City-States in Mesopotamia

Geography of the Fertile Crescent

There is an arc of rich land in Southwest Asia (the Middle East) that is called the Fertile Crescent or sometimes called the “Cradle of Civilization”. Two of its rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, flood in the spring, leaving rich mud, called silt, in the area between the rivers. Because of this, during the Neolithic Age, humans began to settle in the area, known as Mesopotamia (“land between the rivers”). There they grew wheat and barley. It was here that the first civilization began.

About 3300 BCE, the Sumerians moved into this region and settled. They faced three problems. First, the floods were not regular, and once they passed, the hot sun quickly baked the land into clay. Second, the small farming villages had no protection against enemies. Third, the area lacked stone, wood, and metal to use for tools.

The Sumerians eventually solved these problems. They dug irrigation ditches from the river to their fields so they could bring water to their crops. They built walls of baked mud around their villages for defense. Because they could grow more food than they needed, they traded the extra for stone, wood, and metal from other lands.

Sumerians Create City-States

Several large city-states were at the center of the Sumerian world. These city-states had control over a surrounding area and could act independently; much like a country does today, with its own, military, government, and laws. Slowly, some people rose to power in a number of the city-states. They became rulers, as did their children after them. Rule of an area by the same family is called a dynasty.

As population and trade grew, Sumerians came into contact with other peoples. This interaction led to the sharing of ideas and the spreading of cultures. This process of spreading ideas or products is called cultural diffusion.

Sumerian Culture

The Sumerians believed in polytheism, or many gods. Each god had power over different forces of nature or parts of their lives. Sumerians believed that people were just the servants of the gods. Souls of the dead went to a joyless place under the earth's crust. These views spread to other areas and shaped the ideas of other peoples.

Society was divided into social classes. At the top were the priests and kings, after whom came wealthy merchants. Next were workers in fields and workshops. Slaves made up the lowest level. Women could enter most careers and could own property. But there were some limits on them.

The people of Sumer invented the sail, the wheel, and the plow. They were the first to use bronze. They also developed the first writing system—on clay tablets. They invented arithmetic and geometry, which they used to help build large structures.
The First Empire Builders

Centuries of fighting between the city-states made the Sumerians weak. In 2350 BCE, the conqueror Sargon defeated Sumer and captured other cities to the north. He built the world’s first empire. An empire brings together several peoples, nations, or previously independent states. It puts them under the control of one ruler.

THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

A few hundred years later, in about 1800 B.C. a different group of people conquered the Sumerians. These people built a capital at Babylon, establishing the Babylonian Empire. Hammurabi was the king of the city-state called Babylon. He recorded a system of laws called the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi’s Code was a harsh set of laws that punished people for wrongdoing. The 282 laws were engraved in stone and placed in a public location for everyone to see. Hammurabi required that people be responsible for their actions. Some of Hammurabi’s laws were based on the principle “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This means that whoever commits an injury should be punished in the same manner as that injury. If someone put out another person’s eye, their eye would be put out in return. Hammurabi’s code might seem cruel today but it was one of the earliest forms of written law.

Who was Hammurabi?

What is he best remembered for?

Describe the Code of Hammurabi.

Explain the meaning of “an eye for an eye” punishment.

Where did King Hammurabi post his code of laws?

Why did he post them there?
Explain how the geography of Mesopotamia contributed to it being called the cradle of civilization.

Directions: Create a civilization portrait that explains how the people of Mesopotamia met all 5 characteristics of a civilization. You must use visuals to represent key information from each category.

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1. What were some problems faced by ancient Sumerians who settled in Ur?

2. Which do you think was the most significant problem? Why?

3. How did Sumerians solve those problems that they faced?

4. What is a city-state?

5. What happened as Sumerians began to come in contact with other peoples?

6. What was Sumerian religion like?

7. List some inventions or achievements of Sumerians?

8. Which invention/achievement do you think was most significant? Explain why?