THE USBORNE
INTERNET-LINKED
ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF THE
ANCIENT WORLD

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Small stone statues of people at prayer, left in Mesopotamian temples as offerings to the gods.

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MESOPOTAMIA

While Jericho and Çatal Hüyük were growing, great things were happening in another part of the Fertile Crescent, in the region historians call Mesopotamia - which means 'the land between the rivers' in Greek. This vast, fertile plain lying between the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq, was the birthplace of one of the world's earliest civilizations. The most exciting changes began in the southern part, in an area called Sumer.

PRECIOUS WATER

Every spring the Euphrates river swelled with rainwater from the surrounding hills and flooded its banks. The farmers learned how to make their land more fertile by trapping the floodwater in shallow lakes, and digging irrigation channels to carry it to their fields during the hot, dry summer months.

THE FIRST TRADERS

With these new more efficient irrigation methods, farmers could grow far more crops than they needed. This meant they could trade surplus food with people in the surrounding hills, exchanging it for valuable things they didn't have, such as copper, stone and wood. The earliest farmers of Sumer are sometimes known as Ubaids, after one of their settlements, Tell al-Ubaid.

This village on the banks of the Tigris is inhabited by river dwellers known as Marsh Arabs. The houses they live in, made of woven reeds, are not so different from the ones the first farmers lived in - about 7,000 years ago.
NEW CRAFTS AND SKILLS

Learning how to irrigate the land was an amazing step forward. It meant extra food, that not everyone had to spend all their time planting crops, raising animals and cutting irrigation channels. Instead some people became full-time craftsmen, making tools, ornaments and household goods for the rest of the village. Others became priests, praying for a good harvest and overseeing the storage and distribution of food.

The new full-time craftsmen began to create artistic objects, like this Ubaidian clay figure of a woman.

INVENTIONS

From about 4000BC, a new phase began - named after Uruk, one of the earliest settlements - which brought some dramatic changes.

One of these was the invention of the potter's wheel in about 3400BC. Pots became smoother and were much quicker to produce.

Even more important, the wheel was adapted for transport - to produce the first wheeled carts. So farmers could now carry three times as much as they could on the back of a donkey. But the most significant change of all was probably the invention of writing in about 3000BC (see pages 18-19).

This is a decoration from a temple at Tell al-Ubaid. Showa boxes which were often used in sacrifices as they were a symbol of power.

THE FIRST CITY

About this time, Uruk began to mushroom into the world's first substantial city. At its height, it covered a huge area, surrounded by a high wall, with wide streets, grand public buildings and two religious areas with large temples.

Uruk stayed an important city for thousands of years. The people who lived there are known as Sumerians, and it was with them that Mesopotamian civilization really took off.

INTERNET LINK

For links to websites where you can become a Sumerian farmer and find out how the Sumerians invented the wheel, go to www.usborne-quicklinks.com
THE BIRTH OF WRITING

The invention of writing was so significant that it is sometimes seen as the beginning of history, as it enabled people to keep a record of events. Historians and archaeologists disagree about where writing first began, but some of the earliest evidence, from about 3300 BC, was found in the Sumerian city of Uruk.

CLAY TABLETS

Most of the pictures related to farming. An ox’s head was used for ‘ox’, while wheat ears meant ‘grain’. The Sumerians wrote on blocks of damp clay using a pointed reed or stick.

PICTURE WRITING

Later, other symbols were added to express more complicated ideas. For example, an ear meant ‘hear’. Some ideas were made up of a combination of symbols. For example, a mouth and water placed together meant ‘drink’.

Another change came when scribes started using the signs to represent short sounds as well as things. This meant several signs could be placed together to spell out a word which did not have its own picture.

It takes time to draw pictures, even simple ones. Scribes discovered that it was quicker to make simpler versions of the shapes by using the end of the writing tool as a stamp, instead of drawing with it.

RECORD KEEPING

In the new cities, people gave their crops to the temple, so officials needed to record who had paid what. At first they drew simple pictures, called pictographs, of all the deliveries. Circles and crescents represented numbers. This meant they could record the type and number of the goods.

This is a clay tablet from around 1300 BC, which uses pictographs to record food distribution and is probably from a temple.

When the clay dried, the writing hardened too and the records could be kept for a long time. Some of these clay tablets survive even today.
CLINIFORM WRITING

The writing sticks the Sumerians used had a wedge-shaped end. So, when they started using it to create shapes, the writing became wedge-shaped too. Historians call this kind of writing 'cuneiform', which means 'wedge-shaped'. It was used in Mesopotamia for more than 3,000 years.

CRACKING THE CODE

Cuneiform gradually died out and was forgotten for about two thousand years. When the first archaeologists came across inscriptions on ancient clay tablets, they had no idea what they meant.

Cuneiform remained a mystery until 1844. That year, an English army officer, named Henry Rawlinson, completed his study of some inscriptions found on a rock at Bistun in western Iran.

The rock, which had been carved on the orders of King Darius of Persia in the 5th century BC, showed three cuneiform inscriptions recording the same information, but in three different languages - Old Persian, Babylonian and Elamite.

Rawlinson managed to work out which shapes made up the name of King Darius in the Persian part, and used this to guess what some of the cuneiform symbols stood for. This was just the clue he needed, and eventually he was able to decipher cuneiform itself. Even so, it took years of hard work to finish off the job.
THE FIRST CITY-STATES

By about 3000 BC, some Sumerian towns, like Kish, Eridu, Nippur and Ur, had grown into vast cities - even bigger than Uruk. Over time, these cities began to control more and more of the surrounding land and villages, and eventually developed into independent city-states.

Taking Over

Early Sumerian towns had been governed by elected officials. But, as towns grew into cities, the small local organizations that had looked after daily life grew into huge governments, with hundreds of officials. These began to be appointed directly by powerful men, without consulting anyone.

Kings and Warlords

City-states squabbled with each other over valuable farmland, and petty disputes sometimes grew into full-blown wars. So rulers built strong fortified walls around their cities. In wartime, people moved inside the walls for protection, and a warlord, or lugal, was chosen to lead the fighting. As wars grew more frequent, lugals stayed in power longer. Eventually, they were recognized as kings and when they died, their sons took over.