Name: _____

Date: _____

MESOPOTAMIA
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The Sumerians

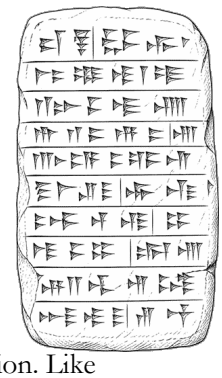
The land between the Tigris and Euphrates had abundant resources to nourish a civilization. The Sumerians used those resources to build the first cities in history. They first settled on the muddy land of southeastern Mesopotamia, where the rivers spread across a broad, fertile plain, about 4500 BCE.

Building Homes from Mud

Sumerian homes were made of mud bricks, formed by mixing mud with straw and drying them in the sun. Thick walls provided insulation and kept interiors cool, and flat roofs were often used for work or sleeping in hot weather. Because there was little wood, builders relied on mud rather than timber, and the walls required regular repair, especially after rain or flooding. When flooding destroyed a village, a new one would often be built on its ruins. Throughout Mesopotamia, there are raised areas called tells, the result of many cities built one on top of the other.

From Villages to Cities

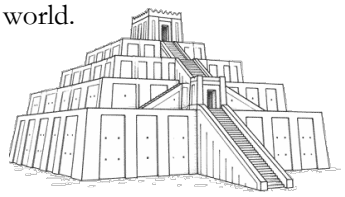
Over thousands of years, Sumerian civilization grew from small villages to cities of more than 30,000 people. They farmed the land, domesticated animals, and built ditches and canals to control water in a system called irrigation. Sumerian record keepers created one of the first writing systems, called cuneiform, to keep track of goods, trade, and taxes. The Sumerians also invented the wheel, which made it possible to move heavy loads.



City States

The Sumerians did not form one nation. Like water beading into droplets, settlements formed in separate places where conditions allowed them to grow. Over time, these became city-states, or independent nations, each with its own ruler. Walls around each Sumerian city-state protected the citizens from outside invaders. Farmland was usually located outside the city walls, and people would seek protection within them when under attack.

Sumer was a small region by modern standards, about the size of Vermont in the United States or Belgium in Europe. Some of its largest cities, such as Uruk, may have grown to more than 30,000 people. At times, the population of Sumer likely reached several hundred thousand people, making it one of the most crowded parts of the ancient world.



Sumerian gods

The Sumerians were polytheistic, which means they believed in many gods. Their gods, like those in other polytheistic societies, reflected what they valued and feared. Anu was the god of the sky and the head of the Sumerian pantheon, or family of gods. Enlil was a powerful and often feared god associated with storms and wind. The unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates was often seen as Enlil's anger. Each city had a patron god, and when one city defeated another in war, the defeated city often came to honor the god of the victor.

The Sumerians worshiped their gods at huge stepped structures called ziggurats, a word that means "built high." Ziggurats were platforms that supported temples at the top. They were constructed of the same mud bricks the Sumerians used to build their houses. Access to a ziggurat was limited and controlled by priests. The highest level held a shrine they believed was reserved for the god.

The Fall of Sumer

Sumerian culture developed over thousands of years until about 2334 BCE, when Sargon of Akkad, a ruler from a city upriver on the Euphrates, formed the first empire in history. An empire is a government that rules over many different groups of people. Sargon conquered the Sumerian city-states one by one, and in time the Akkadian language replaced Sumerian, although Sumerian religion and culture continued to influence Mesopotamia for centuries.

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Fill in the Blanks

The Sumerians settled in Mesopotamia between the T__g__is and E__p__r__t__s Rivers around *_____ years ago. They built cities using m____ b_____ and developed i__r__g__t__on to control water for farming. Over time, villages grew into c_____-s_____, each with its own ruler. The Sumerians were p__l__t__e__s__ic and worshiped gods such as A__u and E__l__l. They worshipped their gods at z__g__u__a__s. Sumerians created one of the first writing systems, c__n__i__o__m, to keep records. They also invented the w_____. Around 2334 BCE, S__r__on of A__k__d conquered the city-states and formed the first e__p__re.

Answer in complete sentences

*1. Why do you think the Sumerians were attracted to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers?

2. Why was there never a King of all of Sumer?

*3. Archaeologists often find evidence of earlier civilizations buried beneath later civilizations, particularly when the encounter a tell. Explain why.

*4. In your opinion what was the Sumerian's most significant achievement. Defend your reasoning.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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