

General Introduction to Mesopotamia

Geography of Mesopotamia

The name Mesopotamia means, “the land between the rivers”. The rivers that wind through Mesopotamia are the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The land in northern Mesopotamia is a **plateau**. The land in southern Mesopotamia is a **plain**. The southern part of the plain was called Sumer.

The people of Sumer lived in a harsh environment. Summers were very hot with little rainfall, and so the land dried out. In spring and fall there were floods. The Sumerians had to adapt to this environment. To bring river water to the dry land, they created irrigation systems of dams, gates, and canals. To control the floods, they developed lakes and ponds to hold excess flood water until it was needed. Irrigation and flood control turned the dry land into a fertile plain, and the Sumerians became successful farmers.

Why was irrigation essential to the development and survival of the Mesopotamians?

The Developments of the Sumerians

By 3,000 B.C.E., there were 12 great Sumerian cities. Three of the best known are Ur, Kish, and Lagash. The cities were independent **city-states** ruled by priests. Irrigation allowed the farmers of each city-state to produce a surplus of food. This allowed city dwellers to do other jobs and to trade for food.

Sumerians had **administrators** to manage and organize the building and upkeep of the irrigation canals and great temples. They traded their surplus wheat, barley, dates, wool, and dairy products for the tools and supplies they needed for building. **Artisans** traded their jewelry, pottery, musical instruments, and fabric.

To keep track of their trading, Sumerians developed a system of record-keeping. They used clay or stone tokens in a clay container called a bulla. Record-keeping marks on the outside of the bulla may have led to the invention of writing.

What were some important advances that the Sumerians made in government, technology, and communication?

The Development of Kings

We know from the **epic** Gilgamesh that the Sumerians thought of their kings as great heroes. But the earliest Sumerian city-states were ruled by priests rather than by kings. As the city-states became wealthy, they were raided by **nomads** or by other city-states. Strong military leaders were needed to help defend the cities. Over time, these leaders replaced the priests and became kings. At first, the kings took over many of the priests' duties. Later, kings and priests took on separate tasks. The kings ruled, and the priests worked to please the gods.

What circumstances in Mesopotamia led to the rise of kings?

Religion in Mesopotamia

Sumerian religion was a kind of **polytheism**, in which the gods controlled everything. There were about 3,000 lesser gods and four main gods. Like humans, the gods had emotions and needed sleep and food. But unlike humans, they were immortal and powerful.

Sumerians believed that by pleasing the gods, they could be safe and have good fortune. They pleased the gods through work, prayer, and offerings of food and animals. Many Sumerian artisans created religious art to please the gods. This art has helped archaeologists learn about Sumerian life.

Describe the Sumerians' religion and explain its important role in the lives of the people.

The People of Sumer

Three social classes lived in Sumer. These classes were:

- a.) the king, government officials, important priests, and wealthy merchants and landowners.
- b.) farmers, fishermen, and artisans.
- c.) slaves

Sumer has some of the first records of slavery. Slaves were prisoners of war, people who didn't own land, people without food or shelter, or children who were sold into slavery. Slaves did have certain rights. They could work in a business, borrow money, and buy their freedom. If a slave and a free person married, their children would be born free.

What were the three social classes in Sumerian cities and how did they differ?

The Development of Writing

The Sumerians were the first people to keep written records. They invented writing because merchants and traders needed to keep track of their sales. The Sumerians' first written symbols were **pictographs** of traded items. Later, the pictures stood for syllables that formed words. By 2500 B.C.E., writers simplified the pictures into the wedge-shaped writing known as **cuneiform**. Few people could read and write, however, so they employed **scribes** to read and write messages. Then the Phoenicians invented a simpler way to keep records. Their writing system had 22 symbols in which each symbol stood for one sound. We call this system the alphabet.

Describe the important steps in the invention of writing, including pictographs, cuneiform, and the alphabet.

Vocabulary

- 1.) Plateau: an elevated area of flat land.
- 2.) Plain: a broad area of flat open land.
- 3.) City-State: a self-governing unit made up of a city and its surrounding area.
- 4.) Administrator: a manager or one who directs a government or an organization.
- 5.) Artisan: a worker who is skilled in making a particular product by hand.
- 6.) Epic: a long poem that tells the story of a hero.
- 7.) Nomad: person who moves from place to place with no permanent home.
- 8.) Polytheism: the belief in many gods.
- 9.) Pictograph: a picture that stands for a word or idea.
- 10.) Cuneiform: wedge-shaped characters used in writing several ancient languages.
- 11.) Scribe: a professional writer or record keeper.