Objectives

In this section you will:

Find out how geography made the rise of civilization in the Fertile Crescent possible.

Learn about Sumer’s first cities.

Examine the characteristics of Sumerian religion.
Key Terms

scribe: a professional writer

Fertile Crescent: a region in Southwest Asia; site of the first civilizations

city-state: a city that is also a separate, independent state
polytheism: the belief in many gods

myth: a traditional story; in some cultures, a legend that explains people’s beliefs
A Sumerian Student

“My headmaster read my tablet and said, ‘There is something missing,’ and hit me with a cane...

The fellow in charge of silence said, ‘Why did you talk without permission?’ and caned me.”

What does this say about the earliest schools?
The First Schools

- The first schools were set up in Sumer over 4000 years ago.
- They taught boys and some girls how to write.
- Graduates of the school became scribes – professional writers.
- Scribes kept records for priests and kings.
Tablet used by scribes
The Geographic Setting

- Sumer was located in a region called Mesopotamia.
- Mesopotamia had rich soil and life-giving rivers.
- Sumer’s central location drew many traders from other regions.
- Because of trade, Sumer became one of the most prosperous areas of the world.
Where was Mesopotamia?

- Mesopotamia comes from the Greek words that mean “between the rivers.”
- It is located between two rivers:
  1. Tigris River
  2. Euphrates River
Fertile Crescent

- **Fertile Crescent** – region in Southwest Asia that was the site of the world’s first civilization.

- The region is shaped like a crescent moon.
  - The rivers around the area make it a great location for farming.
In the spring, topsoil is picked up in melting snow as it rushes down from the mountains and floods the land.

Farmers used the topsoil to plant their crops.

The Tigris and Euphrates’ Rivers also supplied fish, clay for building, and reeds for ship building.
The floodwaters sometimes came at unexpected times.

When this happened, the floodwater would sweep away people, animals, crops, and even houses.
Reading Checks

How did flooding rivers affect people who settled in Mesopotamia?

Flooding made farming, and therefore life, possible in Mesopotamia; floods also sometimes swept away people, animals, crops, and homes.
The First Cities

- As farming succeeded in Mesopotamia, food surpluses encouraged the growth of cities.
- By 3500 B.C., some of the earliest known cities arose in the southern region of Sumer, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
Although cities in Mesopotamia shared a common culture and language, they didn’t unite under a single ruler.

Instead they became city-states – cities with a separate, independent state: their own god or goddess, government, and king.
- Sumerian houses faced away from the crowded streets onto inner courtyards where families ate and played.
  - On hot nights people slept on their flat rooftops.
  - Oil lamps provided light.
Quick Check

- How were the cities of Sumer governed?
  - Each city had its own government and laws.
Sumerian Religion

- Religious, social, and economic activities took place at the temples.
- Sumerian temples were called Ziggurats.
Ziggurats were pyramids made of terraces.

Each terrace was linked by stairs.

At the top was a shrine where Sumerians believed that their gods came down from.
Sumerian Ziggurat
Ancient Religious Beliefs

- Sumerians were polytheistic: “poly” – many and “theism” – belief in a god.

- Sumerians also believed in myths – stories about gods that explain people’s beliefs.
Priests washed the statues of their gods before and after each meal.

Worshippers believed by eating the food offered to the gods they would obtain the qualities associated with each god.

Punishments and rewards were used in Sumerian religion.
The Fall of Sumer

- Sumer eventually fell because of greed.
- The city-states were fighting over land and the use of the rivers.
- Then, around 2300 BC, Sumer was conquered by Akkadian armies.
- It was later taken over by the Babylonians, around 1700 BC.
Quick Check

- What weakened the cities of Sumer?
  - Fights between city-states over the use of land and river water led to frequent battles that weakened Sumer’s rulers and armies.
1.(a) Recall

Describe the geography of Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, had rich soil and plentiful water.
(b) Find the Main Ideas

How did Mesopotamia’s geography help civilizations to develop in the area?

Abundant water and fertile soil encouraged people to settle in the area and develop civilizations.
2.(a) Compare

In what ways were Sumerian cities alike?

Sumerian cities were well developed, had high walls to keep out invaders, large temples, houses, busy shops, markets, and splendid royal palaces.
(b) Contrast

In what ways were the cities of Sumer different?

Each city was its own politically independent city-state; each had its own ruler, its own army, and its own government.
3.(a) Explain How did Sumerians practice religion?

Sumerians worshipped at temples called ziggurats; they practiced polytheism and honored their gods with religious ceremonies.
What do the religious practices of the Sumerians tell us about their values?

Sumerians took religion very seriously and valued food and music.