

# Summary: Ancient Mesopotamia

## The Fertile Crescent

Mesopotamia means “land between the rivers.” It is the ancient name for the region that today includes Iraq, northeast Syria, and part of southeast Turkey. The area is also called the Fertile Crescent.

The Sumerians were the first people to live in the area. They faced three main problems. They feared attacks from invaders, they had little water, and they needed to import and export goods. Around 3000 B.C., the Sumerians began building city-states to solve these problems. City-states included a city and the areas it controlled. City-states had high walls for protection. They had canals to bring water. They were safe havens that traders would gladly visit.

City-states were also centers of worship. The Sumerians had many gods. Each city-state built a temple to one favorite god. The temples were built on ziggurats, which were towers shaped like pyramids. From the terraces wrapped around the ziggurat, people could watch ceremonies.

At first, priests ruled the city-states. Later, kings were added. The priests controlled religion and the economy. The kings governed politics and the armies. Some kings conquered other city-states to build an empire. One famous emperor was Hammurabi. Hammurabi ruled from 1792 to 1750 B.C. He is remembered for creating a set of laws called the Code of Hammurabi.

Mesopotamian society had a class system. Kings, priests, and rich property owners were in the top class. They had the most rights. The middle class was made up of skilled workers, merchants, and farmers. Enslaved people were at the bottom. Some slaves could leave slavery by paying off their debts.

## A Culture Based on Writing

The Sumerians developed one of the first writing systems. It was called cuneiform. Most people could not read or write. Some people were trained to be writers, called scribes.

Scribes kept records for businesses, the temple, and the government. They recorded their history, religion, knowledge of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy.

### Before You Read

Underline each vocabulary word. With a partner, read aloud the sentence the word appears in and explain what the vocabulary word means.

**ziggurats** *noun*, pyramids with porches

**class system** *noun*, a society in which people are divided into groups

**cuneiform** *noun*, the Sumerian writing system

**scribes** *noun*, trained writers

### After You Read

**REVIEW** What were three effects of the founding of city-states? Circle the three sentences that help answer the question.

**REVIEW** In what areas of Sumerian society did scribes work? Highlight the words that tell what scribes wrote about.