

# Unit 6: Ancient Sumer

Ancient Civilizations Options

5000BCE – 1940BCE

## Period Overview

The Ancient Sumer civilization grew up around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), because of its natural fertility. It is often called the 'cradle of civilization'. By 3000BCE the area was inhabited by 12 main city states, with most developing a monarchical system. The fertility of the soil in the area allowed the societies to devote their attention to other things, and so the Sumer is renowned for its innovation. The clock system we use today of 60-minute hours was devised by Ancient Sumerians, as was writing and the recording of a number system. The civilization began to decline after the invasion of the city states by Sargon I in around 2330BCE, bringing them into the Akkadian Empire. A later Sumerian revival occurred in the area.

## Life in Ancient Sumer

Although starting out as small villages and groups of hunter-gatherers, Sumer is notable because of its development into a chain of cities. Within the cities the advantages of communal living soon allowed individuals to take on other roles than farming, and a society of classes developed. At the top of the class system were the king and his family, and the priests. Administrators, scribes, craftsmen and traders made up an upper class strand, with labourers and farmers of the lower classes earning a lesser wage. Slaves were also common, particularly after conquests of neighbouring areas.

Families lived in houses, quite possibly built from the earliest design of bricks, in communities which often centred around the temple or Ziggurat. These places of worship were busy places, and were used for worshipping a number of gods who were thought to live in the sky. Offerings of food and drink would be left at the top of the buildings for the gods.

Education was important to Sumerians, with writing becoming widely used. Only boys could attend schools, although many women learned to read and write.

## Changing Times

During the 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium BCE, Sumerians began to develop large towns which became city-states. This was made possible by their systems of cultivation of crops, including some of the world's earliest irrigation systems. These developing communities then were able to devote time to pursuits other than gathering food. This freedom may explain why the area was home to the first known form of writing. During the late 4<sup>th</sup> Millennium, inventions abounded which seem second-nature to use today, including the use of the wheel, writing and even a base-60 number system (like we still use for time).

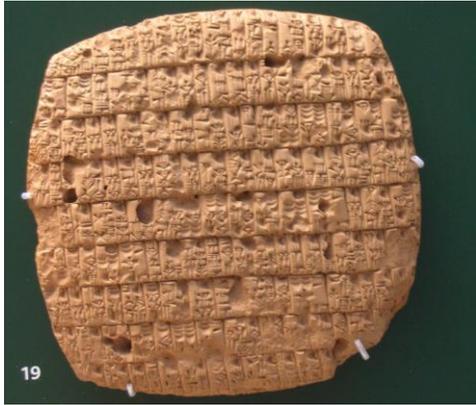
During this period, Uruk in Sumer became the busiest city in the world, with something around 50,000 residents. Later, increased violent clashes between the groups led to the development of walled cities. During the late 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium, the Akkadian empire of northern Mesopotamia began to attack Sumerian city states, led by the king of the empire *Sargon*. His dynasty later came to control much of the area for 150 years. During this period the population rapidly declined & the area was invaded by the Elamites.

## Possible Enquiry Questions

- What were the first civilizations?
- When was the wheel invented?
- Where does writing come from?
- What is the greatest invention in history?
- Who were the greatest inventors of all time? (could link nicely with Greeks/Victorians, etc.)

## Key Individuals

- **Eannatum of Ur** – one of the first individuals in the world to create an empire.
- **Gilgamesh** – King of Uruk, featured in an epic tale often considered to be the oldest written story.
- **Ur-Nammu** – leader of the last great Sumerian renaissance before the empire was overtaken.
- **Sargon the Great** – first king to unit all of the Mesopotamian cities into a single empire



### Ancient Sumerian Cuneiform Writing<sup>6</sup>

### What have Ancient Sumerians ever done for us?

Some people argue that the Sumerians were the world's greatest inventors. They are famed for the introduction of the wheel, and of both writing and the measurement of time – all things that today are a regular part of daily life. Alongside these major changes, the Sumerians also developed the first books, schools, historian, legal precedent, proverbs... the list is near endless. We have Sumerians to thank for the 360° in a circle, for basic geometry and even the very first toys designed for children.

### Big Concepts

The Sumerians are often considered to have developed the earliest **empires**, and then were later taken over by a larger empire, making a good study for this model of control. They also proved themselves to be great innovators of **technology**. The fact that writing was invented at this time makes a good starting point for the consideration of the role of **recorded history**, particularly when combined with other **archaeological** comparisons from the period. It is also a society in which clear **class** divisions were evident.

### Places to Visit:

Inevitably there are relatively few places to visit in the UK relating to the Ancient Sumerian period. However, some museums do include interesting artefacts:

- [British Museum](#), London
- [Ashmolean Museum](#), Oxford

### Timeline of Key Events:

All dates are approximate :

- 5000 BCE** First Sumerians arrive
- 4000 BCE** First Ziggurat temples are built
- 3500 BCE** Unification of city states
- 3300 BCE** Writing invented (pictorial)
- 3200 BCE** Wheel first used on carts
- 3000 BCE** Introduction of base 60 mathematics
- 2700 BCE** Gilgamesh rules in Uruk
- 2350 BCE** Cuneiform writing develops
- 2300 BCE** Sargon the great of Akkad conquers the city states creating the Akkadian empire
- 2100 BCE** Akkadian empire collapses
- 2400 BCE** Sumerian language replaced by Akkadian
- 1950 BCE** The Elamites begin their capture of Sumerian city states, leading to the end of the period
- 1800 CE** First Sumerian cities excavated
- 1900 CE** First translations of cuneiform

### Broader Context

- Stonehenge built in Britain c.3000 BCE
- Old Kingdom in Egypt c.2700-2200 BCE
- First Egyptian pyramid built c. 2600 BCE
- Mammoth becomes extinct, c.2500 BCE
- Bronze Age in Britain in around 2300 BCE
- Completion of Stonehenge, c2200 BCE
- Emergence of Minoan civilization c.2000 BCE
- Early Mayan civilization emerges, c.2000 BCE

### Further Information:

- British Museum: <http://bit.do/BMSumer>
- Schools Wikipedia: <http://bit.do/SumerWiki>
- Mr Donn's history: <http://bit.do/SumerMrDonn>
- Zipang resource packs: <http://bit.do/Zipang>
- Ducksters history: <http://bit.do/SumerDuck>

<sup>6</sup>Image of cuneiform writing displays information about the allocation of barley rations. The image is in the public domain having been released by Gavin Collins. The Wikimedia page can be seen at <http://bit.do/cuneiform>