



History Lesson 2  
*The First Civilization (Grade 6)*

Instruction 2-1  
*River Valley Civilizations*

As we told you in our last Lesson, agriculture and the domestication of animals began more than 10,000 years ago.

This was important. Because agriculture led to *civilization*. The large, complex kind of society we live in today.

Agriculture meant that people could grow more food than they could eat. So they used their surplus food to pay for other things. Like labor. And alliances with other people.

In hunter-gatherer societies, everybody had to work full time to get food. But agriculture freed people up to do other things. To become priests or soldiers. Government bureaucrats. Craftsmen. Teachers. Or artists.

It also meant that those who controlled food controlled society.

Which led to a hierarchy. With rulers or aristocrats on top. Slaves at the bottom. And everybody else in between.

## **Culture and Civilization**

In our last Lesson, we defined *culture* as the way people adapt to their environment. And use their environment to meet their needs.

*Civilization* involves culture. And more. At a much higher level.

All early civilizations had certain things in common. Large urban centers (cities). Monumental buildings and other works of architecture. A bureaucracy. A military. A priesthood or other body of religious leadership. Networks of trade.

Eventually, most civilizations developed some system of writing or notation. As well as mathematics. Astronomy. A road system. A formal body of laws. Organized systems for education and law enforcement.

And, as we said, extensive agriculture and the domestication of animals. Which led to the food surplus that made everything else possible.



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## The River Civilizations

The earliest civilizations emerged near rivers. With their fertile land and plentiful water supply.

Here are the three river valleys where civilization began:

**The Tigris-Euphrates Valley** (Mesopotamia / Iraq)

**The Nile Valley** (Northeast Africa / Egypt)

**The Indus Valley** (India / Pakistan)

The earliest civilization was in *Mesopotamia*. Which includes most of what is today's **Iraq**.

Much of Mesopotamia lay in a part of the world called The Fertile Crescent. A semi-arid hilly area in the Near East where cereal grasses (wheat, barley and rye) grew in great abundance.

The first Mesopotamian discoveries were made by French archeologists in 1842. They were amazed at what they found. Gold daggers and headdresses. Fantastic heads of bulls, harps and lyres crafted from gold and precious stones. Wheeled sledges and chariots. Elaborate funeral attire.

Later excavations have been done primarily by American and Iraqi archeologists.

## Mesopotamia (Sumeria)

The word *Mesopotamia* means "land between the two rivers."

The *two rivers* are the Tigris and the Euphrates. The *land* is the 600-mile-long river valley between them. Most of which is located in modern-day Iraq. The lower part of this land was called Babylonia.

The earliest Mesopotamian civilization emerged in the southern part of Babylonia. In a place called Sumer. That's why the people, and the society, are called *Sumerian*.



Life in this area can be traced back to agricultural villages that arose over 7,000 years ago.

But it wasn't until about 3,000 or 4,000 BC that true civilization emerged.

One *reason* is that *that's* when people learned to make tools out of *metal*.

## The Bronze Age in Mesopotamia (Sumeria)

At first, artisans made tools and weapons out of copper. But copper is soft. So things made from copper aren't very strong.

But about 3100 BC, metal workers discovered that copper could be made stronger by adding tin.

The result was bronze. Which is harder than copper and had a sharper cutting edge.

The Bronze Age -- and civilization -- had begun.

Agriculture became highly sophisticated. Huge fields were cultivated by oxen pulling plows. Farmers harvested crops with bronze sickles. They tended large flocks of sheep and herds of goats.

Donkeys and sailboats carried crops to market.

Another Sumerian invention was the potters' wheel -- which let people make cooking and storage pots faster than before.

Eventually, the potters' wheel was turned on its side and became -- the wheel.

Which revolutionized transportation.

Both the potters' wheel and wheeled carts and chariots eventually reached both the Nile and Indus Valley civilizations.

By 3100 BC, the people of Sumer were living in at least 12 independent city-states. Central cities surrounded by the farms, ranches, villages, quarries, mines, burial grounds and the other entities that supported them.



These city-states were frequently in conflict with one another.

Although the city-state of Kish (with its canals) was significant, the most important city-state in Sumer was Ur.

## **Daily Life in Sumeria**

Ur had a population of about 40,000. Divided into the following classes:

1. Nobles and Priests
2. Commoners
3. Slaves

Most of the people were commoners. They lived in family groups in one-story mud-brick houses built along narrow alleyways. These houses were, naturally enough, mud-colored -- brown.

Men worked as architects, scribes, merchants, farmers, cattlemen and fishermen. They were paid in goods and food, not money. They taught their sons the family trade.

When they weren't helping their husbands, women trained their daughters to run a household.

Men of the upper and middle classes shaved their heads and wore kilts around their waists.

Women braided their hair and wore loose fitting dresses fastened at the shoulder.

Marriages were always arranged by fathers.

Children were expected to obey their parents without question. If they didn't, their parents sold them into slavery. Other people became slaves by falling into debt. Or by being captured in war.

For fun, people played games like checkers. And were entertained by singers and musicians.



Barley was the main food crop. People ate cereal cakes made from barley. And drank barley beer. They also enjoyed dates and honey. And ate vegetables like chickpeas. Lentils. Onions. Lettuce. And turnips.

The upper classes also ate meat and fish.

## **The Temple of the Gods**

In the center of each Sumerian city there was a *Ziggurat* -- a terraced tower about six or seven stories high.

This Ziggurat was the home (the temple) of the Gods.

The most impressive part of the city was the land around this temple. Which was enclosed by a wall. That's where skilled craftsmen (like carpenters and jewelers) had their workshops and lived. Along with the priests and city officials.

The Sumerians had many Gods. Many were simply forces of nature that took human form. Including Gods of the Sky, Sun, Earth and Water. Statues of these Gods were worshipped both in the temples and in private homes.

But each city-state also had its own chief local God. Who was considered the real ruler of the community. Only the High Priest could actually communicate with him.

We know a lot about Sumerian beliefs from the epic tales of *Gilgamesh*. Who was kind of a Sumerian Super Hero. Gilgamesh was 2/3 God and 1/3 man. He had many adventures. Including surviving an event like Noah's Flood.

Through these adventures, Gilgamesh explored the complicated relationship between the Gods and man.

The story of Gilgamesh is one of the masterpieces of ancient literature. And one of its first examples.

Because it was the Sumerians who created the world's *oldest known* writing system.



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## The Oldest Known Writing System

In all the city-states of Sumeria, people left gifts for the Gods. Records of these gifts needed to be kept. So the priests began to develop a kind of writing.

At first, it was mostly pictures. A picture of a sheep, for example. To show that somebody had given the Gods a sheep.

Eventually, some of the pictures came to represent *ideas*. A picture of a foot was used to represent the idea of *walking*. Or a mouth and water to represent *drinking*.

Gradually the pictures evolved into stylized symbols, where each symbol represented a sound instead of a word.

Record-keeping quickly spread from the temples to the world of business and commerce. The Sumerians had a strong sense of private property. Every contract or transaction was carefully recorded. Even something as mundane as buying a pair of shoes.

Scribes made notations on wet clay tablets. With a reed that had a three-cornered end. This reed made wedge-shaped marks. So the writing came to be known as *Cuneiform*. From *cuneus* -- "wedge" -- in Latin.

When they were baked, these tablets got very strong. Archeologists have discovered thousands and thousands of them.

The system became more and more elaborate. It was hard to learn. To master it, children had to spend a long time at the temple school.

When they graduated, they became scribes (writers for hire). A kind of working-class elite. Who sat at the gates of the cities to sell their services.

Cuneiform writing gradually spread throughout the entire Near East.



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## **The End of an Era**

Around 2400 BC, the first great warlord of western history appeared. His name was King Sargon of Akkad.

He and his followers conquered Sumeria and all of Mesopotamia.

King Sargon established his own Akkadian Kingdom. The Sumerian civilization - and language -- disappeared. For a time, at least.

But a number of later Mesopotamian empires emerged in pretty much the same place. Which we'll tell you about in our third Instruction.

The next Instruction is about Ancient Egypt.

To learn about the Indus Valley civilization, check out Lesson 5 on India.