



This mosaic from ancient Sumer shows one of the greatest inventions of the ancient world, the wheel.

Learning Objectives

- Locate the land of Sumer on a map.
- Describe the Sumerian method of farming.
- Describe Sumerian trading.
- Discuss the growth of Sumerian city-states.
- Name the most important Sumerian inventions.
- Describe daily life in Sumer.
- Explain why Sumer grew weak.

Sumerians: The First Great Civilization

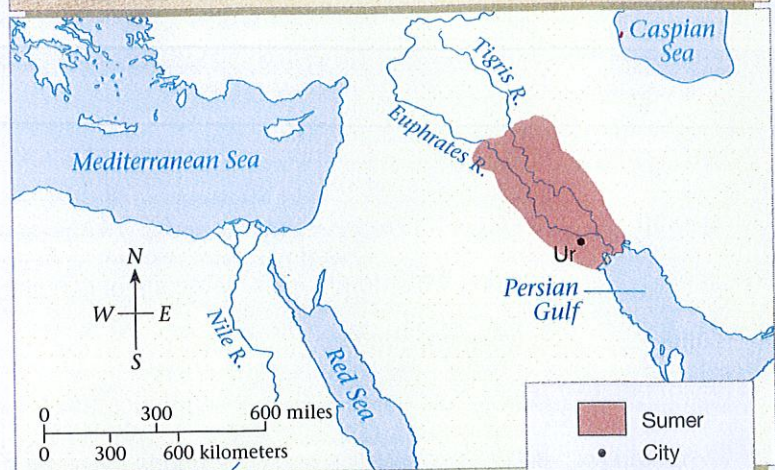
Words to Know

- swamp** / an area of low, wet land
- irrigate** / to bring water to dry land by means of canals
- canal** / a waterway made by humans
- dike** / a wall built along a river or sea to hold back the water from low land
- merchant** / a person who buys and sells goods for profit; a trader
- temple** / a building for the worship of a god or gods
- city-state** / an independent city and the surrounding land it controls
- ziggurat** / a huge, towerlike temple
- tablet** / a small, flat piece of clay used for writing
- cuneiform** / a wedge-shaped form of writing used in ancient Sumer
- scribe** / a person whose job was to write out copies of contracts and other manuscripts
- contract** / a legal written agreement between two or more people
- chariot** / an open two-wheeled cart, pulled by horses

The Land Between Two Rivers

The land that would one day be called Mesopotamia lay between two rivers. The rivers were the Tigris and the Euphrates. Sometimes the rivers flooded and washed rich bottom-soil up on the land. This made the land good for farming. People settled on this rich land. They grew their crops and raised animals. In the south, in a land called Sumer, a great civilization grew.

The Sumerians



Map Study

1. What four large bodies of water are on the map?
2. What three rivers are on the map?

The people of Sumer were called Sumerians. Although the land they settled was fertile, it was not a perfect place to live. The weather was very hot in the summer. In spring there was always the danger of the rivers flooding. Sometimes whole villages would be washed away. Many people would die.

Part of Sumer was **swamp** land. Other parts were very dry. Land that was flooded in the spring dried hard under the late summer sun. It was necessary to make the land ready for crops. The Sumerian farmers had to get water from the rivers to their fields.

Sumerian Farmers

The farmers found a way to **irrigate** their fields. They made cuts in the river banks and dug **canals**. The canals carried the river water out to the crops. The Sumerians also built **dikes** to hold back the flood waters.

A Sumerian farmer worked hard from early morning until late at night. Oxen were the farmer's treasure. They pulled the farmer's plow and carried the crops in from the field. Sumer was a wealthy land. Its wealth lay in farming.

Trading

The people of Sumer had different jobs. While some were farmers, others were **merchants**. Sumer had little metal, stone, or timber of its own. Sumerians depended on trading to get these things. They sent their fine crops to other lands. In return, they brought back the goods they needed at home.

Boats carried the goods to and from Sumer. The Sumerian boats were among the first ever used. There were two kinds of boats. River boats were small. They moved along under the power of long oars or poles. Trading ships were much longer, and they were narrow. They had big sails. The trading boats brought home treasures of gold, silver, pearls, and copper from other lands.

Villages Grow Into City-States

The earliest Sumerians lived in houses made from reeds. The reeds, or tall grasses, grew in the swamps. Later, the people learned to make bricks from mud. They dried the bricks in the sun and built houses from them. The brick houses stayed cool inside during the hot summers.

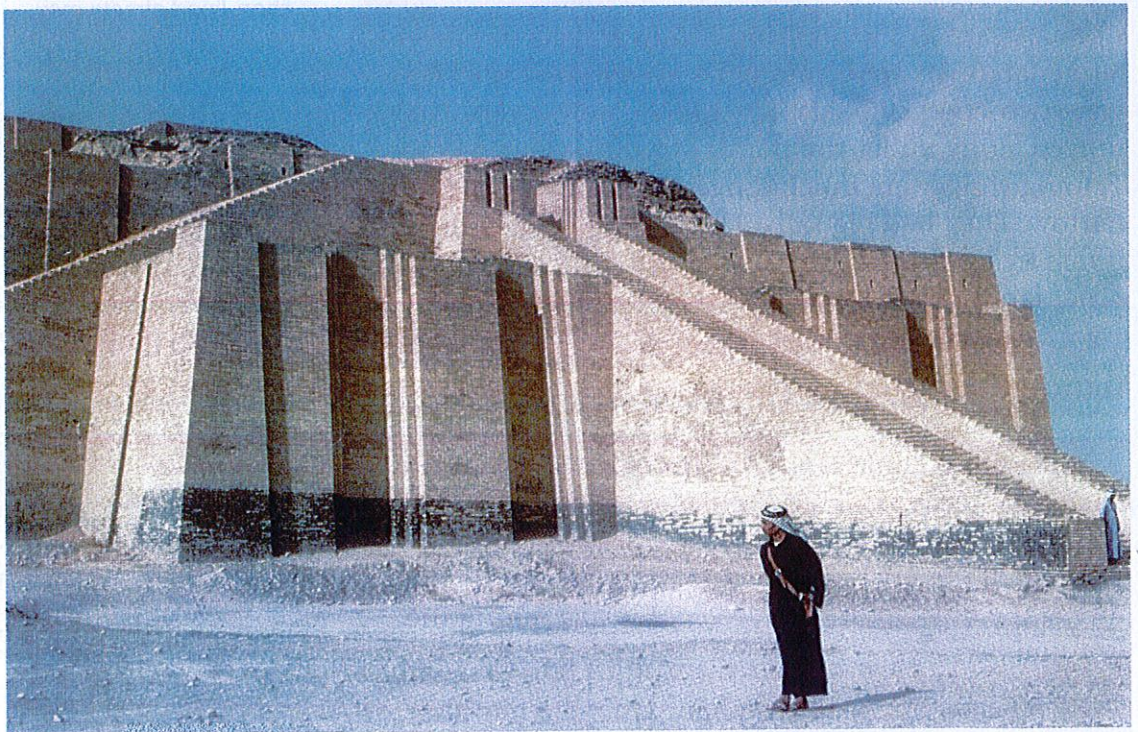
Each Sumerian village was built around a **temple**. The people believed a god or goddess lived in the temple and protected the village. The farmers took part of their crops to the temple to offer to the god or goddess. The priests of the temple became very wealthy and powerful.

HISTORY FACT

Sumerians who had the same jobs often lived and worked on the same street. These shop-lined streets may have been the ancestor of today's shopping malls.

Over the years, the villages grew. They became **city-states**, each one with its own government. A temple still stood at the center of each city-state. There was farmland all around the edge of the city. The city-states often fought among themselves. For protection, the Sumerians built walls around their cities.

One of the greatest city-states of Sumer was called Ur. A gigantic temple called a ziggurat was built in Ur. This tall temple-tower was built to honor the god who watched over the city. The people of Ur came in great numbers to bring gifts to the temple. They believed that if their god was happy, the city would be wealthy.



The ziggurat was built to honor the Sumerian god who watched over the city of Ur.

The Invention of Writing

The Sumerians' inventions were their gifts to the world. All the civilizations that followed used inventions of the Sumerians. There are still things in the world today that date back to Sumer.

The greatest gift the Sumerians gave to the world was the invention of writing. The Sumerians were a wealthy people. They needed some way to keep track of what they owned. They began by drawing pictures. They used a reed as a pen. They drew on soft pieces of clay. The soft clay was then dried in the sun. The **tablet** became a permanent record. Later, the Sumerian drawings changed into wedge-shaped symbols. This kind of writing is called **cuneiform**. By putting symbols together, the Sumerians could write whole sentences.

Not all Sumerians knew how to write. Only wealthy parents could afford to send their children to school. Very few girls received an education, so students were often called school-sons. Their teachers were called school-fathers. Specially trained people called **scribes** learned how to write. The school-sons learned to write by copying texts over to tablets of clay.

The scribes were paid very well for their special skill. They were among the richest of the Sumerians. They drew up business **contracts** for the farmers and merchants. Some scribes learned to add, subtract, and multiply. They could become tax collectors.

We know a great deal about this earliest of civilizations. This is because Sumerian scribes wrote down their ideas and kept records.



A clay tablet

Remember

Before the Agricultural Revolution, most people did not have other jobs besides farming.

WORDS FROM THE PAST













How Writing Changed

If you were trying to communicate with someone and you did not have a written language, how would you do it? You might use pictures to tell a story. That is how writing began in Sumer.

At first, pictographs, or drawings that represent actual things, were used. For example, a picture of a fish represented a fish. These early pictographs were drawn in vertical columns with a pen made from a sharpened reed.

In time, these pictographs began to look less like the real objects they represented. Instead, they became simple symbols that were easier to draw. These marks eventually became wedge-shaped strokes, or cuneiform. The Latin word for "wedge" is *cuneus*. People then began to write in horizontal rows. A new type of pen was used. It was pushed into the clay, forming the wedge-shaped symbols.

Writing eventually developed into something closer to an alphabet by other groups of people. However, it was the Sumerians who created the first efficient form of writing. There were symbols, or cuneiform writing, for thousands of words!

Word	Early Pictograph	Lois Pictograph	Cuneiform
Bird			
Fish			
Ox			
Sun			

This chart shows how writing changed from simple pictures to symbols, called cuneiform.

Other Gifts from the Sumerians

The Sumerian farmers had to pay a tax on their property. To figure the taxes, they invented a way of measuring land. Fields were divided into even squares. Then the squares were counted to decide how much tax a farmer owed. Since the Sumerians used silver as money, payments were made in silver. The value of the silver was measured by its weight.

The Sumerians also learned to measure time. The 60-second minute and the 60-minute hour probably come from the Sumerian way of counting time.

Historians believe that the wheel was first used in Sumer. Sumerian armies rode in wheeled **chariots**. There were no horses in all of Sumer. Therefore, wild donkeys were taught to pull the chariots.

Irrigation canals came to us from the Sumerian farmer. Sailboats came from the traders.

Although there was little metal in Sumer itself, the Sumerians traded for metal. They became skilled metalworkers. They learned to make fine jewelry of copper, silver, and gold.

Sumerian ideas and Sumerian inventions brought about changes that would affect life for ages to come.

✓ Check Your Understanding

Write your answers in complete sentences.

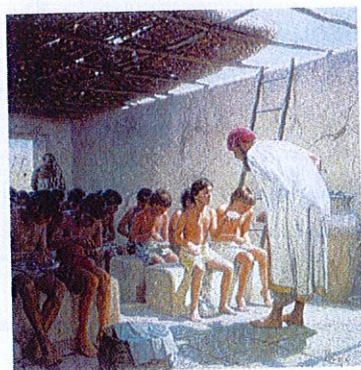
1. Why did the Sumerians trade with other lands?
2. Why did the Sumerians have to invent a way to measure land?
3. What was the greatest gift the Sumerians gave to the world?

You Decide

What if the wheel had never been invented? What would the world be like today? How would people travel?

Life in Sumer

A Sumerian boy might awaken to a hot, dry summer day in the city of Ur. If his father were a farmer, the boy would go with him to work in the fields. The two of them would leave their small house with the earliest rays of the sun. Perhaps that day the father and son would clean the irrigation canals. Even if the day were very hot, the boy would work hard. Those canals were important to the farm. Without them, nothing would grow. The boy might work alongside other farmers. They would have help from the slaves from one of the larger farms.



Sumerian boys from wealthy families went to school, where they learned to write.

Boys from wealthy families could go to school. If a boy learned well, he might become a scribe. A scribe could work in the king's palace or perhaps in the great temple itself.

The king ran the city of Ur. He ruled in the name of the city's god. Priests, scribes, and nobles helped him rule. These people were very rich. They lived a fine life. They were members of the highest classes in the Sumerian culture.

The people of Ur believed that when they died, they went to another world. Archaeologists have discovered graves filled with fine gold jewelry. Some graves of the nobles hold many skeletons. It may be that other people killed themselves, or were killed, when the nobles died. This way they could follow the dead nobles to that other world.

Attack on Ur

The Sumerian city-states fought with each other. That is why, after a while, Sumer grew weak. Around 2000 B.C. Sumerian cities came under attack. The Sumerian armies, even with their wheeled chariots, were not strong enough to save Sumer. Ur was destroyed.

The city's wealth was stolen. Men and women were killed. Children were taken as slaves.

Soon other Sumerian cities fell, too. The invaders, called the Babylonians, built new cities. Later, some of those cities died away, too. Dust and dirt covered them over. Today archaeologists dig into great mounds that still stand in the Middle East. Under the mounds of dirt lay all that is left of these ancient civilizations.



Timeline Study

How many years passed from the rise of Sumerian city-states to conquest by Babylonians?

