

Life in Sumerian Times in Mesopotamia

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The reconstructed facade of the Neo-Sumerian Ziggurat of Ur, near Nasiriyah, Iraq.

Ancient Sumer was a culture of many firsts. It invented the first writing system, the first plow and the first sailboat. Sumerians even created the first lunar calendar.

The city-states of Sumer began on the flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. The Sumerians began building their walled cities around 3500 B.C., about 5,500 years ago.

They dominated the region for about 1,500 years until they were conquered by the Babylonians, another ancient people. Sumerian culture and technology did not disappear, but were adopted by the Babylonians.

Sumer was located in what the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia, which literally means "the land between the rivers." It was a collection of independent cities in the southernmost portion of Mesopotamia, the land which lay between the Tigris and Euphrates. Most Sumerian cities were located on the banks of the two rivers.

The geographic environment has remained relatively the same for about 10,000 years. The landscape is flat and marshy. The ground is primarily made up of sand and silt, with no rock. The climate is very dry, with only about 17 centimeters of rain falling per year. Natural vegetation is sparse, and only palm trees grow there. The rivers overflow their banks in the spring, sometimes violently and destructively. During the flooding, they deposit a rich layer of silt on the surrounding floodplain.

The cradle of civilization

Considering the harsh environment, how did the first civilization arise in Sumer? Surprisingly, it was part of what made civilization possible.

The silt carried by the rivers provided rich fertilizer for growing crops. The constant sunshine was also good for crops. Without water, they would have easily dried up and died. The priest-kings of Sumer organized farmers in each city-state to build extensive irrigation systems of canals and dams. Before long, the desert was blooming with an abundance of barley, dates and other crops.

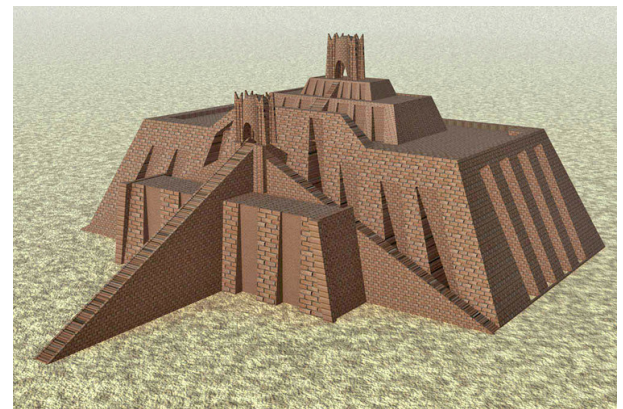
This surplus food allowed many people to work in occupations other than farming, while still being able to meet their basic needs. People became artisans, merchants and craftspeople. They helped build the cities and increase the wealth of the city-states through trade with neighboring societies.

Sumerians also developed high-quality crafts. Evidence of this was found in the royal tombs of Ur. Trade also helped the Sumerians to secure vital items. They were able to import timber from Lebanon and luxury goods, such as the gemstone lapis lazuli from the Indus River Valley.

A writing system

Because of the extra grain, the government could grow large enough to employ many officials and priests. It could also pay thousands of workers with barley to build canals, city walls and ziggurats, large buildings with flat roofs used as religious temples. It also paid them to fight other city-states. The barley was collected as a tax from the farmers. Farmers were also required to give some time to the government to work on projects. Slaves and hired workers also were used.

As the government and economy grew larger and more complex, officials and merchants required a sophisticated writing system to record goods and purchases. First came number markings. Then simple pictograms began to incorporate pictures representing a physical object or idea. A picture of the sun, for instance, stood for the sun.



As trade and government became busier, the writing system began to incorporate more abstract pictograms and phonograms, or symbols representing sounds. These new forms were more flexible and quicker to write. They were used by other cultures who did not even speak Sumerian.

Sumerian wisdom

The Sumerians wrote on clay tablets using a reed pen called a stylus. Once dried, these tablets became hard. Fortunately for today's researchers, they endured for thousands of years in the hot, dry climate.

Thousands of these tablets have been unearthed. Some libraries have even been discovered with more than 10,000 of these clay tablets. The vast majority of these tablets contain records of goods collected and distributed by the governments, and trade records. However, some contain myths, stories and letters. These documents have provided much information about the culture and history of the Sumerian people.

The Sumerian people also were the first people to use the plow to lift the silt-laden soil of their crop fields, and they invented the sailboat. They were the first people to design a calendar based on the phase of the moon. They also developed a numerical system based on the number 60 that is still used to measure seconds and minutes.

The Sumerians led the way for other societies that followed them.



Quiz

1 Read the conclusion below.

As the Sumerian civilization grew, long-distance trade expanded.

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support to the statement above?

- (A) They helped build the cities and increase the wealth of the city-states through trade with neighboring societies.
- (B) Trade also helped the Sumerians to secure vital items.
- (C) They were able to import timber from Lebanon and luxury goods, such as the gemstone lapis lazuli from the Indus River Valley.
- (D) The vast majority of these tablets contain records of goods collected and distributed by the governments, and trade records.

2 Read the section "Sumerian wisdom." Select the paragraph from the section that explains why researchers continue to study the tablets.

3 What are the factors that helped the Sumerian cities grow into a great civilization?

- (A) the ability to communicate in writing; the development of an accurate calendar that could predict seasonal patterns and favorable planting conditions
- (B) its targeted domination of other cultures and people in the region for 1,500 years; the development of a system of taxation that paid for government buildings and services
- (C) the development of specialized occupations that increased wealth, trade, and the role of government; the development of cultural and technical inventions
- (D) its location in a region that has many natural resources; the extensive floodplain that could be used for farming and building cities

4 Which of the following MOST influenced the development of a sophisticated writing system?

- (A) the need to keep accurate records and communicate complex ideas
- (B) the need to record myths and origin stories of the Sumerian people
- (C) the need to trade with cultures who spoke other languages
- (D) the need to empower priest-kings in Sumerian government