

SECTION 1



Sumerian depiction of a man playing a lyre (above); Sumerian lyre (right)

WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

**Ancient Times, Ancient Tunes**

Music may be one of the most difficult artistic forms of early civilizations for us to find evidence of because the songs themselves leave no physical trace. But in the ruins of Sumer, the world's first civilization, archaeologists have turned up both musical instruments and artwork showing musicians playing them. Although we may never know how Sumerian music sounded, we do know that even in the world's first cities, musicians filled the air with song.

**Focus Question** What were the characteristics of the world's first civilization?

# City-States of Ancient Sumer

**Objectives**

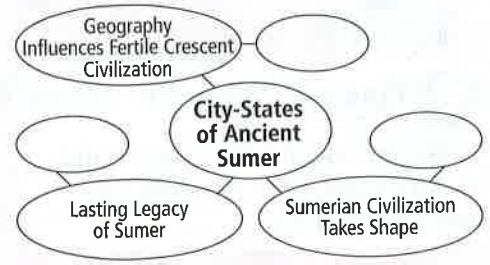
- Understand how geography influenced the development of civilization in the Fertile Crescent.
- Outline the main features of Sumerian civilization.
- Explain how the advances in learning made by the Sumerians left a lasting legacy for later peoples to build on.

**Terms, People, and Places**

Fertile Crescent	hierarchy
Mesopotamia	ziggurat
Sumer	cuneiform
<i>The Epic of Gilgamesh</i>	

**Note Taking**

**Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas** Use this concept web to record the main idea of each section of text that follows a red heading.



A number of early civilizations arose in the **Fertile Crescent**, a region of the Middle East named for its rich soils and golden wheat fields. Over time, nomadic herders, ambitious invaders, and traders easily overcame the region's few natural barriers. As a result, the region became a crossroads where people and ideas met and mingled. Each new group that arrived made its own contributions to the history of the region.

## Geography Influences Fertile Crescent Civilization

The Fertile Crescent curves from the Persian Gulf to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Within the Fertile Crescent lies a region that the ancient Greeks later named **Mesopotamia**, which means "between the rivers." Mesopotamia is the area of land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flow from the highlands of modern-day Turkey through Iraq into the Persian Gulf. Around 3300 B.C., the world's first civilization developed in southeastern Mesopotamia, in a region called **Sumer**.

**Organizing for Floods and Irrigation** Control of the Tigris and Euphrates was key to developments in Mesopotamia. The rivers frequently rose in terrifying floods that washed away topsoil and destroyed mud-brick villages. The Mesopotamian narrative poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was first told orally in Sumer, describes a great flood that destroys the world. Archaeologists have indeed found evidence that catastrophic floods occurred regularly in the ancient days of the Fertile Crescent.



To survive and to protect their farmland, villagers along the riverbanks had to work together. Even during the dry season, the rivers had to be controlled in order to channel water to the fields. Temple priests or royal officials provided the leadership that was necessary to **ensure** cooperation. They organized villagers to work together on projects such as building dikes to hold back floodwaters and irrigation ditches to carry water to their fields.

### Vocabulary Builder

**ensure**—(en SHOOR) *v.* to make sure that something will happen

**Sumerians Build Thriving Cities** The Sumerians had few natural resources, but they made the most of what they did have. They lacked building materials such as timber or stone, so they built with clay and water. They used the clay to make bricks, which they shaped in wooden molds and dried in the sun. These bricks were the building blocks for some of the world's first great cities, such as Ur and Uruk.

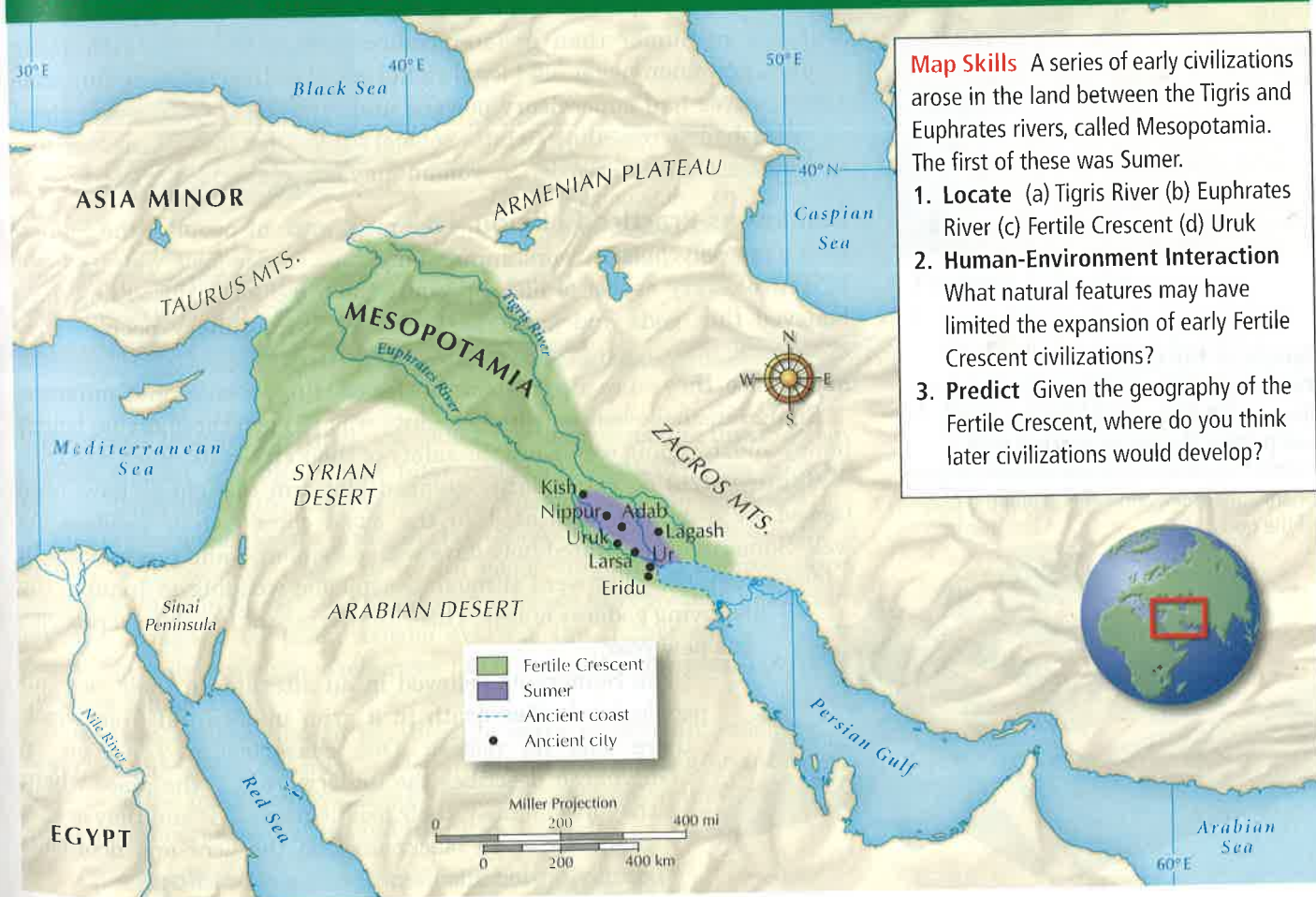
Trade brought riches to Sumerian cities. Traders sailed along the rivers or risked the dangers of desert travel to carry goods to distant regions. Although it is unclear where and when the wheel was invented, the Sumerians may have made the first wheeled vehicles. Archaeologists have found goods from as far away as Egypt and India in the rubble of Sumerian cities.

**Checkpoint** What geographic characteristics made the Fertile Crescent a good place for civilization to develop?

### Geography Interactive

For: Audio guided tour  
Web Code: nap-0211

## Sumer and the Fertile Crescent



**Map Skills** A series of early civilizations arose in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, called Mesopotamia. The first of these was Sumer.

- 1. Locate** (a) Tigris River (b) Euphrates River (c) Fertile Crescent (d) Uruk
- 2. Human-Environment Interaction** What natural features may have limited the expansion of early Fertile Crescent civilizations?
- 3. Predict** Given the geography of the Fertile Crescent, where do you think later civilizations would develop?

### Vocabulary Builder

**evolved**—(ee VAHLVD) *vt.* developed gradually into something

## Sumerian Civilization Takes Shape

Within a few hundred years of its beginning, Sumer included at least 12 separate city-states. Rival city-states often battled for control of land and water. For protection, people turned to war leaders. Over time, the practice of rule by war leaders **evolved** into hereditary rule.

**Complex Government Unfolds** In each city-state, the ruler was responsible for maintaining the city walls and the irrigation systems. He led its armies in war, enforced the laws, and employed scribes to carry out functions such as collecting taxes and keeping records. The ruler was seen as the chief servant of the gods and led ceremonies meant to please them.

**Sumerians Structure Their Society** Each Sumerian city-state had a distinct social **hierarchy** (HY ur ahr kee), or system of ranking groups. The highest class included the ruling family, leading officials, and high priests. A small middle class was made up of lesser priests, scribes, merchants, and artisans. Artisans who practiced the same trade, such as weavers or carpenters, often lived and worked on the same street.

The majority of people were peasant farmers, and they formed the lowest level of society. Some had their own land, but most worked land belonging to the king or to temples. Sumerians also owned slaves. Most slaves had been captured in war. Some, though, had sold themselves into slavery to pay their debts.

The role of women in Mesopotamian society changed over time. In Sumer, goddesses were highly honored in religious practice. Perhaps because of the importance of female deities, women held a higher social standing in Sumer than in later civilizations of the region. However, Sumerian women never held legal rights equal to those of men. But some rulers' wives had supervisory powers, and a number wrote songs about their husbands, revealing to later scholars that they had learned writing and music. On rare occasion, a woman may have inherited property.

**Sumerians Practice Religion** Like most ancient peoples, the Sumerians were polytheistic, worshiping many gods. These gods were thought to control every aspect of life, especially the forces of nature. Sumerians believed that gods and goddesses behaved like ordinary people—they ate, drank, married, and raised families. Although the gods favored truth and justice, they were also responsible for causing violence and suffering.

Sumerians believed their highest duty was to keep these divine beings happy and, by doing so, ensure the safety of their city-state. Each city built a **ziggurat** (ZIG oo rat), a large, stepped platform thought to have been topped by a temple dedicated to the city's chief god or goddess. As well, Sumerians celebrated holy days with ceremonies and processions. In one ritual, the king went through a symbolic wedding to Inanna, the life-giving goddess of love. This rite was meant to ensure a prosperous new year.

The Sumerians believed in an afterlife. In their view, all people lived after death in a grim underworld from which there was no release. One character in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* describes the underworld as “the place where they live on dust, their food is mud, / . . . and they see no light, living in blackness / on the door and door-bolt / deeply settled dust.”

### Temple to the Gods

Priests and priestesses could climb stairs to the top of the ziggurat to perform rituals and prayers. The people watched from below. They also prayed and offered sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine to win the favor of the gods.







1 The Sumerians sometimes pressed tokens into the surface of a clay envelope before placing them within it, perhaps to indicate its contents.



2 A scribe listed quantities of various commodities on this clay tablet using both token impressions and a stylus.



3 Scribes wrote cuneiform on both sides of a tablet, which was small enough to hold in one hand.

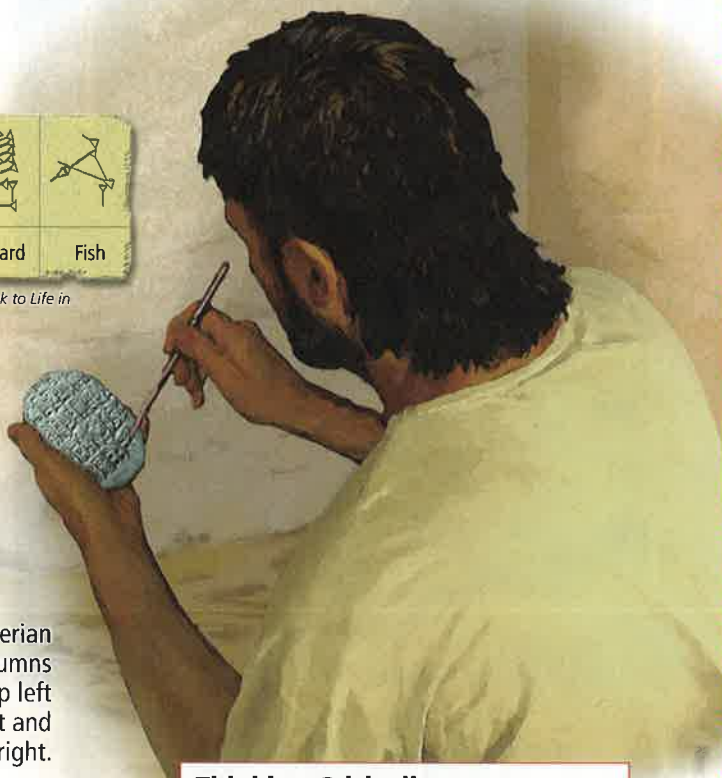
## ● INFOGRAPHIC

# Cuneiform Develops in Stages

Around 8000 B.C., Sumerians began using differently shaped clay tokens to represent various items of exchange, such as sheep, bread, or oil. To record economic transactions, they placed the tokens inside clay envelopes often shaped like balls. Around 3500 B.C., Sumerians began to press the tokens into clay tablets to make signs. They also started marking the clay using a sharp tool called a stylus. Around 3200 B.C., they created a true writing system that included symbols that represented words or syllables.

Cuneiform Symbol			
Meaning	Mountain	Orchard	Fish

SOURCE: Stephen Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*



Using a stylus, a Sumerian scribe wrote in columns beginning at the top left corner of the tablet and working to the right.

### Thinking Critically

1. **Draw Inferences** How do you think the use of clay shaped the writing system the Sumerians developed?
2. **Make Comparisons** How did cuneiform writing allow Sumerians to communicate more effectively than they could using tokens and clay envelopes?

**Sumerians Invent Writing** By 3200 B.C., Sumerians had invented the earliest known writing. It was later called **cuneiform** (kyoo NEE uh fawrm), from the Latin word *cuneus* for “wedge,” because scribes wrote by making wedge-shaped marks on clay tablets. Cuneiform grew out of a system of pictographs used to record goods brought to temple storehouses. Later, the Sumerians developed symbols to represent more complicated thoughts. As their writing evolved, the Sumerians used it to record not only economic exchanges but also myths, prayers, laws, and business contracts.

Sumerian scribes had to go through years of difficult schooling to acquire their skills. Discipline was strict. Untidy copying or talking in class could be punished by caning. Students who did well often learned about religion, mathematics, and literature as well.

✓ **Checkpoint** How was Sumerian society structured?