

## The Fertile Crescent, Mesopotamia, and the Persian Empire

### Lesson 2



#### MAIN IDEAS

1. The Sumerians created the world's first advanced society.
2. Religion played a major role in Sumerian society.
3. The Sumerians invented the world's first writing system.
4. Technical advances and inventions changed Sumerian lives.
5. Many types of art developed in Sumer.

### Key Terms and People

**rural** having to do with the countryside

**urban** having to do with the city

**city-state** a political unit consisting of a city and the surrounding countryside

**Gilgamesh** a Uruk king who became a legend in Sumerian literature

**Sargon** Akkadian emperor who defeated Sumer and built the world's first empire

**empire** land with different territories and peoples under a single rule

**polytheism** the worship of many gods

**priests** people who performed religious ceremonies

**social hierarchy** a division of society by rank or class

**cuneiform** world's first system of writing

**pictographs** picture symbols

**scribe** writer and record keeper

**epics** long poems that tell the stories of heroes

**architecture** the science of building

**ziggurat** a pyramid-shaped temple tower

### Lesson Summary

#### AN ADVANCED SOCIETY

In southern Mesopotamia in about 3000 BC, people known as the Sumerians (soo-MER-ee-unz) created an advanced society. Most people in Sumer (soo-muhr) lived in **rural** areas, but they were governed from **urban**, or city, areas. The size of these **city-states** depended on its military strength. Stronger city-states controlled larger

Why do you think governments are usually located in cities?

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**Lesson 2, continued**

areas. Individual city-states gained and lost power over time. For 1,000 years, the city-states of Uruk and Ur fought for power. One Uruk king, **Gilgamesh**, became a legend in Sumerian literature,

Around 2300 BC, **Sargon** was the leader of the Akkadians (uh-KAY-dee-uhns), a people who lived to the north of Sumer. Sargon built a large army and defeated all the city-states of Sumer as well as all of northern Mesopotamia. He established the world's first **empire**. It stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea and lasted about 150 years.

**RELIGION SHAPES SOCIETY**

Religion played an important role in nearly every aspect of Sumerian public and private life. Sumerians practiced **polytheism**, the worship of many gods. They believed that their gods had enormous powers bringing either illness or good health and wealth. Every area of life depended on pleasing the gods. Each city-state had one god as its special protector. People relied on **priests** to help them gain the gods' favor. Priests interpreted the wishes of the gods and made offerings to them.

A **social hierarchy** developed in Sumerian city-states. Kings were at the top, followed by priests and nobles. The middle ranks included skilled craftspeople, merchants, and traders. Traders had a great impact as they traded grain for precious metals and lumber. Farmers and laborers made up the large working class. Slaves were at the bottom of the social order. Most women were limited to the home and raising children; some upper-class women were educated and even became priestesses.

**What type of religion did the Sumerians practice?**  
\_\_\_\_\_

**In Sumerian religious practice, what did priests do to try to please the gods?**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Which two groups formed the Sumerian upper classes?**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Lesson 2, *continued***THE INVENTION OF WRITING**

The Sumerians developed **cuneiform** (kyoo-NEE-uh-fohrn), the world's first system of writing. They used sharp tools to make symbols on clay tablets. Earlier writing was **pictographs**, or picture symbols. In cuneiform, symbols could also be syllables or basic parts of words. At first, Sumerian **scribes** used cuneiform for business records. Later, they wrote works on history, law, math, and even literature. Some were **epics**, long poems about heroes

How was cuneiform different from pictographs?

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**ADVANCES AND INVENTIONS**

The Sumerians invented many important tools. They were the first to build wheeled vehicles like carts and wagons. They invented the ox-drawn plow and greatly improved farm production. They built sewers under city streets and learned to use bronze to make strong tools. They also excelled in math and science, developing the clock and calendar we use today.

List three items the Sumerians invented.

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**THE ARTS OF SUMER**

Sumerian remains reveal great skills in the fields of art, metalwork, and **architecture**. Artists and craftspeople created statues in clay as well as jewelry made from imported gold, silver and gems. A special art form, the cylinder seal, was a stone engraved with designs for rolling over wet clay to decorate objects or to "sign" documents. A pyramid-shaped **ziggurat** rose above each city. Most people lived in one-story houses with rooms arranged around a small courtyard.

Which Sumerian skill or invention do you think was most important to Sumerian society?

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**CHALLENGE ACTIVITY**

**Critical Thinking: Compare** Consider the invention of writing and of the wheel. As you go through a normal day, keep a list of the things you do that rely on one of these two inventions.

Lesson 2, *continued*

architecture	city-state	cuneiform	empire
epics	Gilgamesh	impact	pictographs
polytheism	priests	rural	Sargon
scribe	social hierarchy	urban	ziggurat

**DIRECTIONS** Read each sentence and fill in the blank with a word from the word bank that best completes the sentence.

1. Land with different territories and peoples under a single rule is called an \_\_\_\_\_.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is a division of society by rank or class.
3. Countryside areas are considered to be \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ are people who perform religious ceremonies.
5. A \_\_\_\_\_ consists of a city, which is the political center, and the surrounding countryside.
6. The practice of worshipping many gods is called \_\_\_\_\_.
7. The temple's \_\_\_\_\_ was taller than all of the other buildings in the city.
8. Trade had a positive \_\_\_\_\_ on Sumerian society, allowing artists to be more creative.
9. Scribes wrote on clay tablets using \_\_\_\_\_ in order to keep business records.