had arches. Similar openings in Egyptian buildings were square.

### Sumerian Religion

Religion was important to the Sumerians. At the center of each city-state was a temple that was surrounded by courts and public buildings. These temples were called **ziggurats**. Ziggurats eventually became temple-towers brightly decorated with glazed bricks. They were like huge pyramids with terraced sides that were flat on the top.



This ancient ziggurat in present-day Iraq has been reconstructed.

The Sumerians had many gods. They believed the gods spoke to them through their priests. The priests had a great deal of power in Sumer. When a priest commanded that something be done, the people believed the command was actually coming from one of their gods, and they obeyed. The priests eventually became priest-kings and ruled large areas.

### Dealing With Invaders

The great disadvantage in Mesopotamia was that the land did not provide any natural protection from invaders. Enemies could easily march into Sumer from almost any direction. This made Sumerians vulnerable to attack, not only from foreign armies, but from other Sumerian cities as well. Wars between Sumerian cities were common.

### The Akkadians

The **Akkadians** moved into Sumeria from the Arabian Peninsula. They were a Semitic people. This means they spoke a **Semitic** language related to Arabic and Hebrew. The Akkadians formed their own country where the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers were close together. Their country was called **Akkad**. The Akkadians adopted much of the Sumerian culture. After many clashes, more Semites invaded Sumeria. The Sumerian culture was eventually absorbed by the invaders. This combined civilization lasted until about 1950 B.C. when the Amorites and the Elamites captured Ur, Mesopotamia's most important city.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Knowledge Check

### Matching

- |                      |                                                                                                        |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| _____ 1. Mesopotamia | a. a wedge-shaped instrument for writing                                                               |
| _____ 2. pictographs | b. temple-tower that was the center of Sumerian cities                                                 |
| _____ 3. scribes     | c. writing consisting of shapes and lines produced by using a wedge-shaped instrument on a clay tablet |
| _____ 4. stylus      | d. the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers                                                    |
| _____ 5. cuneiform   | e. a language related to Arabic and Hebrew                                                             |
| _____ 6. keystone    | f. a wedge-shaped stone in an arch that causes the arch to lock together                               |
| _____ 7. ziggurat    | g. professional writers                                                                                |
| _____ 8. Semitic     | h. pictures that stand for words                                                                       |

### Multiple Choice

9. The first group of people to live in Mesopotamia were the \_\_\_\_\_.
- |                |              |
|----------------|--------------|
| a. Akkadians   | b. Sumerians |
| c. Babylonians | d. Assyrians |
10. These people in Sumeria eventually became so powerful that they became kings and ruled large areas.
- |            |             |
|------------|-------------|
| a. priests | b. farmers  |
| c. scribes | d. soldiers |
11. The Sumerian numbering system that is still used today is based on the number \_\_\_\_\_.
- |       |       |
|-------|-------|
| a. 5  | b. 10 |
| c. 30 | d. 60 |

### Constructed Response

12. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages of living in Mesopotamia? Use details from the reading selection to support your answer.

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