

◀ Panels from the Standard of Ur depict scenes of war and peace in ancient Sumer.

# Was Ancient Sumer a Civilization?

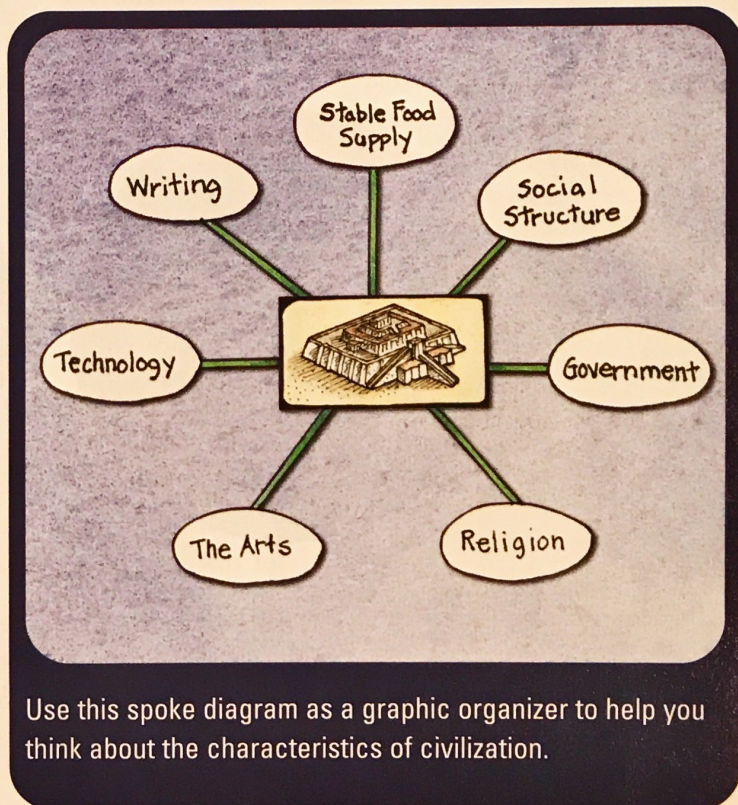
## 5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you read about the rise of Sumerian city-states. In this chapter, you'll take a closer look at Sumerian **culture**. Like an archeologist, you'll consider evidence to try to answer a question about the distant past. The question is this: Was Sumer a **civilization**?

Until about 150 years ago, archeologists had no idea that the Sumerian people had lived at all. Then, in the mid 1800s, archeologists began finding artifacts in the area we call Mesopotamia. They dug up tablets, pottery, and the ruins of cities. They were surprised to find writing in a language they had never seen before.

By studying artifacts, archeologists have learned a lot about Sumer. One artifact is called the Standard of Ur. It was found where the ancient city of Ur once stood. You can see the standard on the opposite page. It is made of wood and decorated with pieces of shell and lapis lazuli, a semi-precious blue stone. It shows Sumerians in times of peace and war. Artifacts like this one can tell us a great deal about daily life in ancient Sumer.

We now know that the Sumerians had a complex society. Some of the things they invented, like the plow and writing, are still in use today. But can we call Sumer a civilization? Let's consider the evidence.



## 5.2 Characteristics of Civilization

As you learned in the last chapter, Sumer was a challenging place to live. It had hot summers, little rain, and rivers that flooded the plains. Yet the Sumerians overcame these challenges. They built complex irrigation systems and large cities. By 3000 B.C.E., most Sumerians lived in powerful city-states like Ur, Lagash, and Uruk. But can we say that the Sumerians had created a civilization?

To answer this question, we need to think about what *civilization* means. What characteristics make a culture a civilization? Historians name several such characteristics, including these:

- a *stable food supply*, so that the people of a society have the food they need to survive
- a **social structure** with different social levels and jobs
- a *system of government*, so that life in the society is orderly
- a *religious system*, which involves a set of beliefs and forms of worship
- a *highly developed culture* that includes arts such as painting, architecture, music, and literature
- *advances in technology*
- a highly developed written *language*

Did Sumer have these characteristics? Let's find out what the evidence can tell us.

**social structure** the way a civilization is organized

**technology** the use of tools and other inventions for practical purposes



These two artifacts—one modern and one ancient Sumerian—are both examples of one characteristic of a civilization. Can you name the characteristic?



### 5.3 Stable Food Supply

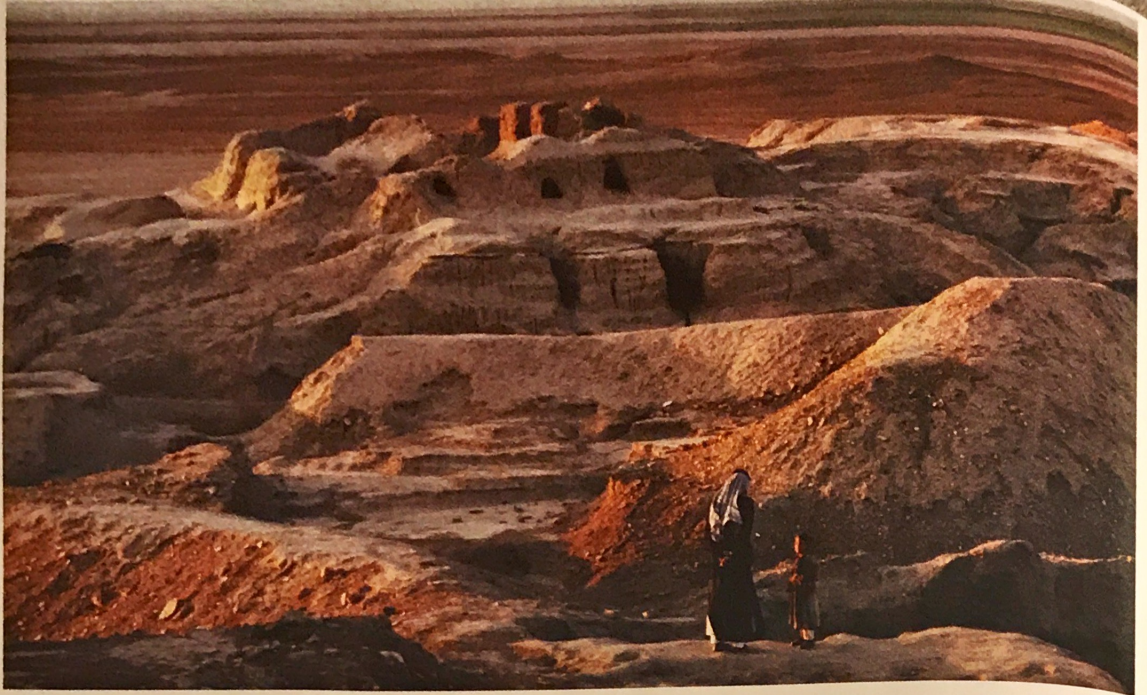
Civilizations need a stable food supply. A complex society can thrive only if its members have the food they need to survive.

Sumerians invented two things to help them create a stable food supply. You already know about one of these inventions—their complex irrigation systems. The Sumerians built networks of canals, dams, and reservoirs to provide their crops with a regular supply of water.

Their second invention was the plow. A plow is a tool for tilling (turning) the soil to prepare it for planting. Before the plow was invented, farmers used animal horns or pointed sticks to poke holes in the earth. Then they would plant seeds in the holes. This was a very slow way to farm. Farmers needed a faster way to prepare the land for planting.

The Sumerians made the first plow out of wood. One end was bent for cutting into the ground to turn the soil. Farmers pushed and pulled the plow along the ground themselves, or they used animals such as oxen to pull it.

Sumerians invented the plow. Today, families in Iraq (ancient Sumer) still farm the land using ox-drawn plows.



This man and child are standing in the ruins of the ancient city of Uruk.

## 5.4 Social Structure

Civilizations have a complex organization, or social structure. A social structure includes different jobs and social levels. People at higher levels have greater **status** than others.

Archeologists have found evidence that several classes of people lived in Sumer. At the top was an upper class, which included priests, land owners, and government officials. These people had the largest and most luxurious homes, near the center of the city. Their houses were two stories high. Evidence suggests they had whitewashed mud walls.

In the middle was the common class. This included merchants and craftspeople. The craftspeople included highly skilled metalworkers. They worked with such metals as gold, silver, tin, lead, copper, and bronze. With these materials, they made swords and arrowheads for the army. They made tools like plows and hoes for farmers. They also made luxury items, such as mirrors and jewelry, for the upper class.

The common class also included farmers and fishermen. They lived in small, mud-brick houses at the edge of the city. Farmers often worked to build or repair the irrigation systems. In times of war, they were forced to serve in the army.

At the very bottom of the social structure were slaves. They lived in their owners' homes and had no property of their own.

**status** importance

## 5.5 Government

All civilizations have a system of government to direct people's behavior and make life orderly. Sumerian city-states were ruled by kings. The Sumerians believed that their kings were chosen by the gods to rule in their place. This belief made their kings very powerful. It also helped strengthen the social order, since Sumerians believed they must obey the will of the gods.

Sumerian kings enforced the laws and collected taxes. They built temples and made sure irrigation systems were maintained.

A king also led his city-state's army. All the city-states needed armies because they were constantly fighting over land boundaries and the use of water. Leading the army was one of the king's most important jobs.

A Sumerian army included both professional soldiers and temporary citizen-soldiers. Some were foot soldiers. Others drove **chariots**, wheeled vehicles pulled by horses.

Kings had officials under them to help them with their duties. Governors ruled over outlying towns. **Scribes** helped record laws. The Sumerians were the first people to develop a system of written laws.

One special group of officials patrolled the canals. They looked for damage and made sure farmers didn't take water illegally.

A king looks out from his palace walls over the city-state he rules.

**chariot** a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by a horse  
**scribe** a person who writes



## 5.6 Religion

All civilizations have a religious system. A religious system includes a set of beliefs, usually in a god or gods, together with forms of worship.

In Sumer, religious beliefs influenced every part of daily life. Sumerians tried to please the gods in all things, from growing crops to settling disputes. Religion bound them together in a common way of life.

Sumerians expressed their religious beliefs by building temples and religious towers called **ziggurats**. It was the king's duty to build and maintain the ziggurats. The towers were made of mud bricks and located near temples. They were so large that they could be seen from 20 miles away. Some were as high as eight stories and as wide as 200 feet.

The Sumerians believed that the gods lived in the ziggurats, and they built special temples at the top for them. Outside the ziggurat, they attached a long staircase so the gods could climb down to Earth. Kings and priests stood inside the towers to ask for the gods' blessings.

Sumerian statues also expressed their religious beliefs. Many of these statues were detailed and lifelike. They showed people worshipping the gods, often with their eyes gazing upward. The Sumerians believed that the gods were pleased when people showed them devotion, or love and obedience.

Sumerians had many kinds of religious ceremonies. Often musicians played at these ceremonies. Some ceremonies may have involved human sacrifice, the ritual killing of a person as an offering to the gods.

**ziggurat** an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower

This is a reconstruction of the ziggurat that once rose over the ancient city of Ur.



## 5.7 The Arts

All civilizations have a highly developed culture, including the arts. Arts include creative forms of expression such as painting, architecture, and music.

There were many kinds of artists and craftspeople in Sumer. Sumerian metalworkers made practical objects, like weapons and cups. They also made decorative items, such as mirrors and jewelry. Sumerian architects designed temples and ziggurats.

Music was another important art in Sumer. The Sumerians believed that music brought joy to the gods and people alike. Musicians played instruments and sang during temple ceremonies. They wrote love songs and entertained guests at feasts.

Musicians played many instruments, including drums and pipes. One favorite was a small harp called a *lyre*. Lyres were wooden instruments made of a sound box and strings. A wooden bar held the strings in place at the top. Lyre makers often decorated their instruments with precious stones and carvings made of horn. These decorations show how much the Sumerians valued music.

This fancy lyre has the head of a bull decorating its sound box. A musician would strum the strings to play musical notes.





## 5.8 Technology

All civilizations create new forms of technology, or practical tools and inventions. The Sumerians made several technological advances.

The Sumerians' most important invention was the wheel. The earliest examples of the wheel date back to 3500 B.C.E. Sumerian potters, or pottery makers, used wheels as a surface for shaping clay into pots. Potters' wheels spun, flat side up, on an axle. Sumerians discovered that a wheel that was flipped onto its edge could be rolled forward. They used this discovery to create wheeled carts for farmers and chariots for the army. They built the wheels by clamping pieces of wood together.

It would be hard to imag-

ine a more powerful invention than the wheel. Before the wheel, people had to drag their goods on flat-bottomed carts called *sledges*. The sledges often got stuck in mud, and they couldn't support heavy loads. Wheeled carts made it much easier to move goods over long distances. Oxen could pull three times more weight on wheeled carts than they could on sledges.

Another technological advance was the **arch**. Sumerian arches were inverted (upside down) U- or V-shaped structures built above doorways. To build arches, the Sumerians stacked bricks made of clay and straw so that they rose in steps from the walls until they met in the center.

Arches added strength and beauty to Sumerian buildings. They became a common feature of temple entrances and upper-class homes. Some historians say the arch is the Sumerians' greatest architectural achievement.



This model shows a wheeled chariot used in the Sumerian army. They were pulled by a horse while a soldier stood behind the shield.

**arch** an upside-down U- or V-shaped structure that supports weight above it, as in a doorway

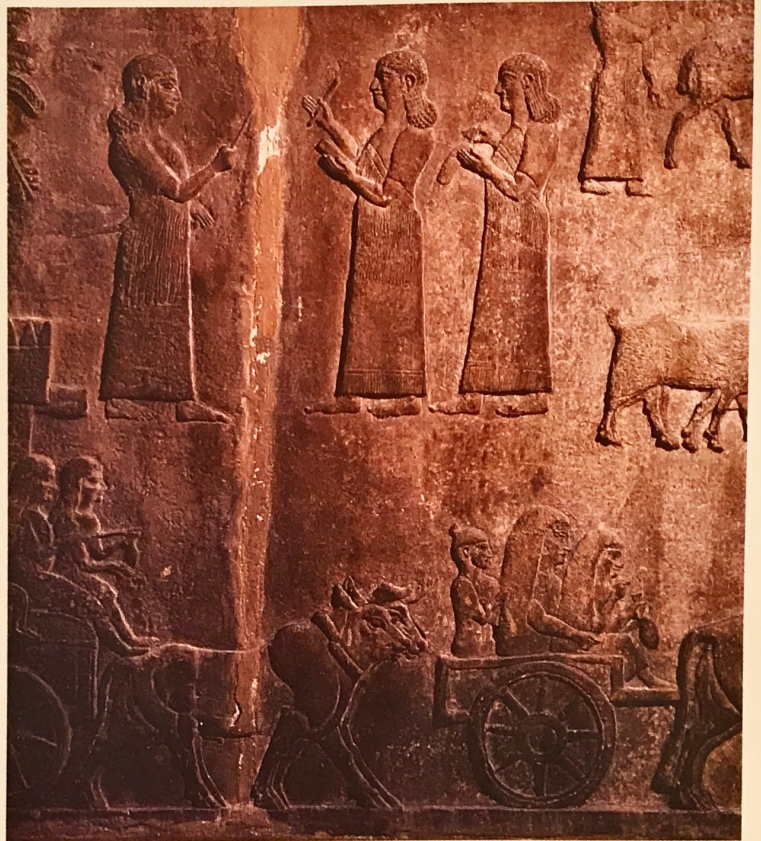
## 5.9 Writing

A final characteristic of civilizations is a highly developed written language. The Sumerians created a written language called **cuneiform**. This name comes from the Latin word for “wedge.” The Sumerians used a wedge-shaped stylus (a sharp, pointed tool) to etch their writing in clay tablets.

Sumerians developed cuneiform around 2400 B.C.E. The earliest examples of cuneiform show that it was used to record information about the goods Sumerians exchanged with one another. At first, they may have used as many as 2,000 symbols to stand for ideas and sounds. Over time, they were able to reduce this number to about 700.

Cuneiform was based on an earlier, simpler form of writing that used pictographs. **Pictographs** are symbols that stand for real objects, such as a snake or water. Scribes drew the symbols with a sharpened reed on wet clay. When the clay dried, the marks became a permanent record.

**cuneiform** writing that uses wedge-shaped characters  
**pictograph** a symbol that stands for an object



This relief sculpture shows scribes using a clay tablet and stylus.

## 5.10 Chapter Summary

Was Sumerian culture a civilization? It had all the characteristics you read about at the start of this chapter. The people of Sumer created a stable food supply. Their society had a complex social structure. They had a system of government, headed by kings. They had a religious system with priests, temples, and ziggurats. They had highly developed arts, technologies, and written language. For these reasons, historians call Sumer one of the world’s first civilizations.

Sumerian civilization lasted about 1,500 years, from 3500 to 2000 B.C.E. What happened to the Sumerians? What new cultures developed in Mesopotamia? In the next chapter, you’ll find out.