

MAIN IDEAS

- 1 **Culture** Sumerian society was divided into several classes, with kings at the top and slaves at the bottom.
- 2 **Science and Technology** Sumerians invented tools and developed special knowledge to improve their lives.
- 3 **Culture** Sumerians created a written language called cuneiform that was based on picture writing.

TAKING NOTES

Reading Skill: Categorizing

To categorize means to sort information. As you read Lesson 3, take notes about life in Sumer. Use a chart like this one to categorize the information you gather.

Life in Sumer		
Society	Technology	Writing



Skillbuilder Handbook, page R6



▲ **Woman with Pottery**
The woman shown in this figurine holds a pot that was probably made on a potter's wheel—a Sumerian invention.

Words to Know

Understanding the following words will help you read this lesson:

desirable having pleasing qualities (page 99)

He had little power, so he was always assigned the least desirable jobs.

daily taking place every day (page 100)

The Sumerians may have invented the wheel, which most people now use daily.

label to mark an object with a name or symbol that identifies it (page 101)

The merchant wanted to label the food items that were for sale.

reed the hollow stem of a tall grass (page 102)

The writing tool was made from a reed like those growing in the swamp.

bronze

pictograph

stylus

cuneiform

scribe

Life in Sumer

Build on What You Know Think about society today. Consider the differences between the people who have money and power and the people who don't have much of either one. Similar differences existed in ancient Sumer.

Sumerian Society

1 ESSENTIAL QUESTION What were the social classes that made up Sumerian society?

As Sumerian society grew more complex, it divided into several social groups, or classes. Many societies are divided into unequal classes. Class systems often define who usually has power and who usually does the less desirable jobs.

Social Classes The king and the priests were at the top of the upper classes of Sumer. The Sumerians believed their kings and priests had a link to the gods, so they had great influence over people. The upper class also included landowners, government officials, and rich merchants.

The in-between classes included all free people. Most people in Sumer were in this group, including many farmers and artisans. Slaves made up the lowest class.

◀ **The Standard of Ur**
A standard is a flag or symbol carried on a pole. This decorated panel shows many people in Sumerian society, including farmers. The panel is about 8.5 inches by 19.5 inches.



Slaves Some past societies have used slaves as a source of cheap labor. Most slaves in Sumer were taken as prisoners during war. In other cases, if Sumerian parents died or were very poor, their children might become slaves who worked in the temple. At times, a free person might borrow more money than he or she could repay. Such persons became slaves until they worked off the debt.

Slaves had some rights. They could conduct business and borrow money. Slaves could also buy their freedom.

Role of Women All of the social classes included women, so their social positions varied widely. In general, women in early Sumer had more rights than they did in later Mesopotamia.

Some upper-class women became priestesses, which was a role of honor. Free women could own land, and they could work as merchants and artisans, such as weavers. Still, the main role for most women was raising their children.

REVIEW Why were kings and priests in the highest class?

Sumerian Science and Technology

2 ESSENTIAL QUESTION What tools did the Sumerians invent?

Sumerians were good at solving problems. They invented tools and developed special knowledge to improve their lives. They were first to invent some of the things we use daily.

Early Inventions Historians believe that Sumerians may have invented the plow (about 6000 B.C.) and the wheel (about 3500 B.C.). These inventions helped Sumerians a great deal in their daily lives.

The plow was the first important tool invented to help farmers. The first plows were often simple digging sticks with handles. They could be pulled or pushed, first by people, then by animals. Plows broke up hard soil, which made planting easier. Also, water could sink more deeply into plowed soil. As a result, the roots of plants received more water.

The Sumerians used the wheel in many ways, such as on wagons to transport goods. Wheeled wagons helped farmers take their crops to market more easily and quickly. However, transporting goods on the river was still more efficient.

Wheel Early wheels were usually made from wood with tires made of leather. ▼



One special kind of wheel was the potter's wheel. Before the invention of the potter's wheel, people made pottery by shaping coils of clay by hand. With the potter's wheel, Sumerians could make more pottery faster. Pots were important storage containers for surplus food.

Sumerians were among the first people to use **bronze**, a mixture of copper and tin. Bronze was stronger than copper so tools lasted longer and stayed sharper. Bronze tools became another item that Sumerians could trade.

Mathematics The Sumerians developed arithmetic to keep records of crops and trade goods. Their number system was based on the number 60. So today, we have 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour. Circles contain 360 degrees. Eventually, the measurement of time helped with the creation of calendars.

Sumerians used a triangle and a measuring rope to set land boundaries. They understood geometric shapes such as rectangles, triangles, and squares. They used those shapes to make bricks, build ramps, and dig canals.

REVIEW How did new tools make life better for the Sumerians?

Creation of Written Language

3 ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did the Sumerians invent writing?

Sumerians invented writing by 3000 B.C. to meet the needs of business. As trade expanded, merchants needed records of exchanges. They also wanted to label goods.

Picture Writing At first, Sumerians used clay tokens that had an image of a product, such as a cow, to keep track of goods. They sealed the tokens in clay containers to make sure that no one tampered with them. The Sumerians marked the outside of the containers so people would know what was inside them.

The marks outside the container would be a symbol of the product. Such symbols are known as **pictographs**, which means "picture writing." In time, Sumerians stopped using tokens. They just drew the pictographs on clay tablets.



▲ Nail Head This bronze figurine of a god decorates a nail. It shows both the technical and artistic skills of the ancient Sumerians.

Visual Vocabulary



pictograph

Primary Source

Background: Cuneiform was used to write many kinds of records. These were often written on small clay tablets like the one shown. Cuneiform was also used for literature, such as proverbs. A proverb is a short saying containing wisdom or advice. Proverbs are found in many cultures.

It is not always easy to understand the meaning of ancient proverbs because every culture is different. What do you think these proverbs mean?

from *Sumerian Proverbs*

Translated by Edmund I. Gordon

Whoever has walked with truth
generates life.

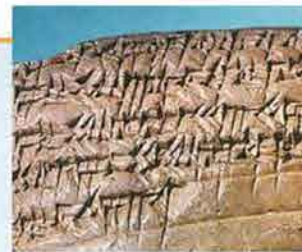
Tell a lie and then tell the truth; it
will be considered a lie!

He acquires many things; he must
keep close watch over them.

Possessions are sparrows in flight
which can find no place to alight.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Judging from these proverbs,
how did the Sumerians feel about
truth? How did they feel about
possessions?



Cuneiform At first, pictographs showed actual objects. Later, they also stood for ideas. In time, the Sumerians began to use pictographs to stand for sounds too. By combining sounds, they could write more words.

The Sumerians used a sharpened reed called a **stylus** to press markings into a clay tablet. Because of its shape, the stylus made marks that were wedge shaped. Over time, the Sumerians stopped using pictures and began to use symbols made entirely of these wedge shapes. This wedge-shaped writing is called **cuneiform** (KYOO•nee•uh•FAWRM).

The writing system was very complex. The Sumerian language contained about 600 different symbols. Learning all those symbols took years. As a result, few people were able to read and write. The people who specialized in writing were called **scribes**. They were professional record keepers. Other people in Sumerian society respected them highly.

Written History At first, Sumerians used records mostly for business dealings. Later, people started writing about wars, floods, and the reigns of their kings. These records are Sumer's written history.



Primary Source
Handbook

See the excerpt from
The Epic of Gilgamesh,
page R37.

Other cultures in Mesopotamia and elsewhere adopted the cuneiform writing system from the Sumerians. Archaeologists have found thousands of cuneiform tablets in Southwest Asia. One king owned a library of more than 24,000 clay tablet records and histories from all over the region of Mesopotamia.

REVIEW Why were scribes highly respected in Sumer?

Lesson Summary

- Sumerian society had several classes. Kings and priests were at the top of society. Slaves were at the bottom.
- Inventions, such as the wheel and the plow, and mathematical knowledge improved Sumerian life.
- The Sumerians created a system of writing to record business transactions and histories.

Why It Matters Now . . .

The Sumerians developed the first system of writing. Writing makes it easier for people to pass on knowledge from generation to generation.



▲ **Scribe** This sculpture of a scribe was made later in Mesopotamian history. Notice that he is holding a stylus.

3 Lesson Review

Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of
- | | | |
|------------|-----------|--------|
| bronze | stylus | scribe |
| pictograph | cuneiform | |

Using Your Notes

Categorizing Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

2. Which invention or technology do you think was most important? Explain why.

Life in Sumer		
Society	Technology	Writing

Main Ideas

3. How did religion affect who was in the upper class?
4. Why was the plow such an important tool for farmers?
5. How did writing evolve in Sumer?

Critical Thinking

6. **Making Inferences** Why was the invention of cuneiform an important development?
7. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do historians identify the beginning of history with the beginning of writing?

Activity

Internet Activity Choose one of the Sumerian inventions and use the Internet to research it. Then give a presentation on its importance. Include visuals with captions in your presentation.

INTERNET KEYWORDS: *plow, wheel, cuneiform*



Mesopotamian Inventions

Purpose: To learn about the ancient Mesopotamian inventions of the plow, board games, and the potter's wheel

The ancient Mesopotamians are a good example of people who solved problems—and changed history by doing so. They invented technology that helped to grow crops and to create pottery more efficiently. Ever since, people all over the world have used those inventions. But don't think that ancient Mesopotamians were so serious that they worked all the time. They also invented some ways to have fun!

Plow

► **Past** The sun can bake the soil as hard as a brick. Seeds thrown on top of such hard ground usually don't sprout. Because of this, early farmers had to find a way to loosen the soil. They invented the plow, which has a blade that cuts into soil and turns it over. The plow helped farmers to grow surplus crops.

▼ **Present** Today's plows are bigger and use metal blades to turn over the soil. Now tractors instead of animals pull plows. Even there, we owe a debt to the ancient Mesopotamians. We wouldn't have tractors without the wheel—and they invented that too.



plow



Board Games

▼ **Past** This game comes from a tomb at Ur. Scholars think the goal was to move your pieces from one end to the other while an opponent blocked the narrow bridge.



► **Present** Checkers is a board game that many people still enjoy. The object is to capture all of your opponent's pieces.



Pottery

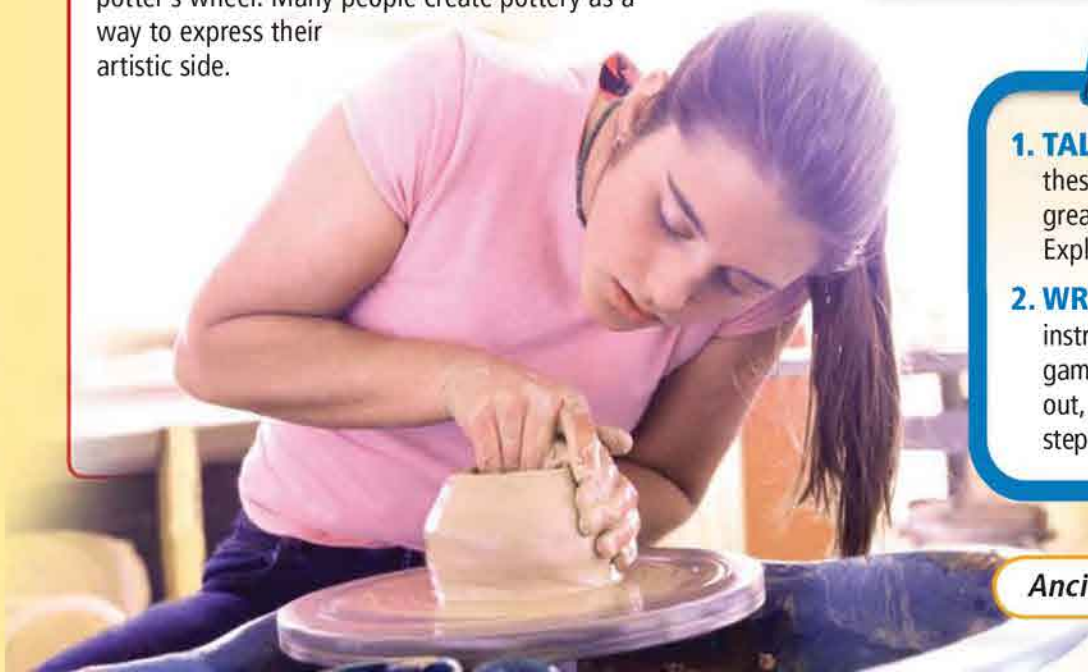
► **Past** It is possible to create pottery entirely by hand, but the potter's wheel provides several advantages. Artisans can make pots with more even, streamlined shapes. And the process is much faster, so artisans could produce more pots than before.

▼ **Present** If you go to any craft fair, you can still find pottery that artisans make on a simple potter's wheel. Many people create pottery as a way to express their artistic side.



Activities

1. **TALK ABOUT IT** Which of these inventions has had the greatest effect on your life? Explain.
2. **WRITE ABOUT IT** Create instructions for the ancient board game shown here. Write them out, using a numbered, step-by-step format.



Chapter 3 Review

VISUAL SUMMARY

Ancient Mesopotamia



Geography

- Rivers made agriculture possible.
- Challenges included floods, drought, and lack of resources.



Culture

- Sumerians developed the first writing system.
- Sumerian society was divided into classes.



Belief Systems

- Sumerians worshiped many gods.
- The temple was called a ziggurat.



Government

- City-states were the form of government throughout Sumer.
- First, priests ruled in Sumer. Later, powerful men became kings.



Science & Technology

- Irrigation helped provide a steady source of water for crops.
- Sumerians invented the wheel and the plow.

TERMS & NAMES

Explain why the words in each set below are linked with each other.

1. **floodplain** and **silt**
2. **Sumer** and **civilization**
3. **ziggurat** and **polytheism**
4. **pictograph** and **cuneiform**

MAIN IDEAS

Geography of Mesopotamia (pages 82–87)

5. How did the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers both help and hurt farmers?
6. Why was irrigation so important to agriculture in Mesopotamia?

The First Civilization (pages 88–97)

7. How did advances in agriculture contribute to the rise of cities?
8. What role did the temple play in Sumerian society?

Life in Sumer (pages 98–105)

9. What roles did women and slaves have in Sumerian religion?
10. What are the characteristics of Sumerian cuneiform writing?