

THE BEGINNING OF CIVILIZATION IN SUMER: THE ADVENT OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 5-8

BY

JOAN PARRISH



**NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES**

**THE BEGINNING OF
CIVILIZATION IN SUMER:
THE ADVENT OF
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 5-8

BY

JOAN PARRISH

**NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Approach and Rationale	1
Content and Organization	1

Teacher Background Materials

Unit Overview	3
Unit Context	3
Correlation to the National Standards for United States History	4
Unit Objectives	4
Lesson Plans	5
Introduction to <i>The Beginning of Civilization in Sumer: The Advent of Written Communication</i>	6

Dramatic Moment	8
----------------------------------	---

Lessons

Lesson One: Readiness—What is History?	9
Lesson Two: Geographic Discussions	15
Lesson Three: Achievements of Sumer	21
Lesson Four: The Life of a Scribe	28
Lesson Five: The Beginnings of Written Communication	36

Bibliography	46
-------------------------------	----

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The purpose of this unit is to introduce students to the achievements and historical significance of the Sumerian civilization, located in the “land between the rivers,” Mesopotamia, the region known today as modern Iraq, and reaching back in time to approximately 3500 B.C.

The unit is divided into five sections. The first three sections concentrate on historical readiness activities and concepts, geographical-historical awareness, and an overview of recognized “firsts” in Sumerian civilization. The last two sections focus upon the most significant achievement of the Sumerians, the development and use of a written language, and provide an in-depth exploration of this ancient writing system and the life of an average scribe.

The unit aims to help students develop an awareness of and an appreciation for the uniquely human achievement of written communication, and provides students with a concept of historical “firsts,” guiding the students to understand the interrelationship between geography, human adaptation, human lifestyles and historical change. The unit should encompass a 4-6 week period of time and is directed at a student audience of ages 11-14.

All events prior to the innovation of writing have been labeled “prehistory.” With the invention of a conventional system of writing, human knowledge was no longer dependent upon the capacity of an individual’s memory. It became possible to accumulate a record of human experience, transcending specific time and place limitations of oral speech. In developing the ancient system of cuneiform, the Sumerian culture provided a foundation upon which all subsequent intellectual and technological progress has been built.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should follow a unit on Prehistory, examining man as a hunter and gatherer and the subsequent advent of agriculture and farming. It should precede unit studies of other ancient civilizations and/or early Mediterranean civilizations.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

The Beginning of Civilization in Sumer: The Advent of Written Communication provides teaching materials that address standards as outlined in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 2**. Lessons in this teaching unit specifically address **Standard 1A** that asks students to compare forms of writing that developed in early civilizations and explain how written records shaped political, legal, religious, and cultural life.

This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: “draw upon data in historical maps” (**Standard 2, Historical Comprehension**); “draw comparisons across eras and regions” (**Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation**); “obtain historical data from a variety of sources;” and “support interpretations with historical evidence” (**Standard 4, Historical Research.**)

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the concepts of continuity, change and historical firsts by creating and discussing personal and/or familial timelines.
2. To examine maps of the present day Middle East and then identify the general area of the ancient Fertile Crescent and the specific area known as ancient Sumer.
3. To discuss climatic conditions, land forms and water sources of the and discover the physical, social, and economic ramifications of these geographical conditions, including the development of an extensive irrigation system, the adaptation of shelter needs to existing natural resources, and the formation of city-states.
4. To learn the importance and unique nature of written communication by participating in activities and discussion.
5. To examine a moment in time via primary source documents on the life of a scribe. Make generalizations on the role and use of writing in the Sumerian civilizations by participating in a role-playing activity.

6. To study the evolution of the ancient writing system, cuneiform, and explore writing systems in general by creating their own communication codes.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Readiness: What Is History?
2. Geographical Discussion
3. Achievements of Sumer
4. The Life of a Scribe
5. The Beginnings of Written Communication

LESSON III: ACHIEVEMENTS OF SUMER

A. LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. To describe the conditions which led to the formation of the city-state.
2. To identify three facets of the Sumerian belief system.
3. To explain the significance of the invention of Cuneiform writing.
4. To define the vocabulary words.

B. BACKGROUND GENERALIZATIONS

1. Efficient irrigation systems led to food surpluses which in turn led to a differentiated society and the formation of cities (the city state).
2. Sumerians believed that their gods controlled all conditions of human life.
3. Belief in the Sumerian gods played an important role in the development of Sumerian civilization.
4. Pleasing the gods was the basis of authority for Sumerian priests and kings.
5. Sumerian civilization was responsible for the formation of many ideas and the invention of many tools
6. The Sumerians were the first people to leave written records.
7. Written language is a uniquely human form of communication.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Students should read and discuss **Student Handout 6** (see questions below for guidelines to use during discussion).
2. Students should play a game of “telephone:” The teacher relays a prepared message about the importance of trade, commerce, writing, government, etc. (not subject matter of personal importance to the students) and whispers the entire message in one student’s ear. This student passes it along (orally) to the next student. The last student will repeat the message heard. Compare the first and last message. Then the teacher should relay a second message on a note card. Each student copies the message on a note card and passes it down. The last student reads the last note card. Discuss with the students what they observed from this experience. Ask: How might writing affect the lives of human beings? How might it have affected the lives of people in ancient Sumer?
3. Have students try to remember (make a record in their minds) all events which take place within a given set of time (10-15 minutes). The next day have them describe the events. Then have them record all events in a new 10-15 minute period by taking notes. The following day they should refer to their notes and share the events. Compare the two processes of recording information. Ask the students to consider again the questions listed in activity two above.
4. Bring clay into the classroom. Give students an opportunity to use a pointed stick and write messages in the clay to simulate Sumerian clay tablets (see **Student Handout 7**.)
5. Students, in small groups, can design a ziggurat, make small clay bricks and build a model temple (use **Student Handout 8** as a guide.)

D. SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OF BACKGROUND MATERIALS

1. What physical needs would have prompted the people of Sumer to show interest in astronomy and the movements of the heavenly bodies? (Refer back to **Lesson Two** on Geography)
-

2. How did the cuneiform writing system reflect the available natural resources of Sumer?
3. How do you think we know about pre-history? (History before written communication.)
4. How do you think writing changed our knowledge of history and ancient people?
5. How do animals communicate?
6. What other forms of communication do people use? (Besides written communication.)
7. What other animals communicate with written systems?
8. Why do you think the people of Sumer felt the need to create a writing system?
9. What types of information do you think they wrote down?

E. VOCABULARY

city-state

surplus

ziggurat

textiles

numeration

cuneiform

archaeologist

F. EVALUATING THE LESSON

1. Check for understanding of the vocabulary.
2. Students should generate examples of the above concepts that they have experienced from their own daily life (i.e. textiles such as cotton, wool). Pose the question, "How is the numeration system devised in ancient Mesopotamia similar to our own Hindu-Arabic numeration system?"

THE BEGINNING OF CIVILIZATION: ACHIEVEMENTS OF SUMER

In early Sumer, most people were farmers. As the people learned to control and maintain the irrigation systems, their food supply became more plentiful. Surplus grain could be stored. It was no longer necessary for everyone to farm. Many people developed new skills and new jobs. They became carpenters, potters, metal workers, boat builders, jewelers and fishermen. Eventually the farming villages developed into cities. By 3000 B.C., the land of Sumer consisted of a dozen city-states, each having a large walled city, surrounded by small villages and farms.

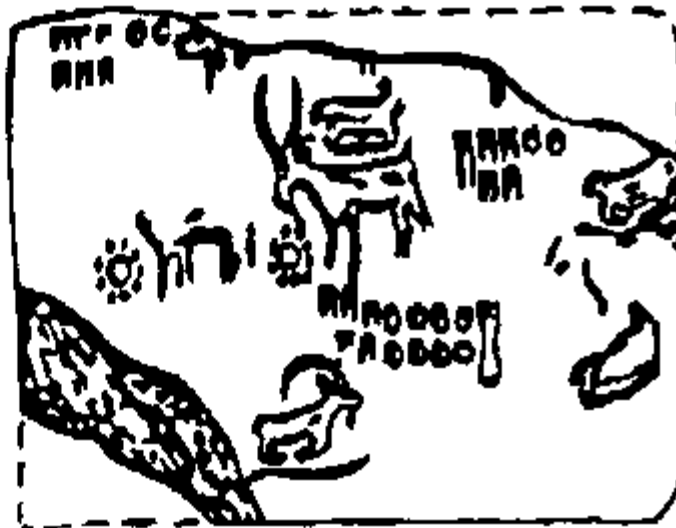
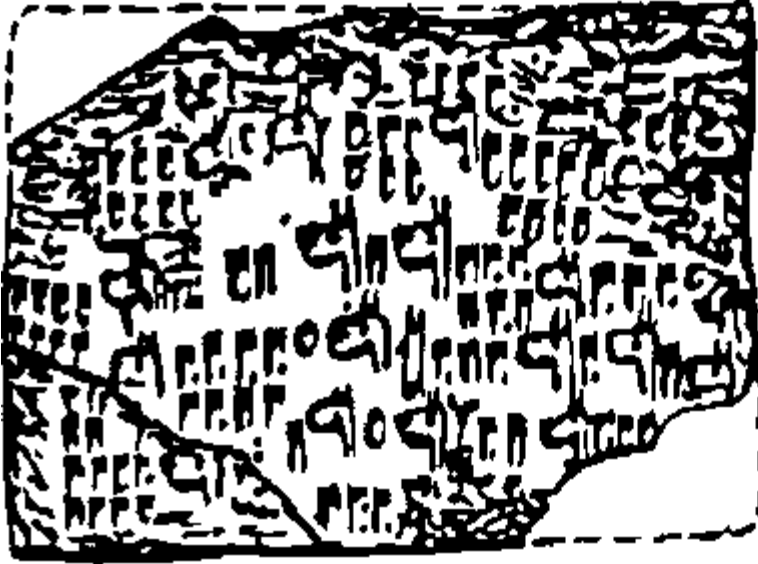
By 2000 B.C., the main feature of the city-state was its temple, called a ziggurat (ZIG-uh-rat). These temples were built of mud bricks and had several stories, each one smaller than the one below forming a pyramid shape. The lower stories were platforms of solid mud brick. The ziggurat was the tallest and most important building in the city. Some were perhaps 150 feet high and could be seen for miles. The top story of the ziggurat was devoted to worshipping the city god and goddess. The temple had storage areas for grain, gems and textiles which were kept for the comfort of the gods and to support the temple dependents. The Sumerians believed that each city belonged to a main god, to whom the city had been assigned on the day the world was created. They believed that the people were slaves of the gods. The people needed to please the gods or risk great harm.

The ruler of each city had authority because he was considered to be the representative of the god who owned the land. It was the responsibility of the priest or the king to interpret what the gods wanted and communicate this to the people. Many people were ordered to build temples, roads and irrigation projects. The people would obey both to please the gods and because service was required by the government.

The people of Sumer achieved many other great things. They were probably the first people to use a wheel. They invented the arch, a curved structure built to support weight over an opening in a building. They also invented a calendar based on the 28 day cycle of the moon. They created a numeration system based on the number 60 leading to such measurements as the 60-second minute, and the 60-minute hour.

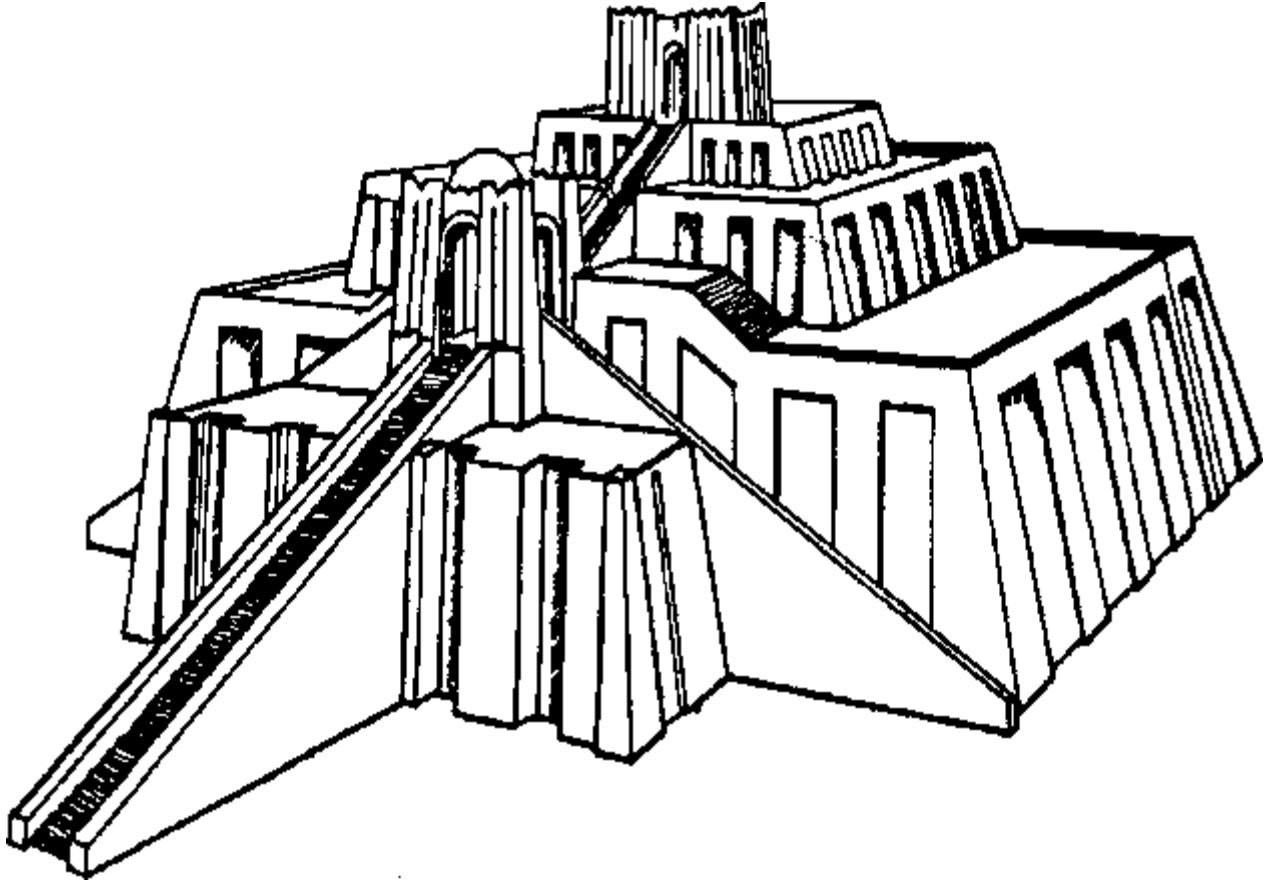
But the greatest creation of the Sumerians was the invention of the first system of writing. The system is called cuneiform (kyoo NEE uh fawrm) and is based on a set of written symbols made with wedge shaped marks on wet clay. Archaeologists have found over half a million Sumerian clay tablets which have survived over time. These tablets have helped us learn much about this ancient civilization.

CLAY TOKENS



Illustrated by Carole Collier Frick

SUMERIAN ZIGGURAT



Illustrated by Carole Collier Frick