

Ancient Civilizations of the Middle East—Mesopotamia

Section 2



MAIN IDEAS

1. The Sumerians created the world's first advanced society.
2. Religion played a major role in Sumerian society.

Key Terms and Places

Sumer area of Mesopotamia where the world's first civilization was developed

city-state a political unit consisting of a city and the surrounding countryside

empire land with different territories and people under a single rule

polytheism the worship of many gods

priests people who performed religious ceremonies

social hierarchy a division of society by rank or class

Section Summary

AN ADVANCED SOCIETY

In southern Mesopotamia about 3000 BC, people known as the Sumerians (soo-MER-ee-unz) created a complex, advanced society. Most people in **Sumer** (soo-muhr) lived in rural areas, but they were governed from urban areas that controlled the surrounding countryside. The size of the countryside controlled by each of these **city-states** depended on its military strength. Stronger city-states controlled larger areas. Individual city-states gained and lost power over time.

Around 2300 BC Sargon was the leader of the Akkadians (uh-KAY-dee-uhns), a people who lived to the north of Sumer. Sargon built a large army and defeated all the city-states of Sumer as well as all of northern Mesopotamia. With these conquests, Sargon established the world's first **empire**. It stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. The Akkadian empire lasted about 150 years.

Why do you think governments are usually located in cities?

Use a world atlas to determine how many miles across the Akkadian empire extended.

Section 2, continued

RELIGION SHAPES SOCIETY

Religion played an important role in nearly every aspect of Sumerian public and private life. Sumerians practiced **polytheism**, the worship of many gods. They believed that their gods had enormous powers. Gods could bring a good harvest or a disastrous flood. The gods could bring illness or they could bring good health and wealth. The Sumerians believed that success in every area of life depended on pleasing the gods. Each city-state considered one god to be its special protector. People relied on **priests** to help them gain the gods' favor. Priests interpreted the wishes of the gods and made offerings to them.

A **social hierarchy** developed in Sumerian city-states. Kings were at the top. Below them were priests and nobles. The middle ranks included skilled craftspeople, and merchants. Farmers and laborers made up the large working class. Slaves were at the bottom of the social order. Although the role of most women was limited to the home and raising children, some upper-class women were educated and even became priestesses.

Do you think religion plays an important role in public life today? Why or why not?

In Sumerian religious practice, what did priests do to try to please the gods?

Which two groups formed the Sumerian upper classes?

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences You are the king of a Sumerian city-state. Write a letter to your priests asking them to make offerings to the gods in order to protect your farms from a possible flood.