

Ancient Sumer

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Introduction

For many teachers and children alike, Ancient Sumer will be completely new. Although Sumer has always been an option for teaching about Early Civilisations, the fame of Ancient Egypt, as well as being a tried-and-tested topic, has meant that Sumer has perhaps been overlooked. There is little danger of failing to capture children's imaginations, however. Ancient Sumer is as every bit as alluring and treasure-laden as Ancient Egypt, if not more so, and there are some great stories to get your teeth into. It also lays claim to a number of firsts such as the first cities and first writing, and to being inventors of the wheel, sailboats, mathematics and time, as well as being called the 'Cradle of Civilisation' (Figure.1). It is hoped that this article will persuade you to consider teaching Ancient Sumer and give welcome support and ideas if you do.

Pupils are expected to build understanding of the terms 'civilisation' and 'empire' during Key Stage 2. Ancient Sumer provides the perfect context for considering these terms as well as providing material for interpretation around the concepts of cause and consequence, continuity and change, similarity and difference and significance.

How do we know about Ancient Sumer?

We know about Ancient Sumer thanks to archaeological research and the texts written by the Sumerians themselves.

Figure 1: Map of the Fertile Crescent showing the region of Ancient Sumer.



Archaeology

- Tel sites (mounds) of Ancient Sumerian cities, such as Eridu claimed by the Sumerians to be their oldest city (Figure 2), and Uruk another famous Sumerian city
- The Royal Tombs of Ur and the Great Ziggurat of Ur. Both of these sites were excavated by archaeologist Leonard Woolley in the 1920s and have revealed the vast wealth and some rather gruesome practices of the Sumerians
- Artefacts recovered from excavations include items such as pottery, stone vessels, furniture, seal-stones, clay tablets, stone plaques (stele), inscriptions, statues and statuettes of stone, copper and bronze, mosaics, games, golden lyres and other instruments, and jewellery of gold and semi-precious gems.

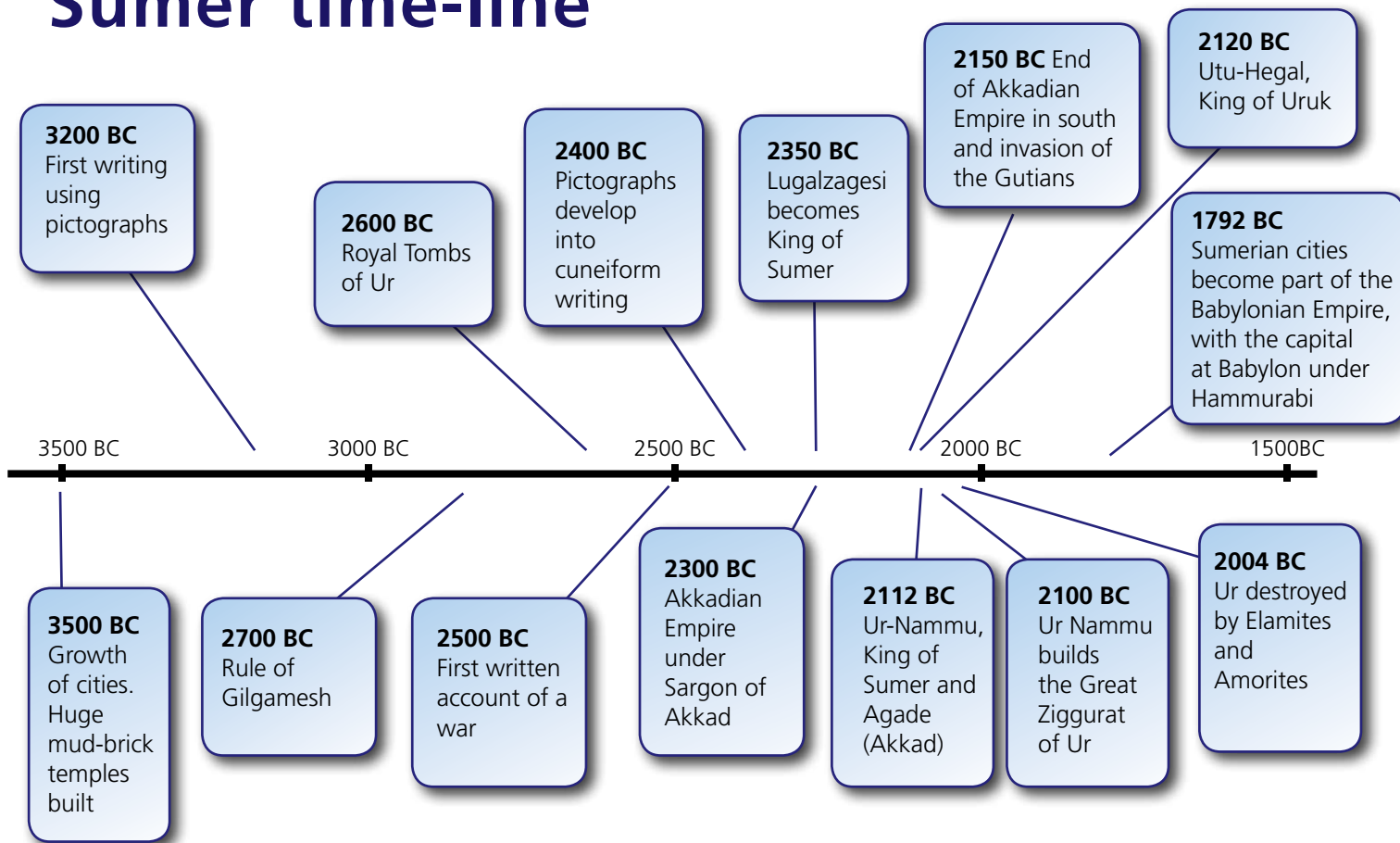
Figure 2: Tel site of Eridu, where successive layers date from c.5000BC to 2900BC as well as evidence from the Third Dynasty of Ur c.2112-2004BC.



Texts and documents:

- Thousands of clay tablets exist inscribed with pictograms and later cuneiform (wedge-shaped writing), recording administrative and bureaucratic details of the cities (Figure 3)

Sumer time-line



- Approximately 400 literary works written in cuneiform on clay tablets in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, such as the Sumerian King List, a valuable source of evidence, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* about a legendary king of Uruk (a city of Sumer), the *Birth Story of Sargon* about the first 'Emperor' of Akkad of which Sumer was a part, as well as hymns, parables and letters, some of which also had clay envelopes! Many of these are contemporary although some of the stories were written down a few hundred years after the supposed events.

Why do we call Ancient Sumer the 'Cradle of Civilisation'?

We call Ancient Sumer the 'Cradle of Civilisation' as it was where a number of features we associate with 'civilised' society first emerged. These include cities, writing, agriculture and a sophisticated system of travel, trade, administration and bureaucracy.

The civilisation of Ancient Sumer developed between two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates and flourished from approximately 3500 BC to 2000 BC. The later Ancient Greeks called this area 'Mesopotamia', literally meaning 'between the rivers', and it roughly corresponds to modern-day Iraq. The area of Sumer was situated in the southern part of this region and formed part of what is known as the 'Fertile Crescent', where agriculture first began.

Figure 3: Chart showing the development of cuneiform from pictographs from c.3200 BC – 1000 BC.

	3200 BCE	3000 BCE	2400 BCE	1000 BCE
sag 'head'				
gin 'to walk'				
šu 'hand'				
še 'barley'				
ninda 'bread'				
a 'water'				
ud 'day'				
mušen 'bird'				

Some archaeologists believe that it was the development of farming and agriculture that enabled all other developments associated with civilisation to take place. Could agriculture then be said to have caused civilisation? What was it about this time and place that led to the emergence of civilisation as we understand it? Although civilisation can be argued to be a good thing, what else was characteristic of Sumerian civilisation (such as warfare)? Were these things consequences of the development of civilisation?

How did Sumer become part of the first Empire?

In approximately 2300 BC Sumer became part of the first-ever empire created by Sargon of Akkad, a region just north of Sumer. It incorporated all the cities of Sumer and parts of modern-day Iran, Syria and Turkey and lasted for around 150 years. Sargon seems to have followed in the footsteps of a Sumerian king called Lugalzagesi who acquired control over all of the Sumerian cities which, up until this time, had been independent from each other. Was Sargon's empire then a consequence of what Lugalzagesi did?

The reasons behind Lugalzagesi's actions are also worth consideration. Before his rule, there were many rivalries and squabbles between the Sumerian cities. In fact it is during this period that we find the first ever record of a war. Inscribed on a stone plaque, known as the Vulture Stele, it describes a battle between the Sumerian cities of Umma and Lagash (Figure 4)

What are the characteristic features of Sumerian Civilisation?

Sumerian civilisation was characterised by a society organised into cities. These cities were largely independent from one another, and although they had to co-operate

in order to control irrigation and maintain trade, there were also many rivalries, squabbles and battles. Each city was ruled by a king although it seems that only one city and king may have had supremacy at any one time.

Texts give snippets of information about how society was structured. The king at the top of the hierarchy was responsible for irrigation, building temples and walls for his city, appointing officials, going to war if necessary and for importing material the city needed, such as timber. Underneath the king were various officials, scribes, artists, craftsmen, labourers and slaves. It seems most inhabitants of a city would have to work for the temple of the city god in some way for example, as a cult-singer, musician, weaver, baker or farmer, who would use their products as offerings to the god. It seems women, especially those in the royal household, had many of the same rights as men. They could own property and take part in commercial activities.

Religion was a significant part of Sumerian civilisation from the beginning. Each city had its own patron deity, for example:

- Ur – Nanna, the Moon god, Lord of Wisdom, Lord of Destiny
- Uruk – Inanna, Lady of the Sky, Queen of Heaven, goddess of love, fertility, and war
- Eridu - Enki, the high god of water, intellect, creation, medicine and wisdom, and the inventor of civilisation
- Eshnunna - Ninazu, god of the underworld and of healing
- Lagash – Ninurta, Lord of the Earth, god of rain, irrigation and fertility
- Larsa and Sippar – Utu, god of the sun, justice, application of law, judgement
- Nippur – Enlil, Lord of the Wind, god of air, wind and storms

The civilisation is also characterised by great architecture, and each

god or goddess would have a great temple built in their honour. The epitome of this was the ziggurat, a massive terraced pyramid on which the temple would stand.

The civilisation was also a very wealthy one, illustrated by what must be one of the most exciting archaeological discoveries of all time, the Royal Tombs of Ur. Of particular interest is the 'Great Death Pit' where 74 bodies were discovered. Leonard Woolley interpreted these as the servants of the Royal Household, who were killed when the king died to serve him in death, as they had in life. (Figure 5)

Who ruled and when?

The Sumerian King List proves to be very useful for knowing who ruled and when, although the early kings are considered to be mythological. The following are a few of the key names from around 150 names that are on the list.

Alulim is believed to be the first ever king after 'kingship' descended from heaven. He ruled for 28,800 years and can safely be put in the realms of myth. Following Alulim, there are many kings with similarly lengthy reigns but, the first king known from both the list and independent archaeological evidence is Enmebaragesi, who built the first temple at Nippur.

It is around the same time (c.2700 BC) that Gilgamesh ruled at Uruk. For a long time, scholars thought he was simply a fictional character from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* but the fact that he is associated with Aga of Kish, the son of Enmebargaesi, who has been verified by archaeological evidence means that Gilgamesh may well have existed also. In addition, some archaeologists believe they have found his grave.

This period, known as the Early Dynastic Period, ends with the reign of Lugalzagesi who became king of all of Sumer. Lugalzagesi's changes

in how the area was governed seem to have led the way to a successful take-over by Sargon and the creation of the first empire. Sargon's achievements, and those of his grandson, Naram-Sin are immortalised in later legends.

The last few generations of the Akkadian Empire saw power divided across the region between local rulers. This ultimately brought about its collapse, although later sources blamed this on the invasion of 'evil' barbarians from the mountains in the East - the Gutians. It was believed that they had been sent from the god Enlil, god of the city of Nippur, as punishment for the actions of Naram-Sin.

In the last century of the third millennium BC came the 'Sumerian Revival' begun by Utu-Hegal, King of Uruk. He may well have compiled the Sumerian King List to legitimise his reign. It was Ur-Nammu, perhaps a close relative, however, who established a new political entity replacing and building on Akkadian achievements. This period of time is known as the Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III 2112-2004 BC) and it saw the flourishing of Sumerian literature and language. Sumerian was used to write such things as administrative texts, a new literary genre known as the 'royal hymn', and epics, including that of Gilgamesh. Ur-Nammu also rebuilt the main sanctuary at Ur using a new form of building - the ziggurat (Figure 6).

The revival was not to last much longer than a century. After marauding Amorites had disrupted already difficult to maintain trade routes, the Elamites destroyed Ur. A diminished Third Dynasty of Ur managed to hang on until Hammurabi, King of Babylon made Sumer part of his empire.

What did they achieve?

They achieved so much that it is impossible to go into detail here. One scholar (Kramer, 1981) has credited Ancient Sumerian with achieving 39 'firsts', many of which have been mentioned. These include:

- civilisation – cities – writing – irrigation – the wheel – schools – astrology – sail-boats – war – proverbs – mathematics – measuring time

Ancient Sumerian Civilisation may be so far away in both time and place, but there are many ways in which it is still relevant and significant today. As such many of these achievements can be explored in terms of similarities and difference, and continuity and change.

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Figure 4: Vulture Stele found at the Ancient site of Girsu. Inscribed with text and pictures, it depicts a battle between the cities of Umma and Lagash.



Figure 5: A silver lyre, one of two found in the 'Great Death Pit' at the Royal Cemetery of Ur.



Figure 6: The Great Ziggurat of Ur built by the King Ur-Nammu in honour of the city's god Nanna. It was finished by his son King Shulgi.



Activities for creating representations of aspects of the past:

1 Sumerian writing

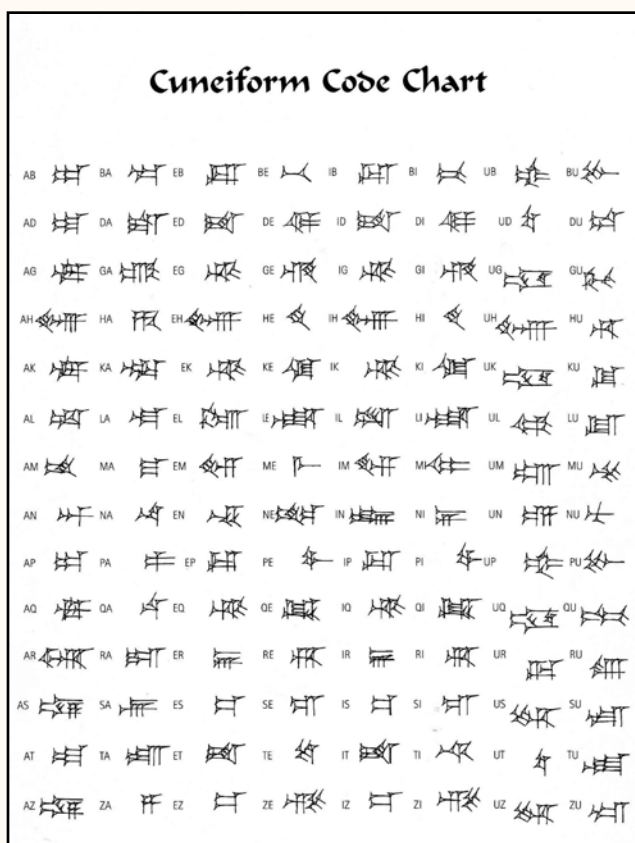
Look at the development of cuneiform from pictograms. Pupils can create their own pictograms for words using items in the classroom for inspiration, and then simplify these into cuneiform (wedge-shapes). They can then make their own tablets with messages for each other to read. Roll out pieces of clay and make writing sticks out of twigs or lolly sticks by cutting the end into a triangular shape. Alternatively, children can write out real cuneiform using the cuneiform symbols chart (see resources and websites).

Writing was also used to write down proverbs. These are from c.2000BC. Ask your pupils what they think they mean? Are they useful?

1. Do not cut off the neck of that which has had its neck cut off.
2. He who acquires many things, he must keep close watch over them.
3. He who eats too much will not be able to sleep.
4. The fox, having urinated into the sea, said 'the whole of the sea is my urine'

2 City gods and goddesses

Find the names of the god/goddess for each city. Divide the children into groups. Each group represents an individual city. Each 'city' creates its own god or goddess, gives it a name, says what he or she is the god/goddess of and what their character is like. Draw, or create in clay, images of the god/goddess and, if time allows, build a temple/ziggurat out of cardboard boxes to house them. Groups present their work to the rest of the class and then together create a story involving all of the gods and goddesses, incorporating each other's ideas – it seems this is what the Sumerians did!



3 Digging Sumer

Create an archaeological dig in the classroom. Laminate images of various finds from excavations in Sumer (see British Museum images collection), then bury them in sand in trays and excavate carefully using brushes. Remove as much of the sand as possible leaving the images in place. Tie string around the sand-trays to make a grid of 10cm or 20cm squares and draw the position of the finds using graph paper. After planning, take the 'finds' out of the trays and complete an artefact recording form (try www.yac-uk.org). Create a number of cards with information about the objects to help the children fill in their recording forms. Make it more of a challenge by asking the children to match their find to its information card.



Key ideas

- What makes a city a city?
- Was Gilgamesh a real person?
- How and why did writing emerge?
- Why did civilisation and empires emerge?
- Is an empire a good thing?
- Are some sources of evidence more reliable than others?
- What makes one group different from another group (e.g. Sumerians, Akkadians, Gutians, Elamites)?



Resources

www.mesopotamia.co.uk

www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Ancient-Sumer-6127863/

Proverbs from: [/www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/2000sumer-proverbs.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/2000sumer-proverbs.asp)

<http://penn.museum/program-resources/online-activities.html>

www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/cuneiform.pdf

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/mesopotamia_gallery.shtml

Donoghue, C. (2007) *The story of writing*, British Museum Press.

Wiltshire, K. (2005) *Pocket Timeline of Ancient Mesopotamia*, British Museum Press.

Collins, S. (2012) *The Wonders of Ancient Mesopotamia*, Melbourne: Museum Victoria.

Kramer, S. N. (1981). *History Begins at Sumer: thirty-nine firsts in man's recorded history*, 3rd edn, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Reade, J. (2006) *Mesopotamia*, London: British Museum Press.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, English version by N.K. Sandars (2006), London: Penguin.

Notes for subject leaders

To start with, subject leaders may encounter some challenges convincing teachers that Ancient Sumer makes a straightforward theme for Key Stage 2 children; having said that, the scepticism can soon turn to pleasure when the opportunities are realised. As with most themes and periods, the subject leader can bring some logic to a complex and long period of history by arranging learning around a few useful enquiries that hold the attention of the pupils. Sumer is also ideal for allowing good cross-curricular links, e.g. with literacy, numeracy, design and technology and religious education.

Worthwhile enquiries could include:

- Why was Sumer able to emerge as a wealthy, advanced early civilisation? (putting emphasis on its irrigation and farming practices)
- Why do we have to thank the Sumerians for the skill of writing? (the development of cuneiform)
- How unusual were Sumerian religious beliefs? (their notion of the universe as a flat disk surrounded by a dome, their pantheon of gods and their beliefs in the afterlife can be compared with other religions)
- How surprised are you that the Sumerians were so advanced at that time? (an opportunity to look at a range of achievements such as the wheel, boats, tools, clothes, number systems, pottery, metal work, weapons, codification of laws, city life etc.)
- How much remains to tell us about Sumerians? (tangible remains such as ziggurats but also the huge numbers of tablets recording many aspects of life as well as numerous artefacts such as pottery)
- How did it all come to an end? (including the ruination of the land by salt).



Places to visit

The British Museum, which has the finds from the Royal Tombs at Ur on display as well as finds from Tel al'Ubaid, and Uruk amongst others.