Program Description

Mesopotamia: From Nomads to Farmers — The ancient land of Mesopotamia has been called the cradle of Western Civilization, and for good reason. Mesopotamians invented many ingenious tools, including the wheel, the plow, a calendar based upon the moon and stars, and even developed a system of writing. This visually rich program uses animation and live action footage to explore the innovations of Mesopotamia from the point of view of Nisaba, a young Mesopotamian girl. Nisaba lives in the city-state of Nippur, located in Sumer, a large region of Mesopotamia. As Nisaba writes in her journal, she reflects upon her life, her people, and their society, and how the ingenuity of her ancestors led to a complete change in their lifestyle—from nomadic hunter-gatherers to city-dwelling farmers and traders.

Discussion Questions

- What was it like to live in the ancient civilization of Sumer?
- Why did the development of farming allow people to live in one place all year long?
- How do inventions improve people’s lives?
- How did people trade with each other and pay taxes long ago?

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Learn about the history and lifestyles of the ancient Sumerians.
- Understand how human innovations dramatically change the way people live.
- Create a journal based on a day in the life of a resident of Nippur, a city-state in the Sumerian region of ancient Mesopotamia.

Materials

- Mesopotamia: From Nomads to Farmers video
- Computer with Internet access
- A map of the ancient world showing Sumer and the rest of Mesopotamia (optional)
Print resources about Sumer and Mesopotamia

Procedures

1. Review information from the video with the class.
   - Why did the ancient Sumerians look for new ways to produce their food? (Hunting wild animals for meat and gathering fruits and greens did not always provide them with enough to eat.)
   - How did growing crops and domesticating animals like sheep and goats allow the Sumerians to build cities and live in one place all year long? (They didn’t have to travel constantly to find new sources of food.)
   - What does the word “Mesopotamia” mean? (The land between the rivers)
   - Between which rivers did Mesopotamia lie? (The Tigris and the Euphrates)
   - Why did the soil of the Mesopotamian region of Sumer grow such good crops? (The yearly flooding of the two rivers washed rich soil down from the mountains and left it in the Sumerian fields.)
   - What problem at first made farming difficult there and how did the Sumerians solve it? (At first, they never knew when the rivers would flood. They solved the problem by building earthen dams called levees to hold back the floods.)
   - In what other way did the Sumerians control the rivers? (They created a system of irrigation using gated ditches.)
   - What important farming tool did the Sumerians invent? (The plow)
   - What else did the Mesopotamians invent? (The wheel; a calendar based on the moon and stars; a system of writing.)
   - What do we call their system of writing? (Cuneiform)
   - What tools did the Mesopotamians use for writing? (They used a sharpened piece of reed called a stylus with which they carved cuneiform symbols into wet clay tablets.)
   - What did the Sumerians put into writing before any other society? (Their laws)
   - What was the name of the temple where Sumerians believed their gods lived? (Ziggurat)
   - Of what material were the houses in Sumerian cities made? (Mud bricks)

2. Ask students to name the people they saw or heard mentioned in the program, by their jobs or their station in life. Record their responses on the board. Examples include:
   - Student
   - Farmer
   - King
   - Priest
• Merchant
• Slave
• Scribe
• Wife and mother
• Potter
• Fisherman
• Grinder Of Grain
• Brewer
• Trader
• Musician
• Taxman

3. Have each student choose an individual from the list and challenge them to learn more about what that person’s life in Sumer would have been like. Have them consider these questions: What was a typical day in that person’s life like? What did he or she do in the morning, afternoon, evening? Where did that person sleep? What kind of clothes would that individual wear? If you lived in Sumer, what would your life have been like? What would your parents do for a living and what would you do when you grew up? How would your life have been different than the life you live now? How would it be harder? How might it be easier?

4. Have students research the lives of people in the Sumerian region of ancient Mesopotamia using print and Web resources. The following Web sites are a good starting point:

- Ancient Civilizations for Kids: Mesopotamia
  http://www.kathimitchell.com/ancivil.html#Mesopotamia:
- Suffolk Web Kids: Mesopotamia
  http://www.suffolk.lib.ny.us/youth/jcancient.html#MESOPOTAMIA
- Everyday Things in Ancient Mesopotamia
  http://www.costumegallery.com/Mesopotamia/ancient.htm
- Yahooligans: Mesopotamia
  http://search.yahooligans.yahoo.com/search/ligans?p=mesopotamia
- Sumerian Civilization
  http://www2.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/sumer.htm
- Ancient Sumer
- Women’s Lives in Mesopotamia
  http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/lesson2.html
5. When students have completed their research, ask them to summarize their findings in a one-page Day In the Life Journal. Ask them to describe the activities and events in a typical day in the life of their chosen Sumerian. Their journals should include at least three specific details, for example, instead of writing that they ate breakfast, they should describe exactly what they ate. They should describe each article of their clothing. They might describe their family’s living quarters, including their own room or sleeping quarters. They might choose different specific details to describe.

6. Have students choose a partner. Ask them to share their journal with their partner and answer any questions. Then have each student summarize their partner’s report for the class, including at least three interesting facts.

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students’ work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students were highly engaged in class discussions; produced a complete Day In the Life Journal, including all of the requested information; accurately summarized their partner’s Journal and cited three interesting, relevant points.
- 2 points: Students participated in class discussions; produced an adequate Day In the Life Journal, including most of the requested information; satisfactorily summarized their partner’s Journal and cited two relevant points.
- 1 point: Students participated minimally in class discussions; created an incomplete Day In the Life Journal with little or none of the requested information; were not able to summarize their partner’s Journal or recall any interesting, relevant points.

Vocabulary

ancestors
Definition: People in one’s family, from whom one is descended
Context: Your ancestors include your grandparents, great grandparents, and great-great grandparents.

cuneiform
Definition: The system of writing used by the ancient Sumerians
Context: Cuneiform writing consists of characters with wedge-shaped parts.

domestication
Definition: The taming of wild animals to use for farming or to be kept as pets
Context: The domestication of sheep and goats helped the Mesopotamians become farmers.

Euphrates River
Definition: One of the rivers that borders what was the land of Mesopotamia.
Context: The Euphrates River bordered Mesopotamia to the west.
journal
*Definition:* A record of personal experiences and thoughts kept on a regular basis
*Context:* Writing a journal can help you understand yourself.

levee
*Definition:* Earthen dams constructed to hold back floodwaters
*Context:* A levee system helped the Mesopotamians farm their most fertile land.

Mesopotamia
*Definition:* An ancient land located where we find the modern country of Iraq
*Context:* Mesopotamia means, “land between the rivers” and got its name because it was located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Nippur
*Definition:* A major city-state in the ancient Sumerian region of Mesopotamia
*Context:* Nippur was a busy trading center in Sumer and its most important religious city.

scribe
*Definition:* A person paid to write, especially in ancient times
*Context:* The job of a scribe was considered important in Sumer.

stylus
*Definition:* A hard, pointed writing tool cut from a reed
*Context:* Sumerians pressed the point of a stylus into wet clay in order to write.

Sumerians
*Definition:* Residents of Sumer, a region of the ancient land of Mesopotamia
*Context:* Sumerians developed a culture whose members farmed and traded instead of hunting and gathering to make a living.

Tigris River
*Definition:* One of the rivers that borders what was the land of Mesopotamia
*Context:* The Tigris River bordered Mesopotamia to the east.
zodiac

Definition: A system of star constellations used to measure time and dates
Context: The Mesopotamians used the zodiac to help them keep track of the seasons.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL’s Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit: [http://www.mcrel.org/](http://www.mcrel.org/).

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- World History – Era 1–The Beginnings of Human Society: Understands the biological and cultural processes that shaped the earliest human communities; Understands the processes that contributed to the emergence of agricultural societies around the world
- Geography – The World in Spatial Terms: Knows the location of places, geographic features, and patterns of the environment; Understands the characteristics and uses of spatial organization of Earth's surface
- Geography – Places and Regions: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place; Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions
- Geography – Physical Systems: Knows the physical processes that shape patterns on Earth's surface
- Geography – Human Systems: Understands the nature, distribution and migration of human populations on Earth's surface; Understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface; Understands the patterns of human settlement and their causes; Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface
- Geography – Environment and Society: Understands how human actions modify the physical environment; Understands how physical systems affect human systems; Understands the changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution and importance of resources
- Geography – Uses of Geography: Understands how geography is used to interpret the past
- Language Arts – Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process; Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
• Language Arts—Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
• Language Arts—Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
• Language Arts—Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media
• Arts—Visual Arts: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures; Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others

National Council for the Social Studies
The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to: http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:
• Culture
• Time, Continuity, and Change
• People, Places, and Environment
• Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
• Power, Authority, and Governance
• Production, Distribution, and Consumption
• Science, Technology, and Society

Support Materials
Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the DiscoverySchool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit
• http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html

Credit
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