

Exploring Ancient Civilizations

MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia was located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is known as the location of the world's first civilizations. Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria were three important city-states there.

Mesopotamia was hot and dry, and seasonal flooding took place there. Silt deposited during flooding resulted in fertile soil for crops such as barley, wheat, flax, and sesame. The fertile ground also supported fruit and vegetable crops.

Mesopotamian farmers faced challenges. To get water to the fields during the dry planting season, the farmers created systems of storage ponds and developed irrigation techniques involving canals and gates. They also developed simple machines to transport water to the fields. To deal with the flooding that occurred during harvest time, the farmers developed dams, dikes, and floodwalls to protect their fields. They also invented the sickle, hoe, and plow for preparing the ground for planting.

Sumer had great inventors and developed cuneiform, believed to be the first system of writing. Sumerians used a pointed reed, or stylus, to create pictures and symbols in clay.

Writing developed as a means of record keeping for commercial transactions. As writing evolved, it allowed news and ideas to be carried great distances.

The ancient Mesopotamians used natural resources to create their architecture, which included arches and columns. They were masters of construction, using bricks made from mud. Brick making was a major industry.

The Sumerians built ziggurats, pyramid-like towers. Each city-state had a ziggurat at its center. The Sumerians believed the ziggurat housed the city-state's patron god.

The invaders who overran the Sumerian civilization built the city of Babylon on the

Euphrates River. Sometime later, Hammurabi, their king, extended his control over most of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. He created a code of laws that represents the oldest known legal system.

The Assyrians overran Babylonia. Their contributions to later civilizations include establishing a library that contained 22,000 clay tablets in cuneiform from all over Assyria and Babylonia.

ANCIENT EGYPT

The Ancient Egyptian civilization developed along the Nile River. The annual flooding there resulted in rich, fertile soil. The people dug canals and irrigation ditches to get water from the Nile to their fields.

Members of the Egyptian society wanted to record important information. To do so, they developed different writing forms. The most well known is hieroglyphics, a picture-based script. Scribes used the script on tomb walls, buildings, and papyrus scrolls.

The main building materials of Egypt were stone and brick. Egyptians used them to build their monuments. They first built mastabas, flat-roofed, rectangular tombs. Later, the Egyptians built the pyramid tombs, which are so famous today.

Ancient Egyptians believed in an afterlife. They used a mummification process to preserve bodies for the next life.

INDUS VALLEY

Civilizations developed on the Indus Valley floodplain, along the banks of the Indus River. These civilizations lived in present-day Pakistan and northwestern India. The Indus Valley civilization is also known as the Harappan civilization.

The Indus Valley is an area located on the fringes of the monsoon region, where rainfall is unpredictable. Settlers there suffered annual flooding and frequent severe droughts. The people dug wells to ensure a safe supply of water.

Crops grown in the Indus region included wheat, barley, peas, melons, and sesame. This civilization was the first to raise cotton for the production of cloth.

The people of the Indus Valley civilization developed a writing system involving stamp seals, and archaeologists are still trying to decipher the information recorded.

The cities in the Indus region were well organized and built of brick and stone. The bricks discovered from that time are of uniform size and shape. The people developed drainage systems, wells, and water storage systems that are considered the most sophisticated of the ancient world.

ANCIENT CHINA

From around 2070 B.C. to around 256 B.C., three dynasties—the Xia, Shang, and Zhou—ruled the area around the Yellow (Huang He) River basin, one after another. Little is known about the Xia dynasty (because there are no written records to confirm its existence), but the subsequent Shang rule (c. 1600 to c. 1046 B.C.) brought great prominence to the area. The Shang dynasty is very important to historians and archaeologists. The people left behind records written on bones, turtle shells, and bronzes, which reveal information about their society. Around 1046 B.C. the Zhou, western neighbors of the Shang, defeated the Shang in battle. In approximately 256 B.C., the Zhou were deposed.

For about the next forty years China was constantly at war. Small states fought each other trying to gain power. In around 221 B.C., Qin Shi Huangdi won these wars. He united all the warring states into one empire. Around 206 B.C., the Han dynasty gained control and expanded the empire west into Central Asia. China remained a centralized empire until A.D. 1912, the longest surviving empire ever.

China's geography protected the area from invasion for many centuries. Mountains, deserts, and the Pacific Ocean provided natural barriers. To add to that protection and prevent invasion from the north, the Chinese built the Great Wall of China.

The Chinese invented many useful items that we still use today, including paper, a compass, silk, matches, wheelbarrows, fireworks, and paper money. They also created a very intricate system of writing, which is believed to have begun as pictures of items and to have expanded to become symbols of sounds. The earliest form of Chinese writing is called oracle bone script. This script was etched

onto turtle shells and animal bones. The Chinese written language is the oldest Asian script and influenced other Asian countries.

Traditional Chinese architecture as we know it is based on that of the Han dynasty. There is little known about the architecture before that except that it involved a great deal of symmetry. The Great Wall is arguably the greatest Chinese structure ever built.

ACTIVITY SHEET ANSWERS

The activity sheets test students' understanding of the poster and teacher's guide information.