



Mesopotamia: From Small Villages to City-States

Overview:

Students will learn the factors that led the Mesopotamians to create city-states during the Neolithic Period (approximately 10,200-2,000 BCE).

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

-  **Identify** at least three problems the Mesopotamians faced as they lived in small, mountain villages.
-  **Describe** at least three solutions they came up with for addressing the problems.
-  **Draw** a design for a stele which illustrates what it was like living in a village vs. a city-state.
-  **Make** their own mud bricks and explain how these were used to protect ancient cities in Sumeria.

Vocabulary:

 Neolithic	 Mesopotamia
 stele	 Sumeria
 moats	 natural barriers
 city-state	 adobe

Learning Activities:

- I. Warm-Up (5 min.)
 - A. In the garden, review the earlier lesson, “Cooking Vegetables 4,000 years ago?” to discuss what kinds of food pre-historic man ate before there were societies and agriculture.

Materials:

-  Map of Mesopotamia
-  Drawings or photos of steles
-  Paper for drawing
-  For alternate activity:
 - wheelbarrow full of sand
 - wheelbarrow full of clay
 - straw
 - small shovels
 - watering cans
 - tarp
 - brick molds (can use small boxes, like milk cartons)

On the Board:

-  Vocabulary
-  Student Reflection Questions

Suggested Snack:

-  Hummus and veggies:
<http://www.inspiredtaste.net/15938/easy-and-smooth-hummus-recipe/>
-  Crispy chickpeas

Other Resources:

-  Background info on Mesopotamia: http://evscicats.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/C_2_S_1_City-States-in-Mesopotamia.pdf

- B. Ask students: Apart from being able to grow more food, how do you think agriculture changed the Sumerian's way of life?
2. Presentation (20 min.)
- A. Lead a discussion about the agricultural transition that occurred in the latter part of the Neolithic Period.
- Ask students to describe what they think life might have been like in small villages.
 - Where did their food and water come from?
 - Do you think they had jobs? What kind?
- B. What were the conditions which led to the change?
- People first began to settle and farm in southern Mesopotamia before 4500 B.C. E. Around 3500 B.C., the people called the Sumerians arrived. The Sumerians mixed with the local farmers, and their language became dominant in the region. No one knows for sure where the Sumerians came from. Good soil was what attracted them to the flat, swampy land of Sumer. There were, however, three disadvantages in their new environment:
 - Water shortages
 - Food shortages
 - Attacks from neighboring communities
- C. What were their solutions?
- They moved to the flat plains between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.
 - They developed a complex irrigation system to grow edible plants.
 - They constructed strong walls out of clay and straw bricks to protect their city.
- D. Ask students to define *city-state*: a city that, with its surrounding territory, forms an independent state.
- E. Why did they choose the city-state option for how they lived in groups?
- The Sumerians had to learn to control their water supply. The complex irrigation system they designed crossed many village boundaries. They had to learn to work together, connecting many villages along their irrigation network. This was the reason for the transition to larger communities— the first cities.
- F. Ask students: What did creating cities allow the Sumerians to do that might not have been possible before?
- create a system of government (city-states were led by kings who were chosen by the gods)
 - specialization of work (people mastered specific jobs like priests, government officials, farmers, merchants, slaves)
 - create culture (art, music, architecture, literature)
 - devise a method of written record keeping (cuneiform)

- innovate new technology (the wheel and the arch)
 - Note: all the societies that lived in this region of the world after the Sumerians, built upon their many innovations.
- G. Ask students: What might have been the positive aspects of living in a village vs. living in a city-state?
3. Optional Classroom Activity: Drawing steles (15 min.)
- A. Ask students: What are *steles*? Steles are carved or inscribed stone slabs or pillars used for commemorative purposes.
 - B. Show the class photos of steles. Say that much of what we know about ancient civilizations comes from interpreting steles.
 - C. Distribute blank paper and ask students to draw a picture on an imaginary stone that illustrates what they think life might have been like in a village or a city-state.
 - D. Ask several students to share their drawings with the class.
4. Optional Garden Activity: Making Mud Bricks (15 min.)
- A. Show students images of the walls and homes of Sumeria.
 - B. Explain how and why the Sumerians used clay and mud bricks to build their homes: it was the most available building material, it created very strong bricks, and using earthen material in an arid climate helped keep occupants warm in winter and cool in summer.
 - Tell students that the Sumerians were the first to standardize the size and shape of bricks.
 - Ask students: How did standardizing the size and shape of the bricks make construction more efficient?
 - C. Explain to students how to make the adobe mixture and tell them the function of each ingredient. Have students pile sand, dirt, straw and water on a tarp.
 - Have students mix the ingredients and fill their molds with the adobe mixture.
 - D. When the bricks have set, in a day or more, remove the mold and set the bricks aside to dry. Have students check on them the next time they are in the garden.
5. Snack (5 min.)
- A. Tell students that chickpeas were a major crop in Mesopotamia.
 - B. Have them taste raw or crispy chickpeas.
 - C. Then serve hummus made from chickpeas and veggie sticks.
6. Have students answer the reflection questions in their garden journals. (5 min.)

Student Reflection Questions:

1. If you grew up in the Neolithic Era, would you want to live in a small village or in city-state? Why?

Assessment Questions:

1. What were three of the challenges the Sumerians faced when they lived in small villages?
 - Water shortages, food shortages, and attacks from neighboring communities
2. Focus on one of these challenges. What was the Sumerians solution to it?
 - For water shortages, they moved to the flat plains between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.
 - For food shortages, they developed a complex irrigation system to grow edible plants.
 - For attacks from neighboring communities, they constructed strong walls out of clay and straw bricks to protect their city.
3. List one benefit of using mud bricks for construction.
 - It was the most available building material.
 - It created very strong bricks.
 - Using earthen material in an arid climate helped keep occupants warm in winter and cool in summer.

Standards:

6.2.2. Performance Standard:

Trace the development of agricultural techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power.

Acknowledgements:

Parts of this lesson were adapted from:

Mesopotamia Walk. The Edible Schoolyard Project.

<https://edibleschoolyard.org/resource/mesopotamia-walk-esyb>

Photo Credits

Brick Making Photos 1 and 2 from:

Mesopotamia Walk. The Edible Schoolyard Project.

<https://edibleschoolyard.org/resource/mesopotamia-walk-esyb>

Mud Bricks Homes Photo from: "The 4,000-Year-Old Abandoned Mud-Brick Town of Kharanaq, Iran: A Photographic Look." Ancient Origins.

<http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-asia/4000-year-old-abandoned-mud-brick-town-kharanaq-iran-photographic-look-003591>

City Walls Photo from: "Mesopotamia - Assyria." Bernard Smith.
[http://www.bernardsmith.eu/Ancient_Civilisations/Mesopotamia_-_Assyria_\(ca._2400_BC_-_609_BC\).html](http://www.bernardsmith.eu/Ancient_Civilisations/Mesopotamia_-_Assyria_(ca._2400_BC_-_609_BC).html)

Stele Photo 1 from: "Sumerian Art." Art 290, UNC.
<https://www.unc.edu/courses/2008spring/art/290/001/Part%202%20Home.htm>

Stele Photo 2 from: "Stele." Wikipedia.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stele>