The world's first complex civilizations were the first to create systems of writing, economic trade, and governments. The first civilizations started in a crescent-shaped area extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf in the FERTILE CRESCENT (what is now Iraq). It had rich soil and produced abundant crops. Within the Fertile Crescent, two rivers, the TIGRIS and the EUPHRATES, hugged a valley that became known as MESOPOTAMIA. Mesopotamia could support large populations because its location was ideal for both trade and agriculture.

SUMERIA (4000 BCE-612 BCE)

SUMERIA was the first civilization in Mesopotamia and developed around 4000 BCE. The SUMERIANS relied on annual floods to deposit rich soil onto the riverbanks every spring. The Sumerians used irrigation and drainage ditches to control the flow of water. But there were still surprise floods that washed entire areas out. This convinced the Sumerians that other forces were at work; people turned to religion to explain destructive floods.

Religion and the Ruling Class

The Sumerians were a POLYTHESITIC - belief in many gods-people. They hoped that if they obeyed and served the gods, they'd get a good harvest. They built and dedicated ZIGGURATS (ˈziɡəˌræt) - temples shaped like pyramids to the chief god or goddess of the city.

SUMERIA was a THEOCRACY in which the priests held an authoritative role, because Sumerians believed gods ultimately ruled the land. Kings ruled by divine right and lived in large palaces.

Writing and Education

Around 3000 BCE, the Sumerian created CUNEIFORM, a form of writing based on making wedge-shaped impressions with reeds on soft clay tablets. Once the impressions were made, the tablets were put in the sun to dry, and there could be no more changes! Cuneiforms was used to keep records and write stories and poems. It took a long time to make a tablet, so it was important to have professional writers, called SCRIBES. Scribes studied at schools and then went to work as copyists, teachers, lawmakers, and leaders. They were an important part of Sumerian society, and thanks to them, history was recorded in words.

City-States

The Sumerian kingdom was made up of CITY-STATES, which were cities that also acted as politically independent states. Each had its own government, army, and king. Trade between city-states was regulated through religious temples, which also functioned as storage units for surplus goods. Goods like wool and wheat were bartered for timber and imported copper. Priests often collected rent from farmers and acted as tax collectors in each city-state.

BUT the city-states also fought each other for land and water, eventually leading to the downfall of Mesopotamia’s first civilization.

AKKADIA

AKKADIA was led for over 50 years (around 2334-2279 BCE) by KING SARGON I, who is considered the first great king in history. King Sargon I united the Sumerian city-states. Around 1900 BCE the Sumerian city-states fell to a northern rival, BABYLONIA.

BABYLON

The Babylonians lived in the western half of the Fertile Crescent. The most well-known
Babylonian leader was Hammurabi, who conquered northern Sumerian cities such as Sumer and Akkad to create the Babylonian Empire around 1800 BCE. The Babylonians built roads to encourage trade and make travel easier. Goods like cloth and spices could come in from as far as India and Egypt. Merchants and traders managed their own businesses.

Hammurabi is most famous for a list of 282 laws called Hammurabi’s Code. This was the first time laws were written out, and therefore the first time people could know how they would be punished if they committed a crime. The laws were based on the idea of “an eye for an eye”, meaning that the punishment should be equally as bad as the crime. However, the punishment varied according to the class of the victim and the lawbreaker. The code covered all aspects of daily life—punishments for everything from judges who incorrectly ruled on a case to builders who built houses that collapsed.

Men held the most power in the patriarchal society of Mesopotamia, and they could also punish women and children. Hammurabi’s empire was conquered and destroyed in the early 1500s BCE.

Assyria

The kingdom of Assyria arose around the 1400 BCE and was one of the first new empires in Mesopotamia. The Assyrian Empire occupied the northern Iraq. The land where Assyria was located was easy for outsiders to get into and attack. So the Assyrians learned to be skilled warriors and decided to strike instead of waiting. They conquered lands from the Nile River (in modern-day Egypt) to the Persian Gulf.

King Sargon II, the most important leader of Assyria, ruled from 722 to 705 BCE. Kings ruled this massive empire with absolute power, meaning that whatever the king decided became the law. The Assyrians developed a system of communication, with riders on horses delivering messages across the empire within a week. This kept the king and governors in contact. They also developed trade networks as far as the Mediterranean.

Nineveh, Assyria’s capital city, became a center of learning; it housed one of the world’s first libraries, storing a collection of dried clay tablets. The Assyrians were defeated by the Medes, the Persians, and the Scythians in 612 BCE.

Babylon and the Chaldeans

Around 612 BCE, Babylon rose again under the Chaldeans, who were masters of mathematics and astronomy. The Babylonians were the first to identify five of our planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. They learned about the planets and stars by actually assigning workers to chart them every night.

Check Your Knowledge

1. What is the name of the first civilization in Mesopotamia?
2. How did geography help civilizations develop in the area?
3. What is cuneiform, and why was it important to Sumerian society?
4. What is a city-state?
5. Who was King Sargon I of Akkad, and why was he so important?
6. What were some of the accomplishments of the Babylonians?
7. Who was Hammurabi, and what was his contribution to the Babylonian Empire?