

Advances by Sumerians

1. **Cuneiform Writing**- By 3200 B.C., the Sumerians had invented the earliest known form of writing called **cuneiform**, a system of writing about as old as Egyptian hieroglyphics. The Sumerians employed a sharp-pointed instrument- called a **stylus** - to inscribe wedge-shaped characters on soft clay tablets, which were then hardened by baking. Reading and writing in cuneiform were difficult because the Sumerian alphabet consisted of about 550 characters. Sumerian scribes had to go through years of strict schooling to acquire their skills. Nevertheless, cuneiform was widely used in the Middle East for thousands of years
2. **System of Numbers**- the Sumerians developed a number system based on the unit 60. They divided the hour into 60 minutes and the circle into 360 degrees, as we still do today. They also developed basic algebra and geometry.
3. **Astronomy**- Priests studied the skies, recording the movement of heavenly bodies. This knowledge enabled them to make accurate calendars, which are so essential to a farming society.
4. **Literature**- A long, narrative Sumerian poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is one of the oldest works of literature in the world. This epic is a collection of stories about a hero named Gilgamesh. In one of these stories Gilgamesh travels the world in search of eternal life. On his journey, he meets the sole survivor of a great flood that destroyed the world. (Archaeologists have found evidence suggesting that a catastrophic flood devastated Mesopotamia somewhere about 4,900 years ago.) By the end of the story, Gilgamesh has learned the greatest truth of all- that even heroes must die.
5. **Art and Sculpture**- Art was also extremely important in the city-states of Sumer. From Sumeria have come examples of fine works in marble, diorite, hammered gold, and lapis lazuli. Art was primarily used for religious purposes. Painting and sculpture was the main median used.

These advances by the Sumerians started the world on its path to larger and more powerful civilizations. The writing, literature and art that were created are the starting point for all great civilizations to follow.

1. What is the cuneiform?
2. Describe the importance of the Sumerian advancements.
3. How are these things responsible for creating a better civilization?

Sumerian Government

Sumer included many independent city-states. Rival cities often battled for control of land and water. For protection, people turned to courageous and resourceful war leaders. Over time, these war leaders evolved into hereditary rulers.

In each city-state, the ruler was responsible for maintaining the city walls and the irrigation systems. He led armies in war, was responsible for administering trade, judging disputes, enforcing the laws and engaging in the most important religious ceremonies. The Sumerians seem to have developed one of the world's first systems of monarchy; the early states they formed needed a new form of government in order to govern larger areas and diverse peoples. The priest-king ruled through a series of bureaucrats, many of them priests that carefully surveyed land, assigned fields, and distributed crops after harvest. As government grew more complex, he employed scribes to carry out functions such as collecting taxes and keeping records. The ruler also had religious duties. He was seen as the chief servant of the gods and led ceremonies designed to please them.

Each Sumerian city-state had a distinct social hierarchy, or system of ranks. The highest class usually included the ruling family, leading officials and high priests. A small middle class was made up of lesser priests and scribes. The middle class also included merchants and artisans who were important for the economy. At the bottom of the society were the majority of people, peasant farmers. Some had their own land but most worked on land belonging to the king or the temple. And at the very bottom were slaves, people who were captured in battle or sold themselves into slavery to pay a debt.

1. How was the monarch chosen?
2. What was the purpose of the Sumerian rulers?
3. What was it their job to do?
4. Create a chart listing the hierarchy of Sumerian government.

Sumerian Religion

Like most ancient peoples, the Sumerians were *polytheistic*, worshipping many gods. The gods were creator gods; as a group, they had created the world and the people in it. The gods who were anthropomorphic, (were thought to have human features and personalities), they represented various natural phenomena. These gods were thought to control every aspect of life, especially the forces of nature. Sumerians believed that gods & goddesses behaved like ordinary people. They ate, drank, married, and raised families. Although the gods favored truth and justice, they were also responsible for violence and suffering.

They also believed spirits were their gods, and with many spirits around, the Sumerians believed in many gods - gods that had humanlike emotions. The Sumerians believed that the sun, moon and stars were gods. They believed in a goddess of the reeds that grew around them and in a goddess of the beer that they distilled.

To Sumerians, their highest duty was to keep these divine beings happy and thereby ensure the safety of their city-state. Each city-state had its own special god or goddess to whom people prayed and offered sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine. Temples, known as ziggurats, were often erected in the cities to honor and house each city's god. People celebrated many holy days with ceremonies and processions. The most important ceremony occurred at the New Year when the king sought and won the favor of Inanna, the life-giving goddess of love. The king participated in a symbolic marriage with the goddess. This ritual, Sumerians believed, would make the new year fruitful and prosperous.

Like the Egyptians, the Sumerians believed in an afterlife. At death, they believed, a person descended into a grim underworld from which there was no release. The gloomy Sumerian view of an afterlife contrasts with the Egyptian vision of the Happy Field of Food. Possible differences in geography help account for this contrast. The floods of the Tigris and Euphrates were less regular and more destructive than the Nile floods. As a result, Sumerians may have developed a more pessimistic view of the world.

1. What is polytheism?
2. How did the Sumerians worship their gods?
3. What is a ziggurat?
4. How important was religion to the Sumerians?

Life in Ancient Sumeria

So how can ancient civilizations give us any insight or knowledge about our world today? That was the question I asked when I began my investigation and study of this topic. What I have found has drastically changed my viewpoint of the world we live in today. There are many ancient civilizations one can read about, but the one that tells the most amazing story is the Sumerian civilization. Until recently, not much was known about the Sumerians. There was no one that could translate the thousands of tablets that archaeologists had uncovered and stored all over the world. Then finally, in the late 1800s, some of the tablets were translated and the story of ancient Sumeria began to unfold.

The Sumerians occupied the lower half of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, roughly the area known as present day Iraq. The area had a hot, dry, wind-swept climate. There were no trees, and therefore no timber. It would seem that the only natural resources were the silt-laden waters of the rivers and the huge reeds that grew in abundance along the river banks. For the resourceful Sumerians this would prove to be sufficient.

The flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, was violent and irregular, hence the mental life of the Mesopotamian civilizations became dominated by a sense of anxiety. The world was unpredictable and capricious, bringing life-giving rain and fertility one day and devastating destruction the next. Since the forces of nature were expressions of the whims of the gods, the gods were also unpredictable. The Hebrews believed man was the representative of God on earth, for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia man was nothing more than a slave to the gods, designed to relieve them of their toils and subject to their whims.

The Sumerian civilization existed about 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. It is considered to be the mother civilization of us all, the first human civilization. There were no other human civilizations leading up to it. It sprang up seemingly out of nowhere and had many first time events for mankind. They were the first to use city-states. Ur was the first city-state founded by the Sumerians. In each city-state, the ruler was responsible for maintaining the city walls and the irrigation systems. He led armies in war, was responsible for administering trade, enforcing the laws and engaging in the most important religious ceremonies. The Sumerians seem to have developed one of the world's first systems of monarchy; the early states needed a government in order to govern larger areas. Priests acted as rulers. He was seen as the chief servant of the gods and led ceremonies designed to please them.

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Their religion was also complex. Like most ancient peoples, the Sumerians were polytheistic, worshipping many gods. These gods were thought to control every aspect of life, especially the forces of nature. Sumerians believed that gods & goddesses behaved like ordinary people. They ate, drank, married, and raised families. Although the gods favored truth and justice, they were also responsible for violence and suffering. They also believed spirits were their gods, and with many spirits around, the Sumerians believed in many gods - gods that had humanlike emotions. The Sumerians believed that the sun, moon and stars were gods.

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They had written music and poetry, literature in the form of epics, their own creation story, known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, astronomy, astrology, advanced engineering and architecture, contracts, a bicameral congress, agriculture and the wheel. Much of what we have today can be traced back to the Sumerians.

In the excavations of these ancient sites, archaeologists found temples, art work, tombs and thousands of clay tablets with a strange wedge shaped writing called cuneiform. This is believed to be the world's first written language. The Sumerians recorded everything. They were great record keepers of their daily activities such as grain harvests, marriages, treaties and contracts. This information has been widely received and accepted as true.

1. Fill in the graphic organizer below that analyzes the Sumerian civilization.

Cities	
Government	
Social Structure	
Religion	
Art/Architecture	
Writing	