

# Lesson 3 Life in Sumer

## MAIN IDEAS

**Culture** Sumerian society was divided into several classes, with kings at the top and slaves at the bottom.

**Science and Technology** Sumerians invented tools and developed special knowledge to improve their lives.

**Culture** Sumerians created a written language called cuneiform that was based on picture writing.

---

## Sumerian Society

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What were the social classes that made up Sumerian society?

### Social Classes

- Sumerian society grew complex, split into social groups, or classes
  - class systems unequal; define who has power, less desirable jobs
- King, priests were at top of Sumer's upper classes, had influence
  - upper class included landowners, government officials, merchants
- Most people were of in-between class, including farmers, artisans
- Slaves made up lowest class

### Slaves

- Some societies used slaves as cheap labor
  - in Sumer, slaves were war prisoners, orphans, poor children, debtors
  - slaves had right to do business, borrow money, buy freedom

### Role of Women

- Women had more rights in early Sumer than in later Mesopotamia
  - some upper-class women were priestesses
  - some women landowners, merchants, artisans; most raised children

### REVIEW QUESTION

Why were kings and priests in the highest class?

---

# Sumerian Science and Technology

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What tools did the Sumerians invent?

## Early Inventions

- May have invented plow around 6000 B.C., wheel around 3500 B.C.
- First plows were digging sticks pulled or pushed by people, animals
  - broke up soil for easier planting, water to get to plants' roots
- Wheels used to move goods, get crops to market more easily, quickly
  - transporting goods on river was still more efficient
- Potter's wheel let people make pottery faster than by hand
  - pots were important, used to store surplus food
- Sumerians were among first to use **bronze**—mixture of copper, tin
  - bronze stronger than copper, lasted longer, stayed sharper
  - bronze tools could be traded

## Mathematics

- Sumerians developed arithmetic to record crops, trade goods
- The number system was based on the number 60
  - time is one example—60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour
- Measuring time helped create calendars
- Used triangle, measuring rope to set land boundaries
  - used geometric shapes to make bricks, ramps, dig canals

## REVIEW QUESTION

How did new tools make life better for the Sumerians?

---

# Creation of Written Language

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How did the Sumerians invent writing?

## Picture Writing

- Invented writing by 3000 B.C. for business records, to label goods
- First used clay tokens with image of products, such as cows
  - sealed tokens in containers marked with symbol of product
  - these symbols were **pictographs**—“picture writing”
- Later Sumerians stopped using tokens, drew pictographs on tablets

## Cuneiform

- First pictographs showed actual objects, but later stood for ideas
  - eventually they stood for sounds; combined sounds to write words
- Used sharp reed—**stylus**—to make wedge-shaped markings in clay
  - pictures replaced by **cuneiform**—wedge-shaped symbolic writing
- Complex language had 600 symbols, so few people could read and write
  - **scribes**—highly respected writing specialists, record keepers

## Written History

- At first records were used mainly for business
  - later used writing to record history of wars, floods, kings
- Other Mesopotamian cultures adopted cuneiform system
  - cuneiform tablets found throughout Southwest Asia
  - one king’s library had over 24,000 clay tablet histories, records

## REVIEW QUESTION

Why were scribes highly respected in Sumer?

## **Lesson Summary**

- Sumerian society had several classes. Kings and priests were at the top of society. Slaves were at the bottom.
- Inventions, such as the wheel and the plow, and mathematical knowledge improved Sumerian life.
- The Sumerians created a system of writing to record business transactions and histories.

## **Why It Matters Now...**

The Sumerians developed the first system of writing. Writing makes it easier for people to pass on knowledge from generation to generation.