



Ancient Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent

TERMS & NAMES

Hammurabi
Fertile Crescent
Sumerian
ziggurat
class system
cuneiform
scribe

MAIN IDEA

Ancient Mesopotamia's complex civilization, based on city-states, developed a code of laws and a written language.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Mesopotamia's achievements led the way to the law codes and written languages in use today.

DATELINE

BABYLON, HAMMURABI'S EMPIRE, 1750 B.C.— Emperor Hammurabi has unveiled a huge black stone containing 282 laws given to him by the god Shamash. For one of the first times ever, a code of laws has been presented to the people of the empire.

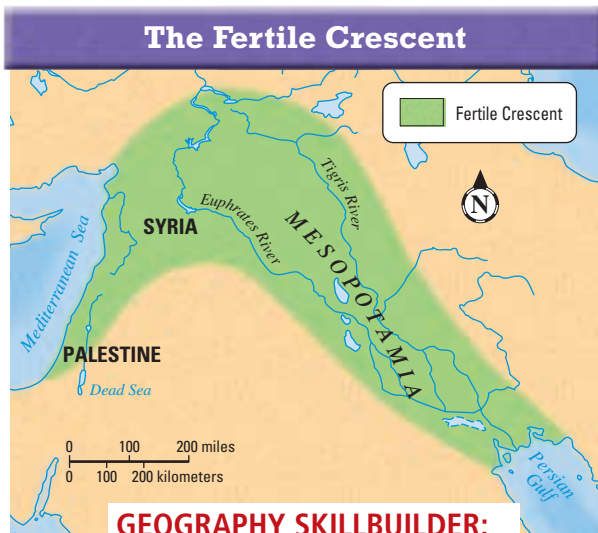
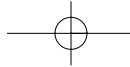
According to the Code of Hammurabi, punishment for breaking the law will depend upon the status of the offender and the victim. Most serious crimes, such as murder, will be punished by death. If a house falls down on its owner, the builder of the house will be killed. If the owner's son is killed, then the builder's son will be killed as well. The idea is that a crime should be repaid with a similar punishment. Many of the laws can be boiled down to this statement: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."



Culture • Emperor Hammurabi receives a code of laws from the god Shamash, patron of justice. ▲

The Mesopotamian City-State

Hammurabi (hah•moo•RAH•bee), a famous emperor of ancient Mesopotamia, ruled from 1792 to 1750 B.C. (See the map on page 218.) Mesopotamia, which means "land between the rivers" in Greek, covers about the same area as modern Iraq, northeast Syria, and part of southeast Turkey. The region is sometimes called the **Fertile Crescent** because of its shape and fertile soil.



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting a Map

1. **Location** • What two rivers formed Mesopotamia?
2. **Place** • What does the map tell you about the importance of water in forming the Fertile Crescent?

Place • This is the gateway to a ziggurat built around 1250 B.C. ▼



City-States Around 3000 B.C., the **Sumerians**, the first inhabitants of the area, organized the first city-states. A city-state is made up of a city and the areas it controls. Three major challenges influenced the development of city-states. One was the threat of hostile invaders. To protect themselves, the Sumerians surrounded their cities with strong, high walls. The second challenge was lack of water. There was very little rainfall in the region. City-states built and maintained irrigation canals for local use.

The third challenge involved trade. The Sumerians lacked stones, metals, and timber for building and had to import these materials. The Sumerians

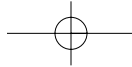
wanted to export grain, dates, and cloth. But trade was risky. Traders often had to cope with bandits, pirates, and wild animals. Well-protected city-states would have helped traders feel more confident about doing business.

Government by Priests and Kings Mesopotamian city-states were centers of religious worship. The Sumerians believed in many gods. The most important gods, Enlil and Utu, controlled the rain and sun. Other gods, such as Inanna, Goddess of Love and War, cured diseases and helped kings fight wars. Each city-state built a temple to a specific god. The people believed this god was the city's special guardian. The temple was built on a pyramid-shaped tower called a **ziggurat**. From the winding terraces wrapped around the ziggurat, people could watch celebrations honoring their god.

Temple priests were the first governors of Mesopotamian city-states. When the city-states began to argue about land and water rights, leaders were elected to defend their interests. Later these rulers became kings. Each king chose who would rule after his death. From then on, the city-states were governed by two groups. The priests controlled religious and economic life, and the king controlled political and military life.

Reading Social Studies

A. Recognizing Effects What were three effects of the founding of city-states?



Reading Social Studies

B. Analyzing
Causes How
did some kings
become emperors?

From Kings to Emperors Occasionally, kings conquered other city-states. Sometimes these kings allowed the conquered cities to keep worshipping their own special gods. They let the ruling families and temple priests keep local control. Other kings built empires from the lands they had conquered. An empire is a group of countries under one ruler's control. These emperors demanded that the conquered people honor them as gods. Local rulers could no longer turn to their own gods for advice. Now they had to take orders directly from the emperor.

The Class System

Mesopotamia had a **class system**. This meant society was divided into different social groups. Each social group, or class, possessed certain rights and was protected by law. The most favored classes enjoyed more rights than anyone else.

The Three Classes Kings, priests, and wealthy property owners were at the top of the class system. The middle class included skilled workers, merchants, and farmers. Skilled workers specialized in one craft, such as making pottery or spinning thread. Merchants often sold goods brought from other Mesopotamian cities or from other countries. Farmers worked fields that belonged to the temple or the palace.

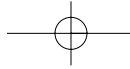
Many workers in Mesopotamia were enslaved. These people were at the bottom of the class system. Some had been captured in war. Others sold themselves and their families into slavery to pay off a debt. Once they paid the debt, their masters had to set them free. Even former slaves had some rights in Mesopotamian society.



Culture •
These necklaces,
earrings, and
headress were
worn by a
Sumerian
queen. ▲

Place •
People
in Mesopotamia
raised animals,
caught fish,
raised crops,
and traded
goods. ►





A Culture Based on Writing

The Sumerians developed one of the first systems of writing, called **cuneiform** (KYOO•nee•uh•FAWRM). With this wedge-shaped writing, they kept lists and records. They sent business letters. They recorded their history, their religious beliefs, and their knowledge of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Few Sumerians actually learned to read and write. Schools trained **scribes** to be society's record keepers and meet the different needs of the temple, the royal government, and the business world.

Educating Scribes Only the wealthy could afford to send their children to school. Most of these children were boys, but a few girls also studied at the schools—called tablet houses. Most scribes were children of government officials, priests, and wealthy merchants. Some were orphans who had been adopted by rich people and sent to school. The school day lasted from sunrise to sunset. There were about 600 different characters which students had to memorize. Students who misbehaved were punished by “the man in charge of the whip.” Here is how one student scribe described his monthly school schedule:

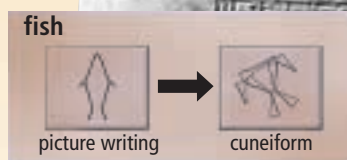


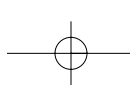
The Development of Cuneiform The Sumerians created one of the world's first written languages more than 5,000 years ago. Cuneiform—which means “wedge-shaped”—developed from pictographs. Early pictographs looked like the object they represented, such as a fish or a bird. Sumerians used a pen made from a sharpened reed to draw pictographs in vertical rows on soft clay tablets. Over time, the pictograph forms became more simplified and people began to write in horizontal rows. Eventually the forms became wedge-shaped. Scribes began using a pen that created the wedge-shaped signs when it was pushed into the clay.

THINKING CRITICALLY



- Analyzing Information** Why do you think Sumerians wrote on clay tablets?
- Contrasting** What were the differences between early pictographs and cuneiform writing?





A VOICE FROM SUMERIA

The reckoning of my monthly stay in the tablet house is (as follows):

My days of freedom are three per month.
Its festivals are three days per month.
Within it, twenty-four days per month
(is the time of) my living in the tablet house.
They are long days.

a student scribe

Scribes Played Many Roles Scribes did more than make lists, keep records, and write letters for their employers. Some wrote literary and scientific works of their own. Certain lullabies and love songs were written by women scribes. Traveling scribes from Mesopotamia shared their writings with people from neighboring countries.

Since few people in Mesopotamia could read, scribes read out loud to audiences. One favorite tale was about a flood that covered the earth. It is one of a collection of tales in a book called *Gilgamesh*, which relates the adventures of a semidivine hero.



Culture • The hero Gilgamesh was both a king and a god. ▲

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Terms & Names

1. Identify: (a) Hammurabi (b) Fertile Crescent (c) Sumerian (d) ziggurat
(e) class system (f) cuneiform (g) scribe

Taking Notes

2. Use a chart like this one to show how building city-states solved challenges faced by the Mesopotamians.

Challenge	Solution

Main Ideas

3. (a) Why do geographers refer to Mesopotamia as the Fertile Crescent?
(b) How did some Mesopotamian kings become emperors?
(c) How did scribes contribute to Mesopotamian civilization?

Critical Thinking

4. Forming and Supporting Opinions

Are the laws set forth in Hammurabi's Code too harsh?

Think About

- the meaning of justice
- the reasons for punishment
- the role mercy plays in justice

ACTIVITY -OPTION-

Design a **mural** of ancient Mesopotamia showing the roles and activities of typical citizens.