

Questions & Answers about Theme 1: Writing and City Life

1. Explain the 'far-reaching changes' associated with the shift from nomadic life to settled agriculture around 10,000 years ago.

- The change was the gradual shift **from nomadic life to settled agriculture**.
- People gathered **plant produce** and adopted agriculture as a **source of food**.
- They learned how to **domesticate animals** such as **sheep, goat, cattle, pig and donkey**.
- These developments led to **more permanent structures** in which to live, causing **settled life** to become **more common**.

2. Describe the distinct geographical features of Iraq and explain why Southern Mesopotamia became the centre of the earliest cities and writing.

- Iraq is a **land of diverse environments**, including the green undulating north-east plain and the **upland called a steppe** in the north.
- The South is mostly a **desert region**. However, the **Euphrates and Tigris rivers carry huge loads of silt (fine mud)** when they flood.
- When this water is let out onto the fields, the **fertile silt is deposited**.
- This phenomenon made the agriculture of southern Mesopotamia the **most productive**, even though the region did not have **sufficient rainfall to grow crops**.

3. Assess the challenges faced by Mesopotamian cities regarding resource availability and how they addressed the problem of long-distance transport.

- Mesopotamia faced a scarcity of **mineral resources**.
- They lacked **stone for tools and seals, wood** for carts, boats, or wagons, and **metal**.
- They traded their **abundant textiles and agricultural produce** to import copper, tin, silver, gold, and various stones from places like **Turkey and Iran**.
- The **cheapest mode of transportation is everywhere over water**, and in Mesopotamia, **river boats or barges** were propelled by the **current of the river and/or wind**.

4. Explain the main reasons why city life in Mesopotamia necessitated the development of a written system of communication.

- Writing converts **spoken sounds** (verbal communication) into **visible signs**.
- City life required the **keeping of records of transactions** because it was difficult to account for everything orally.
- Transactions often **occurred at different times**, involving **many people and a variety of goods**.
- The earliest tablets contained **picture-like signs and numbers** listing things like **oxen, fish, and bread loaves** brought into or distributed from the temples.

5. Describe the key characteristics and early uses of the Cuneiform script in Mesopotamia, noting the shift in language over time.

- Cuneiform refers to the **wedge-shaped signs** pressed into the soft clay by the **sharp end of a reed**.
- The earliest known language of Mesopotamia was **Sumerian**, which was gradually replaced **after 2400 BCE by the Akkadian language**.
- By **2600 BCE**, writing was used for things other than just **log keeping records**, such as **making dictionaries**.
- Cuneiform was also used for **giving legal validity to land transfers** and announcing **changes a king had made in the customary laws of the land**.

6. Examine the reasons why literacy rates were likely very low in Mesopotamian society.

- **Very few Mesopotamians could read and write**.
- This was because the script had **hundreds of signs** and was **complex**.
- A scribe required **intellectual achievement** and skill to **handle the craft tablet** and learn the signs.
- If a king himself could read, he made sure that this was recorded in **boastful inscriptions**.

7. How did the temples evolve to become the nucleus of urban settlements in Southern Mesopotamia starting around 5000 BCE?

- The earliest cities in Southern Mesopotamia began to **develop around temples**.
- Temples were considered the **residences of various gods** (like the **Moon God of Ur** or the **Goddess Inanna of Uruk**).
- The temple god was the **theoretical owner of the agricultural fields, the fisheries, and the herds** of the local community.
- The temple organized the **processing of produce** (such as oil pressing, grain grinding, and weaving of woolen cloth) and employed **merchants and keepers of written records**.

8. Analyse the role of continuous warfare and military success in the emergence of powerful kingship in early Mesopotamian city-states.

- The early Mesopotamian countryside saw **repeated conflict over land and water rights**.
- **Chiefs who had been successful in war** would **distribute the loot** and take **prisoners** to use as **guards or servants**.
- Over time, **victorious chiefs began to offer precious booty to the gods** and **beautify the community's temples**.
- The leadership of the king was viewed as an **efficient way** for things to be organized and a system that **secured the community**.

9. Uruk was a major example of early urbanization. State the key features of Uruk around 3000 BCE.

- Uruk was one of the **earliest rulers of Uruk**.

- Uruk was **often simply known as The City** in Mesopotamian epic literature.
- Around **3000 BCE**, Uruk grew to an **enormous extent of 250 hectares**.
- Uruk's growth was so significant that it was **twice as large as Mohenjo-daro** in later centuries.

10. Write four points explaining the social structure observed in Mesopotamian cities like Ur, focusing on the elite and family organization.

- A **small ruling elite emerged** who commanded **enormous riches**.
- This elite possessed expensive items like **jewellery, gold vessels, musical instruments**.
- Mesopotamian society revolved around the **nuclear family** (a man, his wife, and children).
- The **father was the head of the family**; for marriage, the **bride's parents giving their consent** was required.

11. What were the peculiar features of town planning and hygiene observed in the residential areas of Ur, based on archaeological excavations?

- The streets were **narrow, winding streets**, which meant **wheeled carts could not have reached many parts of the town**.
- There were **no street drains** of the kind found in Mohenjo-daro.
- Drains and clay pipes were found in the **inner courtyards** of the houses.
- Rainwater was channelled via drainpipes into a **covered basin or 'sump' in the inner courtyards**.

12. List four superstitious beliefs related to house building and customs recorded in the city of Ur.

- Houses often had **doors opening away from the street** to give **privacy** to the families inside the courtyard.
- A **raised threshold** was believed to **bring prosperity**.
- A **main wooden door opening inwards** was believed to mean the **wife would constantly argue with her husband**.
- The town cemetery housed the graves of royalty and commoners, but some individuals were **found buried under the floors of ordinary houses**.

13. Describe the function and authentication process involving the Cylinder Seal in the context of Mesopotamian urban life.

- Cylinder stone seals were **pierced down the centre** and fitted with a stick, then **rolled over wet clay**.
- This process created a **continuous picture**.
- A seal could be rolled on clay covering the **string knot of a cloth package or the mouth of a pot**, serving to **keep the contents safe**.
- When rolled on a written letter, it became a **mark of a city dweller's role in public life** and a **mark of authenticity**.

14. Mari, though an agricultural centre, stood out due to its reliance on pastoralism. Discuss the interaction between pastoralists and farmers in the Mari region.

- Mari's surrounding territory was used by shepherds for **grazing sheep and goats** (pastoralism).
- Mobile pastoralists traded **young animals, cheese, leather, and meat** for **grain, metal tools** and other products with the farmers.
- Herdsmen, being **mobile**, would bring their flocks into the **sown area** in the summer after the harvest.
- Clashes sometimes occurred when herdsmen moving their flocks would **graze in sown fields** or **block irrigation canals**.

15. Explain how the city of Mari functioned as a strategic urban centre for trade, highlighting the taxation system applied there.

- Mari was located on the Euphrates in a **prime position for trade**.
- Trade routes carried goods like **wood, copper, tin, wine, and oil** between the southern plains and the **mineral-rich uplands of Turkey, Syria and Lebanon**.
- Mari is an example of an **urban centre prospering on trade**.
- Officials at Mari would **inspect the cargo** and **levy a charge of about one-tenth the value of the goods** before allowing them to continue downstream.

16. Describe the key mathematical and astronomical achievements of the Mesopotamians that influenced later civilizations.

- Mesopotamia is globally renowned for its contribution to **time reckoning and mathematics**.
- Tablets from around **1800 BCE** show detailed knowledge of **multiplication and division tables, square- and square-root tables, and compound interest**.
- They divided the year into **12 months** (according to the moon) and the day into **24 hours**, and the hour into **60 minutes**.
- They **observed and recorded the observed positions of stars and constellations** in the night sky.

17. The use of bronze was highly important in Mesopotamia. What evidence from the source supports the view that securing metal resources was vital to the kingdom of Mari?

- Bronze was the **main industrial material for tools and weapons**.
- Mari was located for trade between the southern plains and the **mineral-rich uplands** that supplied **copper and tin**.
- Barley and copper, known as '**Alashiya**' (the island of Cyprus), came in **special grain boats**.
- This necessary trade was important and ensured that the kingdom of Mari was **exceptionally prosperous**.

18. Provide four pieces of information about the scale and content of the library collected by the Assyrian King Assurbanipal at Nineveh.

- The library was established by the great Assyrian king **Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE)**.

- The library was located at his capital, **Nineveh in the north**.
- Assurbanipal collected tablets covering subjects like **history, epics, omen literature, astronomy, hymns, and poems**.
- His library contained a total of some **30,000 tablets**, which were **grouped according to subject**.

19. Explain the historical significance of the Gilgamesh Epic and how it reflects Mesopotamian cultural values regarding cities.

- The Epic of Gilgamesh is the **most poignant reminder of the pride Mesopotamians took in their cities**.
- Gilgamesh, the ruler of Uruk, went on a **heroic search for immortality** after the death of his friend.
- Gilgamesh **failed** in his attempt to find immortality and returned to Uruk **consoling himself**.
- He consoled himself by walking along the **city wall of Uruk** and reflecting on the great **tale of heroism and endeavour** that his city represented.

20. Why was Mesopotamia considered an "ancestral land" by early European explorers and scholars, as mentioned in the sources?

- Mesopotamia was important to Europeans because of **references to it in the Old Testament**.
- The **Book of Genesis** refers to Shin'ar (Sumer) as a **land of brick-built cities**.
- **Travellers and scholars of Europe** regarded Mesopotamia as a **kind of ancestral land**.
- When archaeological work began in the area in the 1840s, it was often an attempt to **prove the literal truth of the Old Testament**.