

Ancient Civilizations of the Middle East—Mesopotamia

Section 3



MAIN IDEAS

1. The Sumerians invented the world's first writing system.
2. Advances and inventions changed Sumerian lives.
3. Many types of art developed in Sumer.

Key Terms

cuneiform the Sumerian system of writing, which used symbols to represent basic parts of words

pictographs picture symbols that represented objects such as trees or animals

scribe writer

epics long poems that tell the story of a hero

architecture the science of building

ziggurat a pyramid-shaped temple tower

Section Summary

INVENTION OF WRITING

The Sumerians made one of the greatest cultural advances in history. They developed **cuneiform** (kyoo-NEE-uh-fohrm), the world's first system of writing. But Sumerians did not have pencils, pens, or paper. Instead, they used sharp reeds to make wedge-shaped symbols on clay tablets.

Sumerians first used cuneiform to keep records for business, government, and temples. As the use of cuneiform grew, simple **pictographs** evolved into more complex symbols that represented basic parts of words. Writing was taught in schools. Becoming a writer, or **scribe**, was a way to move up in social class. Scribes began to combine symbols to express complex ideas. In time, scribes wrote works on law, grammar, and mathematics. Sumerians also wrote stories, proverbs, songs, poems to celebrate military victories, and long poems called **epics**.

Write the name of the world's first system of writing.

What are pictographs?

Section 3, continued

ADVANCES AND INVENTIONS

The Sumerians were the first to build wheeled vehicles like carts and wagons. They invented the potter’s wheel, a device that spins wet clay as a craftsperson shapes it into bowls. They invented the ox-drawn plow and greatly improved farm production. They built sewers under city streets. They learned to use bronze to make strong tools and weapons. They named thousands of animals, plants, and minerals, and used them to produce healing drugs. The clock and the calendar we use today are based on Sumerian methods of measuring time.

Which Sumerian invention greatly improved farm production?

THE ARTS OF SUMER

Sumerian remains reveal great skill in **architecture**. A pyramid-shaped **ziggurat** dominated each city. Most people lived in one-story houses with rooms arranged around a small courtyard.

Underline the sentence that describes the kind of houses in which most Sumerians lived.

Sumerian art is renowned for sculpture and jewelry. Sculptors created statues of gods for the temples, and made small objects of ivory or rare woods. Jewelers worked with imported gold, silver, and fine stones. Earrings and other items found in the region show that Sumerian jewelers knew advanced methods for putting gold pieces together.

The Sumerians also developed a special art form called the cylinder seal. The cylinder seal was a small stone cylinder that was engraved with designs and could be rolled over wet clay to decorate containers or to “sign” documents.

Name four types of musical instruments played by Sumerians.

Music played an important role in Sumerian society. Musicians played stringed instruments, reed pipes, drums, and tambourines both for entertainment and for special occasions.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences Consider the inventions of writing and the wheel. As you go through a normal day keep a list of the things you do that rely on these two inventions.