

Lesson 5

Ancient Sumer

Why do historians classify ancient Sumer as a civilization?

Introduction

The rise of Sumerian city-states began around 3500 B.C.E. Taking a closer look at life in Sumer will help you act like an archaeologist. You'll consider evidence to try to answer this question about the distant past: Why do historians classify ancient Sumer as a civilization? A civilization is a society that has developed arts, sciences, and organization.

Until about 170 years ago, archaeologists had no idea that the Sumerian people had lived at all. Then, in the mid-19th century, archaeologists began finding artifacts in the area of the Fertile Crescent called Mesopotamia, uncovering tablets, pottery, and the ruins of cities. They were surprised to find writing in a language they had never seen before.

By studying artifacts, archaeologists have been able to learn a lot about Sumer. One artifact is the Standard of Ur (uhr), found where the ancient city of Ur once stood. The artifact is made of wood and decorated with pieces of shell and lapis lazuli, a semiprecious blue stone from what is now Afghanistan. It shows the Sumerians in times of peace and war. Ancient objects like this one can reveal a great deal about daily life in ancient Sumer.

Historians now know that the Sumerians had a complex society. Some of the things they developed, like the plow and writing, are still in use today. But which characteristics of Sumer society cause historians to classify it as a civilization? Let's take a closer look at ancient Sumer.

◀ The Standard of Ur depicts scenes of war and peace in ancient Sumer.

Social Studies Vocabulary

artisan

civilization

culture

cuneiform

merchant

pictograph

scribe

social structure

technology

ziggurat

civilization a society marked by developed arts, sciences, government, and social structure

social structure the way a civilization is organized

technology the use of tools and other inventions for practical purposes

1. Characteristics of Civilization

Sumer was a challenging place to live since it had hot summers, little rain, and rivers that flooded the plains in the spring. Building complex irrigation systems and large cities allowed the Sumerians to overcome these **challenges**. By 3000 B.C.E., most Sumerians lived in powerful city-states like Ur, Lagash (LAY-gash), and Uruk (UH-ruhk). But what did the Sumerians do to **create a civilization**?

To answer this question, we need to examine what *civilization* means. What characteristics make a society into a civilization? Historians name several such characteristics, including these:

- a *stable food supply*, to ensure that the people of a society have the food they need to survive
- a **social structure** with different social levels and jobs
- a *system of government*, to ensure that life in the society is orderly
- a *religious system*, which involves both a set of beliefs and forms of worship
- a *highly developed way of life* that includes the arts, such as painting, architecture, music, and literature
- *advances in technology*
- a *highly developed written language*

Did Sumer have these characteristics? Let's find out what the evidence can show.

Which characteristics of a civilization does this artifact represent? How do we use objects like this one in modern society?





2. Stable Food Supply

Civilizations need a stable food supply since a complex society can only thrive if its members have the food they need to survive. The Sumerians invented two key ideas to help them create a stable food supply.

One of these inventions was their complex irrigation systems. The Sumerians built **networks** of canals, dams, and reservoirs to provide their crops with a regular water supply.

Their second invention was the plow, which is a tool used for tilling, or turning, soil to prepare it for planting. Prior to the plow's invention, farmers used animal horns or pointed sticks to poke holes in the earth, where they would plant seeds. This was a very time-consuming process, and farmers needed a faster way to prepare the land for planting.

The Sumerians made the first plow out of wood. One end of the plow was bent for cutting into the ground to turn the soil. Farmers themselves either pushed and pulled the plow along the ground or used animals such as oxen to pull it.

The Sumerians invented the plow. Today, some people still use plows to farm the land.



This man and child are standing in the ruins of the ancient city of Uruk, located in present-day Iraq. Uruk was one of many powerful Sumerian city-states.

merchant a person who makes money by selling goods

artisan a craftsperson

3. Social Structure

Civilizations have a complex organization, or social structure, including different jobs and social levels. People at higher levels have greater status than others.

Archaeologists have found evidence suggesting that several classes of people lived in Sumer. At the highest level were priests, kings, nobles, and government officials. These top members of society had the largest and most luxurious homes near the center of the city. Evidence suggests that these mud houses had whitewashed walls and were typically two stories high.

At the middle level were **merchants** and **artisans**. Among the artisans were skilled metalworkers, who used such metals as gold, silver, tin, lead, copper, and bronze. Since Mesopotamian land had few minerals, Sumerians imported these materials from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and the Elamites on the Iranian plateau. Out of these materials, they could create swords and arrowheads for the army. They engineered tools, like plows and hoes, for farmers, as well as **luxury** items, such as mirrors and jewelry, for the upper class.

The middle class also included farmers and fishers living in small, mud-brick houses at the edge of the city. Farmers often worked to build or repair the irrigation systems.

At the bottom level of the social structure were slaves. Most slaves were enemies that the Sumerians had captured during war.

4. Government

All civilizations have a system of government to direct people's behavior and make life orderly. Kings ruled the Sumerian city-states. The Sumerians believed that their gods supported these kings. This belief made kings very powerful. It also helped to reinforce the social order because obeying the will of the gods was one of the Sumerians' strongest beliefs.

Sumerian kings enforced the laws and collected taxes. They built temples and made sure irrigation systems were maintained.

A king also led his city-state's army. All the city-states needed armies for various reasons. Some were defending land boundaries and others were fighting over the use of water. Leading the army was one of the king's most important jobs.

A Sumerian army included both **professional** soldiers and temporary citizen-soldiers. Some were foot soldiers, while others drove chariots, which were wheeled vehicles pulled by oxen.

Kings appointed officials to help with certain duties. Governors ruled the outlying towns, and **scribes** helped record laws as well as contracts. The Sumerians were the first people to develop a system of written laws.

scribe a person who writes



Nebuchadnezzar II was a Babylonian king who ruled over Sumerian lands. Kings were responsible for ruling and maintaining order in the entire city-state.

5. Religion

All civilizations have some kind of religious system. A religious system includes both a set of beliefs, usually in a god or gods, as well as various forms of worship.

In Sumer, religious beliefs influenced many parts of daily life. The Sumerians tried to please their gods in every aspect, from growing crops to settling disputes. Religion created a common way for people to connect with one another.

Constructing temples and religious towers called **ziggurats** (ZIHG-guh-rats) was one way the ancient Sumerians expressed their religious beliefs. It was the king's duty to build and maintain these ziggurats. The towers were platforms made of mud bricks, with shrines on the highest tier. Ziggurats were so large that they could be seen from miles away. Some were as high as 7 stories and as wide as 200 feet.

The Sumerians may have believed that their gods lived in the ziggurats, most likely in the special shrines at the top. Attached to the outside walls of each ziggurat was at least one long staircase that some think was created so that the gods could climb down to Earth. Kings and priests likely stood inside the towers to ask for the gods' blessings.

Sumerian statues also expressed religious beliefs. Many of these statues were detailed and lifelike. They showed people worshipping the gods, often with wide-eyed gazes. The Sumerians may have believed that the gods were pleased when people showed these signs of devotion, or love and obedience.

ziggurat an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower with outside staircases and a shrine at the top

This is a reconstruction of the ziggurat that once rose over the ancient city of Ur. Sumerians may have thought their gods resided in ziggurats.



The Sumerians had many kinds of religious ceremonies. Often, musicians played at these events. Some ceremonies may have involved human sacrifice, the ritual killing of a person as an offering to the gods.

culture a characteristic of civilization that includes the beliefs and behaviors of a society or group of people

6. The Arts

All civilizations have a highly developed **culture**, including the arts. Arts include creative forms of expression such as painting, architecture, and music.

There were many kinds of artists and artisans in ancient Sumer. Metalworkers made objects, like weapons and cups, as well as decorative items, such as mirrors and jewelry. Architects designed temples and ziggurats. Sculptors carved statues that adorned temples or were used in rituals.

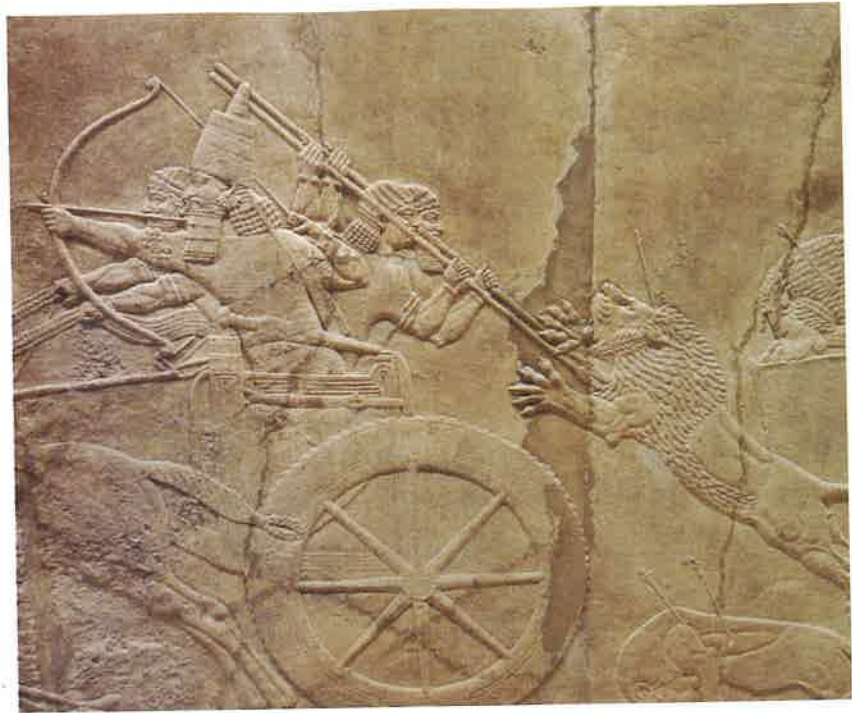
Music was another influential art in Sumer. The Sumerians may have believed that music brought joy to gods and people alike. Musicians sang and played instruments during temple ceremonies. They wrote love songs and entertained guests at feasts.

Sumerian musicians played a variety of instruments, including drums and pipes. One favorite was a small harp called a *lyre*, a wooden instrument made of a sound box and strings. A wooden bar held the strings in place at the top. Lyre makers often decorated their instruments with precious stones and with carvings made of horn. These decorations demonstrate how much the Sumerians valued music.

This fancy lyre has the head of a bull decorating its sound box. A musician would strum the strings, seen on the left side of the image, to play musical notes.



The Sumerian invention of the wheel helped better the lives of later groups as well. The Assyrian men seen here riding a wooden chariot were able to improve their military strategies because of the wheel.



7. Technology

All civilizations create new forms of technology. The Sumerians made several technological advances, the most important being the wheel.

The earliest examples of the wheel date back to 3500 B.C.E. when Sumerian potters, or pottery makers, used them as a surface for shaping clay into pots. A potter's wheel would spin, flat side up, on an axle. The Sumerians discovered that a wheel could be rolled forward when flipped onto its edge. They used this discovery to create wheeled carts for farmers and chariots for the army. They constructed the wheels by clamping pieces of wood together.

It would be hard to discover a more powerful invention than the wheel. Before its invention, people had to drag their goods on flat-bottomed carts called *sledges*. Wheeled carts made it easier to move goods over long distances because they did not get stuck in mud and could support heavy loads, unlike the earlier sledges. Oxen could pull much more weight on wheeled carts than on sledges.

Another technological advancement was the arch, which is an inverted (upside-down) U- or V-shaped structure built above a doorway. To build arches, the Sumerians stacked bricks, made of clay and straw, to rise from the walls in steps until they met in the center.

In ancient Sumer, large chunks of wood were tightly clamped together in order to form wheels. This invention was key in improving Sumerian life.



Arches added strength and beauty to Sumerian buildings. They became a common feature of temple entrances. Some historians say that the arch is the Sumerians' greatest architectural achievement.

8. Writing

A final characteristic of civilizations is a highly developed written language. The Sumerians created a written language called **cuneiform**. This name comes from the Latin word for "wedge." The Sumerians used a wedge-shaped stylus (a sharp, pointed tool) to etch their writing in clay tablets.

Sumerians developed cuneiform around 3300 B.C.E. The earliest examples of cuneiform show that it was used to record information about the goods people exchanged with one another. At first, cuneiform writing may have contained as many as 2,000 symbols to stand for sounds and for words and phrases. Over time, this number was reduced to about 700.

Cuneiform was based on an earlier, simpler form of writing that used **pictographs**. Pictographs are symbols that stand for real objects, such as a snake or water. Scribes used a sharpened reed to draw the symbols on wet clay. When the clay dried, the marks became a permanent record.



Shown here is cuneiform writing etched in a clay tablet. Cuneiform was often used to record traded goods.

cuneiform writing that uses wedge-shaped characters

pictograph a symbol that stands for an object

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you have learned about the characteristics of Sumer society that made it a civilization.

Stable Food Supply Ancient Sumerians invented an irrigation system and the plow to help them create a stable food supply.

Social Structure, Government, and Religion Ancient Sumer had a complex social structure with different jobs and social levels. Kings led the government. Religious beliefs influenced every part of daily life.

Arts, Technology, and Writing Ancient Sumerians had a highly developed culture that included the creative arts of painting, architecture, and music. The Sumerians' most important technological invention was the wheel. They also created a written language called cuneiform that was based on pictographs.