UNIT ONE
Reading Passages
Ancient Mesopotamia 1B
Ancient Sumer 1C
Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means “between two rivers.” The two rivers referred to are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers begin in what is now Turkey, flow southeast, converge in the southeast in what is now Iraq, and empty into the Persian Gulf. Mesopotamia is considered the cradle, or beginning, of civilization. Here large cities lined the rivers and many advances took place. The hot, dry climate of Mesopotamia was mixed with seasonal flooding. The flooding deposited silt, which is fertile, rich, soil on the banks of the rivers each year. This is why Mesopotamia is part of the fertile crescent, an area of land in the Middle East that is rich in fertile soil and crescent-shaped. The flooding also created some challenges for the farmers. Farmers in ancient Mesopotamia learned to deal with these problems by building levees to control the floods and developing irrigation systems in order to produce wheat, barley, sesame, and flax. They were also able to produce many different kinds of fruits and vegetables.

People talk about Mesopotamia as if it were a single civilization or culture. Actually, Mesopotamia was an area, not a civilization. It was composed of several independent city-states, each with its own religion, laws, language, and government. Many civilizations have existed in Mesopotamia, some of them at the same time. While one culture may have dominated a certain period, other cultures may have existed and were seeking to become independent. Some of the cultures that have existed in this area are Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian.
ANCIENT SUMER

The Sumerians
The first group of people to inhabit Mesopotamia were the Sumerians. They originally lived in the mountains, but moved near the Persian Gulf to take advantage of the fertile soil.

At first, their settlements were small villages. But over time, they grew larger. Finally, they built the world's first cities. And they developed the world's first culture.

People in "the land between the rivers" were very smart. They invented and discovered many things. The Sumerians are given credit for many inventions. One of the most important was the invention of a written language. Writing was invented so the Sumerians could keep records. It was composed of pictures called pictographs. Scribes drew the pictures on clay tablets using a wedge-shaped instrument, or stylus. Over the years, the pictures were replaced with shapes and lines. This type of writing is called cuneiform. Other inventions include the wheel, the water clock, the twelve month calendar, the plow, and the sailboat.

The Sumerians had a numbering system based on the number 60. We still use the Sumerian system today when measuring time. For example, sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. Also, a circle has 360 degrees.

Eventually, the Sumerians became prosperous, and the villages developed into self-governing city-states. The buildings in these city-states were made of sun-dried mud bricks. The Sumerians used these mud bricks as building materials because there was no building stone and very little timber in Sumer, and the rivers were a great source for mud.

The buildings in Sumer were different from other civilizations, such as the Egyptians. Sumerians learned how to use a keystone to make arches. A keystone is a wedge-shaped stone in an arch that causes the arch to lock together. The doorways, gates, and other openings in buildings in the Sumerian cities had arches.
Priests, wealthy citizens, and merchants had two-story houses. These houses had an open courtyard that all the rooms of the house opened into. There were smaller homes for others, also.

Religion was important to the Sumerians. At the center of each city-state was a temple that was surrounded by courts and public buildings. These temples were called ziggurats. Ziggurats were originally built on platforms, but eventually became temple-towers brightly decorated with glazed bricks. These were like huge pyramids with terraced sides that were flat on top. (One of the most famous stories surrounding a ziggurat-like temple is the Tower of Babel from the Bible. The Tower of Babel is associated with the ziggurat of the great temple of Marduk in Babylon.)

The Sumerians had many gods. They believed the gods spoke to them through their priests. Since the priests were representatives of the gods, they had a great deal of power in Sumer. When a priest commanded that something be done, the people believed the command was actually coming from one of their gods, and they obeyed. The ability to make important decisions and have people obey them elevated the status of priests. They became priest-kings and ruled large areas.

While Mesopotamia offered many advantages for settlement, such as rich soil, water, and game, there was one great disadvantage. The land did not provide any natural protection from invaders. Enemies could easily march into Sumer from almost any direction. This made Sumerians vulnerable to attack, not only from foreign armies, but from other Sumerian cites as well. Wars between Sumerian cites were common.

The independent city-states of Sumer were conquered by a man called Sargon the Great of Akkad, who had once ruled the city-state of Kish. Sargon is considered the first empire builder. Sargon made Agade the capital city of his empire. Sargon's son and grandson ruled after him, but eventually the Akkadian Empire fell, and was replaced by the Old Babylonian Empire.