

THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION

What is civilization? It is not easy to define, but archaeologists look for certain characteristics that, if present, suggest a civilized society. First, they look for evidence of a hierarchy. In a hierarchy different social classes possess different privileges. Those in the wealthier and smaller social classes have more power than the more numerous but poorer classes "below" them. In fact, the upper classes usually rule over the lower classes.

Other characteristics of civilization include formal political and religious institutions, monumental architecture, and finally, writing. The first civilization that we know of emerged between 3500 and 3000 b.c. in Mesopotamia. This is the name for the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley of modern-day Iraq. The people who founded the first civilization are known as Sumerians. The climate of ancient Sumer, like that of modern Iraq, was harsh. Summers were hot and dry, but spring brought too much water with yearly, unpredictable flooding. Historians like Arnold Toynbee believe that it was the challenge of living in this harsh environment that led the Sumerians to create civilization.

The Sumerians had to learn to build reservoirs to save the flood waters, as well as irrigation systems to channel the water out to the fields during the dry summers. To accomplish this daunting task, they needed centralized direction and cooperation. They also needed specialists who could plan and supervise the engineering projects. Other experts were needed to study the stars and predict the yearly floods. Hence, Sumerian society began to develop a hierarchical structure. Not only did the Sumerians learn to manage the precious water, but they also developed important technological breakthroughs like the wheel and the plow. New kinds of food were introduced, like dates, figs, and olives. These improvements in agriculture meant that farmers produced more than they could eat.

As they were making strides in agriculture, the Sumerians were also finding new ways to work with metal. At the end of the stone age, humans were already making tools and weapons out of copper. In Mesopotamia, however, they began to discover that if copper was melted and mixed with tin, they could produce a new metal that was still easily shaped but was stronger than copper. The new metal was bronze. It made a much sharper and more dangerous weapon as well as a more useful tool. As a result, those in Sumerian towns built walls to protect themselves from these new weapons, but also constructed monumental buildings with the more efficient bronze tools. Historians consider the discovery of bronze



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so important that they call the following 3,000 years the Bronze Age.

Sumeria was becoming wealthier but also more complex. There were serious problems in managing this changing society. To solve these problems, historians suggest the Sumerians invented writing. At first they kept records by means of tiny clay tokens that represented the objects being counted or traded. However, by 3500 B.C. the system had become unwieldy. It was easier for people to use signs on clay tablets to indicate numbers instead of amassing piles of tokens. Signs were scratched on wet clay tablets that were dried in the sun and then baked in an oven to harden. Thus, writing was born. In time, new words were added through pictographs. Pictographs are simplified pictures that stand for a particular object. Eventually, these evolved into ideograms, which are symbols that are no longer recognizable as specific objects but denote ideas. For example, a picture of an ox would have originally represented just an ox. Later, however, it might be transformed to represent the idea of work. When the Sumerians combined two or more such ideograms, it was possible to communicate more complicated ideas without creating new pictures.

As the centuries passed, these symbols evolved into signs that often looked little like the original pictograph, but the signs became standardized into Sumerian. However, they didn't develop an alphabet where symbols stood for sounds. That came much later. Sumerian pictographs were later learned by neighboring people who adapted it for their own languages. Thus, writing began to spread in the Middle East.

Sumerian was written with a reed stylus, or point, shaped like a triangle. This made wedge-shaped marks. Scholars usually call Sumerian pictographs *cuneiform* because the Latin word for wedge is *cuneus*. Writing Sumerian cuneiform was clumsy and time consuming, and only rigorously-trained scribes had the skill to do it. Nevertheless, writing had a profound effect on Sumerian life. Now economic and commercial records could be kept, along with details of offerings to the gods, important events, and even poetry. After 3000 B.C. historians can learn about the Sumerians in their own words. Armed with their writings and archaeological evidence, we can construct a good estimate of what life was like for the Sumerians.

Discussion

1. Why is writing so important to civilization?
2. What impact did bronze tools have on Sumerian life?
3. Why did civilization appear in Mesopotamia?
4. How is an ideogram different from a pictograph?

Map Activity

Using map B, locate and label the modern states of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran. Locate and label the modern cities of Baghdad and Al Basrah. Locate and label the Persian Gulf. Locate and label the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Finally, using a pen or pencil of a different color, label the area on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf, which was the ancient land of Sumer.