

UPSC Civils Books

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World History

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World History Part-1

By MyFHT

Part 1: Ancient Civilizations and Foundations

1. Sumerian City-States and Cuneiform Writing

The Sumerian civilization represents humanity's first venture into organized urban life and written communication, emerging in ancient Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE. Located in the fertile region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq, the Sumerians established the world's earliest city-states and developed cuneiform writing, fundamentally transforming human civilization and laying the foundation for all subsequent literate societies.

★ 1.1 Origins and Geographic Setting

The Sumerian civilization took shape during the Uruk period (4th millennium BCE) in the region known as Sumer or Kengir, meaning "Country of the noble lords." The fertile alluvial plains created by annual flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers provided the environmental foundation for this revolutionary urban civilization.

A. Environmental Advantages

The geographic location provided crucial advantages including nutrient-rich silt deposits, fertile agricultural land, and access to water resources. However, irregular flooding patterns necessitated sophisticated irrigation systems, requiring coordinated labor and centralized authority that became hallmarks of Sumerian political organization.

B. Cultural Synthesis

Archaeological evidence suggests Sumerian civilization emerged from the fusion of three distinct cultures: Ubaidian farmers, nomadic Semitic pastoralists, and marsh-dwelling fisher folk. This cultural synthesis contributed to Sumerian innovation in agriculture, trade, and water management.

★ 1.2 City-State Political Organization

By the 3rd millennium BCE, Sumer comprised twelve major city-states including Uruk, Ur, Lagash, Nippur, and Eridu. Each functioned as an independent political entity controlling surrounding agricultural territories, with advanced urban centers housing up to 80,000 inhabitants.

A. Theocratic Governance

Sumerian government operated as a theocracy where religious and political authority were inseparable. Kings claimed divine descent and ruled through patron deities, with over 3,000 gods recognized in the pantheon. Each city-state maintained distinct governmental structures and legal codes centered around massive ziggurat temple complexes.

B. Political Evolution

The first successful unification occurred under Etana of Kish around 2800 BCE. Subsequent competition between city-states for regional dominance eventually weakened Sumerian resistance to external conquest, first by the Elamites and later by Sargon of Akkad, who created Mesopotamia's first empire.

★ 1.3 Development of Cuneiform Writing

The invention of cuneiform writing around 3500 BCE represents one of humanity's most significant intellectual achievements, emerging from practical needs to record economic transactions in increasingly complex urban societies.

A. Evolution from Pictographs

Cuneiform evolved from simple pictographic symbols organized in vertical columns. Early tablets from Uruk expressed only concrete objects, but the need to represent proper names and abstract concepts drove development of phonetic writing where symbols represented sounds rather than objects.

B. Technical Innovation and Complexity

The term "cuneiform" derives from Latin "cuneus" meaning wedge-shaped, referring to marks made by reed styluses pressed into clay tablets. The system eventually incorporated over 600 signs representing syllables, words, or concepts, requiring extensive training that made literacy exclusive to professional scribes educated in temple schools.

★ 1.4 Social Structure and Economic Organization

Sumerian society was highly stratified with kings and royal families at the apex, followed by priests, nobles, wealthy merchants, artisans, farmers, traders, and slaves. The economy was primarily agricultural, supplemented by extensive trade networks reaching the Indus Valley and Anatolia.

A. Religious and Cultural Achievements

Sumerian religion was polytheistic with a complex pantheon headed by An, Enlil, and Enki. Religious practices included elaborate rituals reinforcing social cohesion and political authority. The Sumerians pioneered technological innovations including the wheel, sailboat, plow, and the sexagesimal number system still used for measuring time and angles.

B. Legal and Administrative Systems

The Sumerians established the world's first known legal codes, predating Hammurabi's Code by centuries. These laws addressed property rights, family relationships, and commercial transactions, providing frameworks for social order in complex urban societies with sophisticated bureaucratic systems managing taxation and resource distribution.

Quick Facts

- **Period:** 3500-2334 BCE (Uruk to Akkadian conquest)
- **Location:** Southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq)
- **Major Cities:** Uruk (80,000+ population), Ur, Lagash, Nippur, Eridu
- **Key Innovation:** Cuneiform writing (3500 BCE) - world's first writing system
- **Political System:** 12 independent theocratic city-states
- **Population:** Urban centers housed 50,000-80,000 inhabitants

- **Writing Complexity:** 600+ cuneiform signs for syllables, words, concepts
- **Religious System:** 3,000+ gods in pantheon with patron deities per city
- **Economic Base:** Agriculture with trade networks to Indus Valley and Anatolia
- **Technological Achievements:** Wheel, sailboat, plow, sexagesimal number system
- **Legal System:** World's first written legal codes (pre-Hammurabi)

UPSC Relevance

Prelims Focus: First urban civilization features, cuneiform writing system invention, Mesopotamian geography, theocratic governance structure, major Sumerian cities, technological innovations, and chronological sequences regularly appear in ancient history questions.

Mains Relevance: Foundation of urban civilization and administrative systems, development of writing and record-keeping, political organization models, and cultural innovations form important discussions for GS-1 (History). Urban planning principles, governance structures, and technological development provide historical context for contemporary administrative challenges.

Contemporary Connections: Urban planning and city governance principles, administrative record-keeping systems, federal vs unitary governance debates, cultural preservation initiatives, and heritage management policies connect Sumerian innovations to modern governance challenges.

Key Figures

- **Etana of Kish** (c. 2800 BCE): First king to unite multiple city-states
- **Sargon of Akkad** (2334-2279 BCE): Conqueror who ended Sumerian independence

Important Terms for Revision

- **Cuneiform Writing System**
- **Theocratic City-States**
- **Ziggurat Temple Complexes**
- **Mesopotamian Irrigation Systems**
- **Sexagesimal Number System**
- **Professional Scribal Schools**

One-liner Facts for Quick Revision

- Sumerians invented world's first writing system around 3500 BCE using wedge-shaped cuneiform script
- Uruk became world's first major city with over 80,000 inhabitants by 3000 BCE
- Sumerian cuneiform system used 600+ signs requiring years of professional scribal training
- Twelve independent city-states including Uruk, Ur, Lagash, Nippur dominated southern Mesopotamia
- Etana of Kish achieved first successful unification of multiple Sumerian city-states around 2800 BCE
- Sargon of Akkad conquered Sumerian city-states in 2334 BCE, creating first Mesopotamian empire
- Sumerian theocratic system combined religious and political authority under divine kingship

- Ziggurat temple complexes served as religious, administrative, and economic centers
- Sumerian legal codes predated famous Hammurabi's Code by several centuries
- Technological innovations included wheel, sailboat, plow, and base-60 mathematical system
- Professional scribes underwent extensive education in temple schools for literacy training
- Trade networks extended from Indus Valley to Anatolia, demonstrating early globalization

Condensed Bullet Points for Quick Revision

- Sumerian civilization emerged around 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia as world's first urban literate society with cuneiform writing invention
- Twelve independent theocratic city-states including Uruk, Ur, Lagash governed through divine kingship with ziggurat temple complexes
- Cuneiform writing evolved from pictographs to complex 600+ sign system requiring professional scribal education in temple schools
- Urban centers housed 50,000-80,000 inhabitants with sophisticated irrigation systems, legal codes, and administrative bureaucracies
- Technological innovations included wheel, sailboat, plow, and sexagesimal number system still used for time measurement
- Political evolution from independent city-states to first unification under Etana of Kish to Akkadian conquest under Sargon
- Economic foundation combined agriculture with extensive trade networks reaching Indus Valley and Anatolia regions
- Religious system featured 3,000+ gods with patron deities governing each city-state through elaborate ritual practices
- Social stratification included kings, priests, nobles, merchants, artisans, farmers, and slaves in hierarchical urban society
- Legal achievements established world's first written codes addressing property rights, family relations, and commercial transactions
- Cultural synthesis merged Ubaidian farmers, nomadic pastoralists, and marsh dwellers into innovative urban civilization
- Historical significance represents transition from prehistoric to historic times, establishing urban governance and administrative patterns

2. Babylonian Empire and Code of Hammurabi

The Babylonian Empire represents one of the most significant civilizations in ancient Mesopotamia, establishing legal, administrative, and cultural precedents that influenced subsequent empires for millennia. Centered around the magnificent city of Babylon, this empire reached its zenith under Hammurabi, whose legal code became the foundation of written law in the ancient world.