

# Mr. Dowling's Study Sheet on Mesopotamia

## The Fertile Crescent

Civilization developed slowly in different parts of the world. People began to settle in areas with abundant natural resources. A section of the Middle East is called the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent is a rich food-growing area in a part of the world where most of the land is too dry for farming. The Fertile Crescent is a boomerang shaped region that extends from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Some of the best farmland of the Fertile Crescent is on a narrow strip of land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Greeks later called this area Mesopotamia, which means "between the rivers." Many different civilizations developed in this small region. First came the Sumerians, who were replaced in turn by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Today this land is known as Iraq.

## The Sumerians

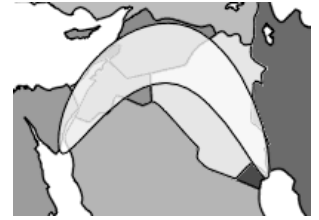
The Sumerians moved to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers about 3500BC, but we do not know where they came from. They were probably nomads who discovered the fertile land between the rivers. Nomads travel in small groups until they have eaten the food that grows wild and hunted the animals in the area. When food is no longer plentiful, they move to a new area. Some people continue to live like this in remote parts of the world to this day.

Eventually the Sumerians developed a civilization. They learned that by planting seeds and plowing their land, they were able to grow crops. They learned to domesticate, or tame animals to help them plow their lands. The Sumerians learned to use irrigation. Irrigation is a system of watering crops to grow more food. The Sumerians also made a very important invention--the wheel. The invention of the wheel made it possible to pull heavy loads.

Sumeria was composed of several city-states, or nations the size of cities. Walls around each city-state protected the citizens from outside invaders. Farmland was usually outside

the city walls, and people would seek protection from the walls of the city when under attack.

The Sumerians were polytheistic, which means they believed in many gods. They worshiped their gods at huge temples they called ziggurats. Each ziggurat was dedicated to a specific god, whom the Sumerians believed ruled over their city. When one city was conquered, the invaders would force the conquered people to accept their gods. Most people in the Western Hemisphere today practice monotheism, which means they believe in only one God. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are all monotheistic faiths.



## Civilization

There are many ways to define a civilization, but most scholars agree that when a society begins to form cities, it becomes a civilization. Most civilizations have the following elements:

- **A surplus of food.** When people have enough food, they begin to develop other needs.
- **Division of Labor.** When people have one job, they tend to do that job very well. They are also more likely to choose a job in a field they enjoy.
- **Organized government and religion.** When people have the same laws, it is easier to trade. People living under the same government, or having the same religious beliefs are likely to have the same values.
- **Writing.** This allowed societies to keep records and communicate.

## Waterfront living

Most people live near water. If you look at any large city, you'll probably find water nearby. People need the water for drink, cooking, cleaning and transportation.

Mesopotamia, the "land between the rivers" is an obvious place for a civilization. Ancient Egypt developed along the Nile River. In America, New York City has a harbor, Chicago grew alongside Lake Michigan and Los Angeles is on the Pacific Ocean.

## Numbering Years

In ancient calendars, years were generally numbered according to the year of a ruler's reign, for example, the third year of Hammurabi's rule. About AD525, a monk named Dionysius suggested that years be counted from the birth of Christ. Today we live in 2006, which is sometimes written AD2006. AD refers to the term *anno Domini*, or "the year of the Lord."

The years before the birth of Christ are numbered backward from his birth. The year before AD1 was 1



Ziggurat

BC, or one year “before Christ.” When referring to dates before the birth of Christ, the higher the number the earlier the year.

Non-Christians often use the term CE in place of AD. CE refers to “Common Era” or “Christian Era.” They mark the era preceding the Common Era as BCE, which can either mean “Before the Common Era,” or “Before the Christian Era.” Since years are marked from a set point known as 1 (there is no year 0), 3500BC was about 5500 years ago.

There are ten years in a decade, one hundred years in a century, and 1000 years in a millenium. This is considered the twenty-first century of the Common Era. On December 31, 1999, many people celebrated the coming of the new millenium, but the millenium did not end until December 31, 2000. This is because the calendar we use does not have a year called 0.

## Writing

Ancient Sumerian record keepers marked pictographic symbols in soft pieces of clay with a pointed reed. The clay tablets were then baked to make

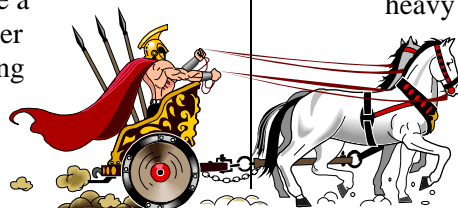
them hard. We call the Sumerian writing system cuneiform. Cuneiform means wedged shaped, because the marks in the clay were wedges.

The first pictographs were simple. A writer would draw an object like a fish or a broom to communicate to others.



This system worked well in a simple society, but it would be difficult to describe abstract concepts such as justice or liberty in pictographs. Many Chinese people continue to use a pictographic system today, but the government has endorsed the Pinyin system of phonetic writing.

Eventually, most cultures developed phonetic writing systems where a symbol represents a sound rather than an object. English speaking people, agree that the symbols **D-O-G** refer to an animal. English, French,



Spanish, German and Russian are examples of phonetic languages. Phonetic languages make small typewriters and computer keyboards possible. Imagine a different key for every single word!

## Writing allowed civilization to develop

- Writing allowed people to keep records of their transactions.
- Writing made it possible for people to send messages with couriers to far away lands without traveling.
- Writing allowed people to pass on their accumulated knowledge to future generations.



## Hammurabi

Hammurabi was the king of the city-state of Babylon. About 1800BC, Hammurabi conquered the nearby city-states and created the kingdom of Babylonia. He recorded a system of laws called the Code of Hammurabi. The 282 laws were engraved in stone and placed in a public location for everyone to see. Hammurabi required that people be responsible for their actions.

Some of Hammurabi’s laws were

based on the principle “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This means that whoever commits an injury should be punished in the same manner as that injury. If someone put out another person’s eye, their eye would be put out in return. Hammurabi’s Code may seem cruel today, but it was an early attempt at law.

## The Assyrians

The Assyrians lived upstream on the Tigris River from the Babylonians. The people of the region did not know how to read, but about 1350BC, they managed to conquer all of Mesopotamia and build an empire that reached as far as Egypt. The Assyrians developed powerful armies with iron weapons. They dammed the rivers leading into Babylon. This deprived the Babylonians of water. The Assyrians also used chariots, which allowed them to move quickly, and battering rams,

heavy logs carried by many men to break down city walls. In time, the Medes and the Persians conquered the Assyrians, The Medes and the Persians were two powerful civilizations east of Mesopotamia in land we now call Iran.