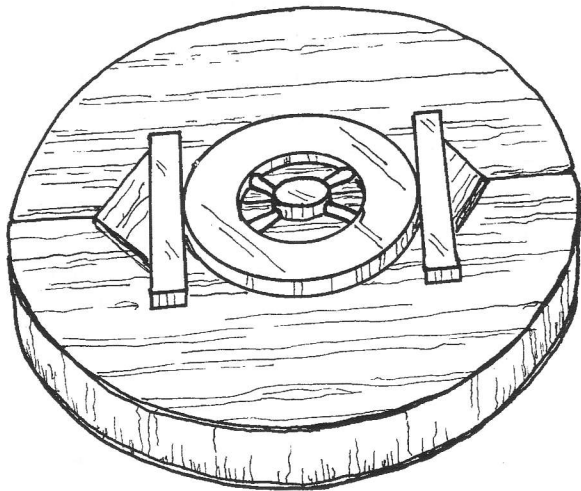


# Daily Life in Mesopotamia

The Mesopotamians of the third and fourth millennia B.C. (a millennium is 1000 years) created an intricate and highly specialized society. Living in complex city-states brought together many talented and creative people who were always looking for ways to improve their world.

Through creativity and practical ingenuity, Mesopotamia flourished. For example, the practical use of the wheel began in Mesopotamia. By 3500 B.C., Sumerian potters were using a new invention: a wheel which turned horizontally, allowing craftsmen to make pots from wet clay.

About 250 years later, Mesopotamians began using carts with solid wooden wheels, consisting of two sections of planking which formed a disk fastened together with wood and copper brackets. These were attached to the axle of the cart by linchpins.



*A solid wheel design typical in Mesopotamia*

This basic technology—two- and four-wheeled carts—allowed the Mesopotamians to transport produce to market and carry people where they needed to go.

Other improvements included the plow. By 4000 B.C., Mesopotamian farmers attached primitive plows behind teams of oxen to cut furrows across the fields of Sumerian farms.

Meanwhile, Mesopotamian merchants were busying themselves with commerce: trading surplus grain for silver and lead from Turkey, lumber from Syria, copper and building stones from Oman, and semiprecious gems from Afghanistan. Great Sumerian trading ships—some capable of carrying up to 35 tons of grain and other produce—were sailing far from home, doing business with the people of the city of Mohenjo Daro, located in the Indus River valley.

Much of this trade caused disunity and decentralization, however. Rivals for trade often went to war with one another.

As the Sumerian city-states fought each other for dominance, the cities of Egypt to the southwest were coming together, creating a unified kingdom.

Despite these political and economic rivalries, the city-states of Mesopotamia prospered and grew. Prominent among them was the city of Ur. With its great temple dominating the city's center, this shining urban oasis could be seen for miles in the desert, home to 24,000 people.

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## *Review and Write*

What examples of cooperation, organization, and specialization do you see described here which probably made the people of the Mesopotamian city-states more civilized?

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## Sumerian Temples and Homes

As civilization in Mesopotamia developed, so did life in the city-states. By 3000 B.C., most of the people in Sumer lived in one of over a dozen such towns. These cities were fiercely independent, each featuring its own type of government ruled by either a king, a class of priests, or some other leader.

The people living in the city-states were divided into three classes, or groups. The most important class in status consisted of the nobility and the priests. The nobility were privileged land-owners. The next class was made up of the commoners—those who labored in the fields of the nobility or worked in the cities as artisans, craftsmen, or unskilled workers. The lowest class of Sumerians was made up of slaves.

Just as a king might occupy the most important position in his city-state, so did a special type of building in Mesopotamia. Rising high above the streets of a typical city was a special temple called a ziggurat, from an Assyrian word *zīqquratu*, meaning “mountain top.”

Similar to the massive stone pyramids constructed by ancient Egyptians, the Mesopotamians built multi-leveled complexes of baked mud bricks. The typical ziggurat had three long staircases leading to the top of the structure—a height of perhaps 80 feet. These great temples were massive, often measuring 700 feet around the base.

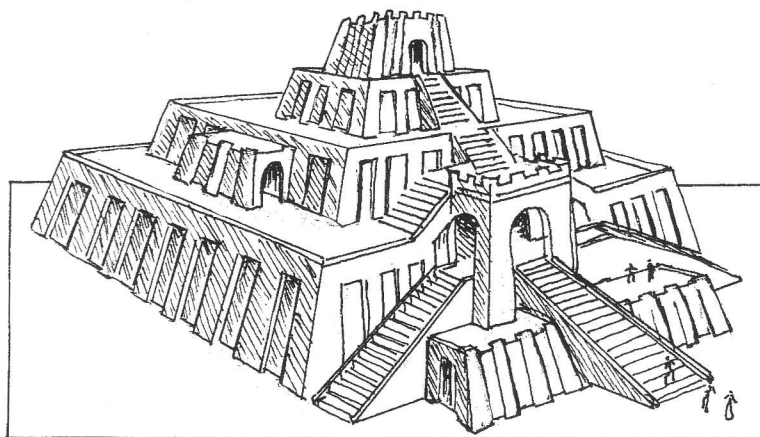
The ziggurat was important to the Mesopotamians and their religion. The height of the temple symbolized the human desire to connect with heaven. Each ziggurat was dedicated to a special god. The stairs were an invitation to their god to come and visit them.

Unlike the typical Egyptian pyramid which featured smooth, sloping sides, the ziggurat had several flat terraces which were places of constant activity where everyone—from slave to king—gathered to worship.

Inside the ziggurat were special rooms and chambers, some serving as living quarters for temple priests. Other rooms were kept as sacred shrines and storage rooms.

While ziggurats dominated the skyline of the Sumerian city-states, the people lived in much smaller homes. The Mesopotamians recognized the

right of private ownership of property and the typical commoner lived in a one-story mud-brick home. Such houses were often crowded together and lined the city's narrow streets.



*A ziggurat from Ur-Nammu, built around 2000 B.C.*

Wealthy citizens might live in larger, two-story houses, complete with bedrooms, a kitchen, bathrooms, an inside courtyard, and storage rooms. Underground cellars might also be part of the home, where certain household goods, including foods, were kept cool. Such homes commonly included a family chapel for private worship, as well as a family burial plot where the tombs of deceased family members served as a constant reminder of the family's past.

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### *Review and Write*

1. What are some of the important buildings in your town or neighborhood? List them below.

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2. Why do you think the Mesopotamians considered their ziggurats to be such important buildings?

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# Sumerian Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

As trade in ancient Sumeria expanded in the third millennium B.C., the need for making accurate records of transactions also developed. In response, the early Mesopotamians created one of the first systems of arithmetic and writing in the history of early humans.

Ancient Sumerian mathematicians developed the skills of addition, subtraction, and multiplication. They used 60 as the base of their number system, still used today in our 60-minute hour and 360-degree circle.

Math skills were necessary to do business in Mesopotamia. For example, suppose a merchant of Ur sells a trader from Egypt 10 head of cattle and 10 jars of olive oil in exchange for 20 large sacks of wheat and 5 necklaces of semiprecious gems. How does the merchant record the sale?

Early Mesopotamian records might depict a picture of one head of cattle with 10 small marks next to it to denote a total of 10 cattle. The corresponding number of marks would be placed next to pictures of jars, sacks, and necklaces.

This was a cumbersome system, however. Such records were made on soft clay tablets using a sharp reed stick which fit in the hand much like a pencil. Later, the tablets were baked in a kiln to make the records permanent.

Originally, Mesopotamians “wrote” on their tablets in vertical columns going from the top-right, down, and to the left. By 3000 B.C., scribes turned their tablets and wrote horizontally from left to right.

Scribes also began using a different type of writing tool, one with a wedge-shaped tip rather than a pointed one. (Such a tip left cleaner marks on the wet clay.) This writing, called *cuneiform* (meaning “wedge-shaped”) developed into a system of markings rather than pictures.

Around 2500 B.C., scribes developed symbols which could be used to denote many different things. The wedge symbols were used in combination, their sounds serving to phonetically create other words.

For example, if a scribe wished to write an abstract concept such as *belief*, he might depict the wedges for *bee* and *leaf*. With this adaption of the written word, scribes could more readily show ideas in their writings.

In time, the Sumerian system of symbols developed into 600 different signs. This would be similar to our having an alphabet of 600 letters rather than 26. The system remained an awkward one—after all, they were writing on wet clay—but one which created a written language used not only by the Mesopotamians, but by others in the ancient Near East as well.

## Review and Write

Pictured below are some of the symbols of the Sumerian’s written language and the phases of change they underwent between 3000 and 600 B.C. Study each picture-symbol carefully. What do you think each one represents? Note: The second symbol from the top is used in combination with another symbol. Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

