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The First Farmers

The very first people hunted wild animals, caught fish and gathered nuts, plants and berries to eat. It was thousands of years before people learned how to farm.

Farming began in the Middle East, in an area we call the Fertile Crescent. Around 10,000 BC, the weather there became wetter and warmer, so plants could grow more easily.

People noticed that seeds which had fallen on the ground grew into plants. They began to collect the seeds and plant them on purpose. The first crops grown like this were wild wheat and barley.

Around the same time, people learned how to tame animals. This meant that they always had plenty of meat, milk and wool. They could also use cattle for working in the fields.

Once people knew how to farm, they no longer needed to move around to hunt for food. They began to settle down in villages and learned how to make bricks from mud and clay to build homes.

In this picture of an early village, one house has been cut away to let you see inside.

The roofs are made of poles covered with straw.
This man is tossing grain to separate it from the husk (the hard outside part).

These pots were made by early farmers.

Map of the Fertile Crescent

A wall protects the village from wild animals.

Clay for building a new house

Pots are baked hard in an oven, called a kiln.

Making bricks from clay

Loom for weaving cloth

Making baskets

Making pots

Drying put

Pot for cooking

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The First Towns

Slowly, small farming villages grew into towns. The oldest town that has been found so far is at Jericho.

Jericho
The people of Jericho lived in small, round houses made of mud bricks.

Dead people were buried underneath the houses. Their skulls may have been put on display, as a way of showing respect.

Jericho grew rich by trading with other communities, and people in the nearby villages became jealous. To protect themselves, the people of Jericho built a massive stone wall around the town.

Çatal Huyük
Çatal Huyük (pronounced "chatal hoo-yook") was the largest of the early towns. Around 6,000 people lived there.

When someone in Çatal Huyük died, the body was left outside to rot. The skeleton was buried under a bench in the house or in a shrine room, where the people prayed to their gods.

The Çatal Huyük people make clay sculptures of very large women. Some experts think that these are models of a great Mother Goddess.

Important dates
- c.10,000 BC: Farming begins in the Fertile Crescent.
- c.8000 BC: Jericho grows into a wealthy town.
- c.6250-5650 BC: Çatal Huyük is at its largest.
The First Civilization

From around 5000BCE, farmers settled in the wide valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This area became known as Mesopotamia, which means “the land between two rivers”. Some of the world’s first cities grew up in Sumer, in the southern part of Mesopotamia.

Farmers were soon able to grow more crops than they could eat. There was no need for everyone to farm, so some people had time to learn specialist skills, such as pottery and weaving.

At first, the Sumerians lived in houses made of reeds. Later, they learned how to make bricks from mud and straw.

Small farming villages gradually grew into huge walled cities, each with its own temple. Each city had a ruler who also had control of the farmland around the city. Cities organized like this are called city-states.
The invention of writing

Farmers had to give part of their crop to the temple, and temple officials needed to know if a farmer had paid his share. Writing probably developed as a way of recording this information.

1. At first, people drew simple pictures of the objects they wanted to record. These pictures are called pictograms.

2. The pictures were drawn one below the other on a piece of wet clay.

3. Later, people turned the clay around and wrote from side to side. This stopped them from smudging the pictures they had already drawn.

4. Because of the shape of the reed pen, the pictures gradually changed into wedge-shaped symbols, which we call cuneiform writing. Cuneiform means "wedge-shaped".

Internet links: For links to websites where you can find out more about cuneiform writing and life in ancient Sumer, go to www.usborne-quicklinks.com

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This cutaway picture shows a house in a Sumerian city.

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THE MIDDLE EAST

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Crafts and Trade

There was no stone, metal or strong wood in Sumer, so all these things had to be brought in from other lands. In exchange, the Sumerians sold grain and wool, as well as the pots and metal objects they made in their workshops.

Sumerian traders sailed along canals and rivers into the Persian Gulf and beyond. They traded with merchants from as far away as the Mediterranean Coast in the west and the Indus Valley in the east.

In this picture, merchants are trading at a busy Sumerian market.

Metalwork

The Sumerians were skilled metalworkers, and made beautiful objects from gold, silver and copper.

Pots and wheels

Sumer had plenty of clay for making pottery. Pots were shaped by hand until around 3500BC, when the potter's wheel was invented.

Stone carving

Sculptors carved small stone statues of people praying. People believed that if they placed a statue in the temple, the statue would pray for them.

People soon realized that wheels could be attached to carts or chariots, and used for getting around. A donkey pulling a cart could carry three times as much as it could on its back.