

Student Handout I: Mesopotamia and Egypt

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, or the area in the floodplain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, was home to many small Neolithic farming villages that grew steadily between 4000 and 3500 BC/BCE. By 3000 BC/BCE the villages became cities and grew in population and began building walls and monuments. Sumer was a particular civilization that developed in the region of Mesopotamia.

Cities were home to a privileged class of elites who headed households supported by nearby irrigated land. The households were made up of staff, slaves, and workers. Outside the walls of the city, merchants traded products like wool and food for timber and metals from as far away as Egypt or the Indus River. Evidence of Sumerian seals has been found in both places.

Sumerian Seal (http://z.about.com/d/arthistory/1/0/1/8/MorganExpansion_12.jpg 6/3/10)

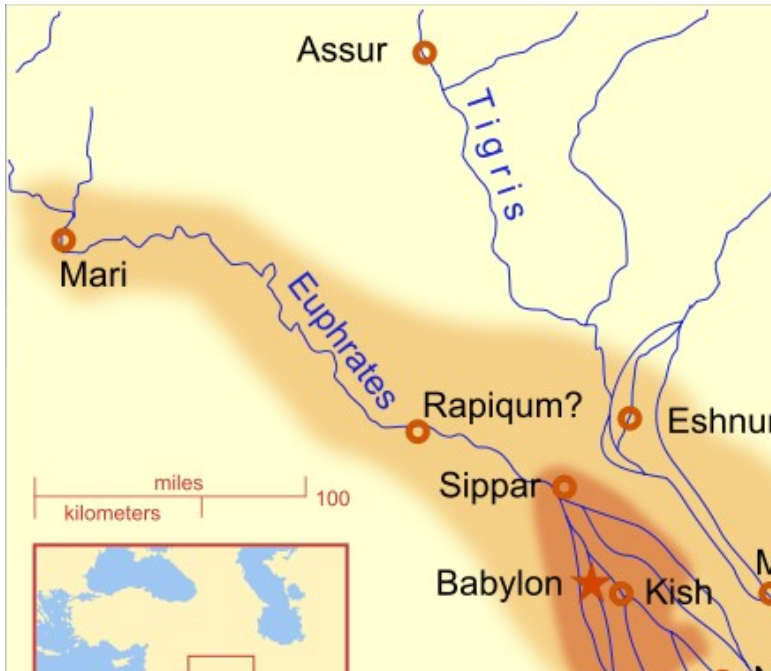


Each city had a large monument that was believed to be home to a god. The monument was surrounded by a temple managed by priests. The temples were the wealthiest of households, each supported by agriculture, artisans who crafted metals and stones into goods, and large storehouses of surplus grain.

Sumerian religion was polytheistic – meaning there was more than one god. The religion revolved around monuments and the houses the gods. People believed that if the gods were not pleased by the splendor of the temple, floods or attacks might occur. It is believed there were two types of deities (gods) in Sumer; each city-state had local gods they worshipped, and there were also several gods that were worshipped across the larger region.

The cities of Sumer grew larger and larger as the wealth of the temples expanded. They controlled large areas of the fertile land near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. When cities grow to be this large and wealthy and traded with each other, historians called them *city-states*. Each city-state had its own specialization of workers that promoted trade within Sumer and across Afroeurasia.

Eventually, in about 2200 BC/BCE, the ruler of the Sumerian city Akkad, Sargon, conquered all of the other Sumerian city-states. His descendants who ruled after him declared themselves to be living gods. The resident gods at the cities temples became less powerful, and the entire society became subject to one ruler. Sometimes new rulers, or kings, would come from different cities and the center of power would change. About 1000 years after Sargon, Hammurabi became king of Babylon and ruled all of Mesopotamia.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hammurabi%27s_Babylonia_1.svg

Men and women lived on equal terms during Paleolithic and even Neolithic times, but in the era of agrarian civilizations these roles changed. Women became more responsible for maintaining a household, while men were responsible for work outside of the household (farming, trading, becoming a soldier). Though some early leaders in Sumer may have been women, after the city-states were conquered they rarely joined in politics.

Sumerians developed the first known form of writing called *cuneiform*. The Sumerian writing system had 3,000 characters. With so many letters to learn, being a scribe, or a person who could write Sumerian script, was a full time job.

Archeologists have uncovered about 6,000 tablets with cuneiform from ancient Sumer.

Sumerians also developed the first known form of mathematics. Our math system is base-ten while Sumerians was base-twelve. This is the basis of our 60 second minute, 60 minute hour, and 24 hour day (each number is divisible by 12).

Sumer lasted until around 1200 BC/BCE when nomadic raiders attacked and destroyed many of the city-states. Before this, problems like natural disasters, disease, shortages of food, and ineffective rulers weakened the large civilization.

STOP

TURN AND TALK – What were some of the different groups of people living in Sumer at this time and how would their lives have differed?

Egypt

Neolithic villages began growing as populations increased along the Nile River in much the same way as it did along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In fact, Egyptians along the Nile were trading with the people of Sumer. Much of the early architecture along the Nile looks similar to early Sumerian architecture. Egyptians probably adapted cuneiform into their own form of writing called hieroglyphics.

Egypt was unified by the first pharaoh around 3100 BC/BCE. Since all the cities were along one river that allowed easy transportation, the pharaoh was able to easily collect tribute, or taxes, and labor to support building his monument. This made unification of the cities into one empire possible.



Pharaohs built large monuments called pyramids, where they would be buried when they died. Egypt's rulers claimed to be living gods who turned all of Egypt into one extremely large temple community. Religion in Egypt was also polytheistic, with several gods. Many of these gods were tied to the local environment, such as Hapi, the god of the Nile River. The Nile River itself represented a passageway from life to death to the afterlife.

This community was supported by a hierarchy of workers and craftsmen. Egyptians had an abundance of stone that they used to build many of their monuments. Small homes were made out of mud-bricks just like in Mesopotamia.

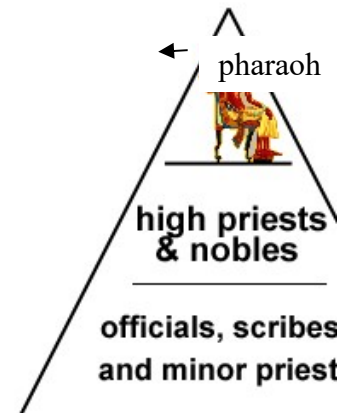
In the ancient Egyptian world, life was controlled by the pharaoh. Farmers and laborers were at the bottom of the social ladder. Above them were the craftsmen and artisans who build the pharaoh's monuments. The upper class was made up of scribes, priests, and officials who helped the pharaoh collect taxes and resources from the surrounding area.

Family life in ancient Egypt found men as the heads of the household. Most men took only one wife except for the pharaoh who may have taken multiple wives. Wealthier families had servants and slaves to take care of children while poorer families did not.

The elite families in Egypt were usually headed by priests or officials, however people learned to write by becoming scribes or became soldiers moved up in the social hierarchy in ancient Egypt.

The civilization of Ancient Egypt eventually fell into decline at around 1000 BC/BCE, but the land around the Nile remained fertile thousands of years unlike in Mesopotamia. Because of this, agrarian civilization has endured around the Nile, though power eventually shifted away toward Persia in era of Empires beginning in about 500 BC/BCE.

Hapi, God of the Nile



TURN AND TALK –

What were some of the different groups of people living in Egypt at this time and how would their lives have differed? How was this similar to or different from Sumer?

Note: The above information was compiled and adapted from Cynthia Stokes Brown's *Big History* (2007), David Christian's *Maps of Time* (2004), and J. R. and William H. McNeill's *The Human Web* (2003).

<http://karenswhimsy.com/public-domain-images/map-of-ancient-egypt/images/map-ancient-egypt-1.jpg>