

# The Sumerians

The first inhabitants of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley were the Sumerians. Their civilization developed about six thousand years ago, possibly even before that of the Egyptians. They built their principal city, Sumer, at the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent near the Persian Gulf. Sumer was a city-state. It consisted of the city itself and all its surrounding area. Other Sumerian cities were also city-states, each ruled by a priest-king.

Like the Egyptians, the Sumerians were polytheistic, worshiping many gods. To honor their gods, the Sumerians built large temples called ziggurats. Because Mesopotamia contained no stone, temples and other buildings were constructed of sun-dried brick.

The Sumerians made achievements in many areas. They gave the world the wheel, and they may have been the first to use the arch in construction. They divided the circle into 360 degrees and the minute into 60 seconds. They devised an early calendar, although it was not as accurate as that of the Egyptians. To correct inaccuracies in their lunar year, the Sumerians occasionally added a thirteenth month.

The Sumerians also developed a system of writing called cuneiform. Cuneiform consisted of some six hundred signs, each standing for a particular sound. Scribes wrote these signs on wet clay with a pointed stick called a stylus.

Because the Sumerians remained separated into city-states and never united into a single nation, they easily fell prey to nomadic groups that pushed in from the Arabian desert. Their civilization was overrun by the Babylonians about the year 2300 B.C.

*Write the letter that matches the term on the right with the phrase on the left.*

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|---|--------------------|
| 1. _____ Sumerian writing                       | A. Babylonians     |
| 2. _____ first people to live in Mesopotamia    | B. city-state      |
| 3. _____ Sumerian temple                        | C. cuneiform       |
| 4. _____ pointed stick used for writing         | D. lunar           |
| 5. _____ conquerors of the Sumerians            | E. polytheistic    |
| 6. _____ worshiping many gods                   | F. Sumerians       |
| 7. _____ type of calendar used by the Sumerians | G. stylus          |
| 8. _____ an independent city                    | H. ziggurat        |
| 9. _____ Sumerian construction material         | I. sun-dried brick |
10. The moon takes  $29\frac{1}{2}$  days to pass through its phases. Explain why a lunar calendar would be inaccurate.

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11. What brought about the downfall of the Sumerians?

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