

◀ These ruins in the Syrian desert reveal an ancient Sumerian walled city.

The Rise of Sumerian City-States

4.1 Introduction

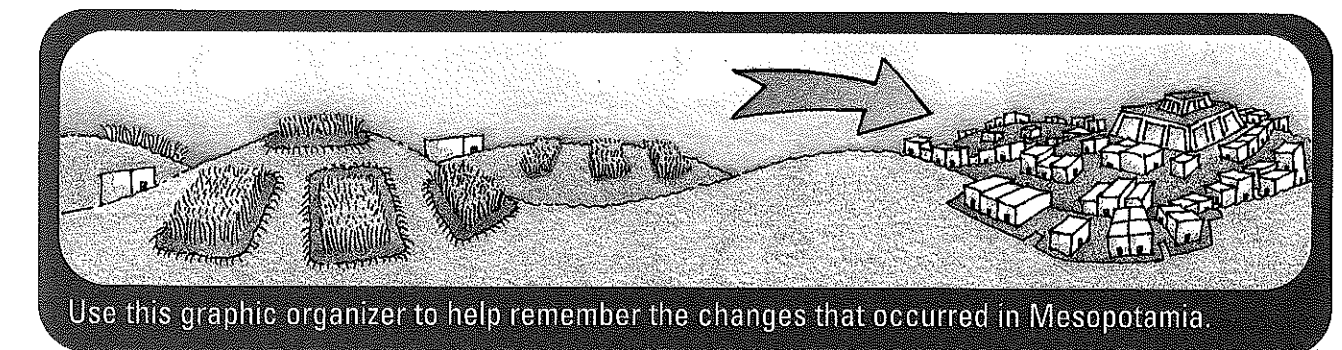
In Chapter 3, you learned how people began farming and living in small villages during Neolithic times. In this chapter, you'll discover how some small villages grew into large, complex cities.

These villages were located in a land of rolling hills and low plains called **Mesopotamia** (modern-day Iraq). *Mesopotamia* is a Greek word that means "the land between the rivers." The two rivers are the Tigris River and the Euphrates River. Cities first appeared in the southern part of this land, an area called **Sumer**.

The earliest cities in Sumer date back to about 3500 B.C.E. These first cities were like small, independent countries. They each had their own ruler and their own farmland to provide food. For this reason, they are called **city-states**.

Imagine that you are visiting one of these early cities. You see a walled settlement surrounded by farmland that supplies food for the city. The strong city walls are built of sunbaked bricks. Moats, or ditches filled with water, surround the walls. The moats help to keep out enemies. During an attack, people living outside the city walls fled inside for protection.

As you gaze on the city, you may wonder how it came to be built. Why didn't people in Mesopotamia go on living in small villages, as their ancestors had done for thousands of years? Why did large city-states grow up here, in the "Land Between the Rivers"? In this chapter, you'll find out.



4.2 Mesopotamia: A Difficult Environment

Mesopotamia was not an easy place to live. The northern part was hilly and received rain. The southern part was low plains, or flat land. The sun beat down fiercely on the plains between the Tigris River and the Euphrates River. There was little rain. The Mesopotamians were farmers, and farms need water. The rivers brought water to the plains when they flooded, but for most of the year the soil was hard and dry.

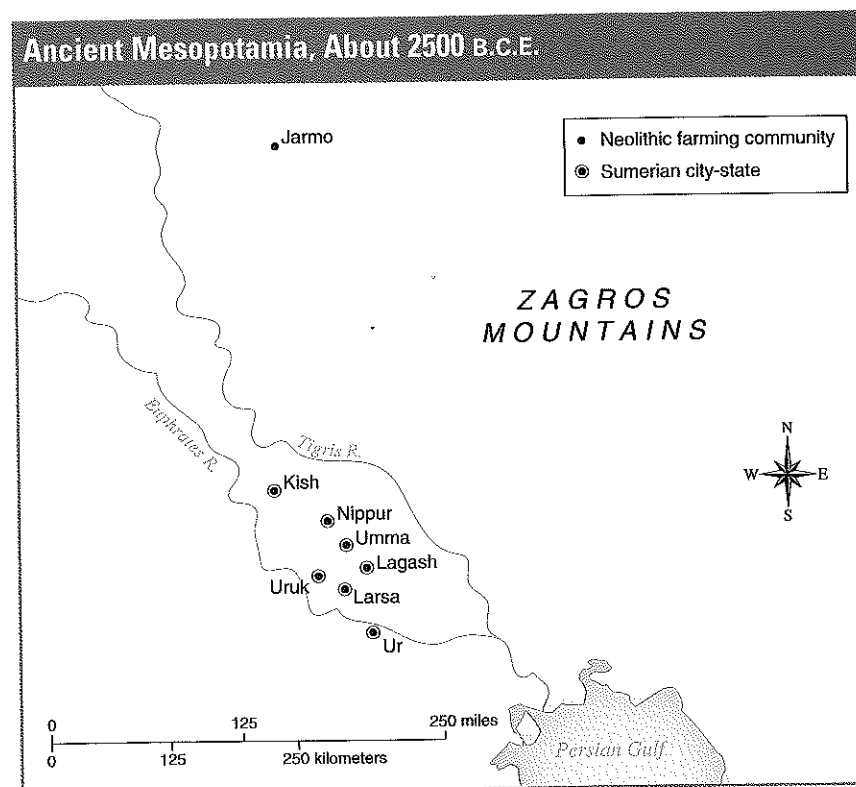
On the plains, building materials were difficult to find. There were plenty of reeds (weeds that grow near rivers). But there were few trees to provide wood. Even stones were scarce. And there were few natural barriers to keep out enemies.

Mesopotamians faced four key problems as they tried to survive in this environment:

- food shortages in the hills
- an uncontrolled water supply on the plains
- difficulties in building and maintaining **irrigation systems** to serve the needs of several villages at once
- attacks by neighboring communities

Over time, Mesopotamians found solutions to these problems. Let's explore how their solutions led to the building of some of the first cities in the world.

irrigation system
a means of supplying land
with water



4.3 Food Shortages in the Hills

As you learned in the last chapter, in Neolithic times people in some areas of the world began farming. One of these areas was the rolling foothills of the Zagros Mountains in northern Mesopotamia.

Mild weather and plentiful rains made the foothills a good place to farm. The wooded hills provided timber for building shelters. There were plenty of stones in the hills for toolmaking. Over several thousand years, these conditions allowed the population in Mesopotamia to grow dramatically.

Then problems arose. By 5000 B.C.E., some historians believe, farmers in the Zagros foothills did not have enough land to grow food for the increasing number of people. As a result, villages began to suffer from food shortages.

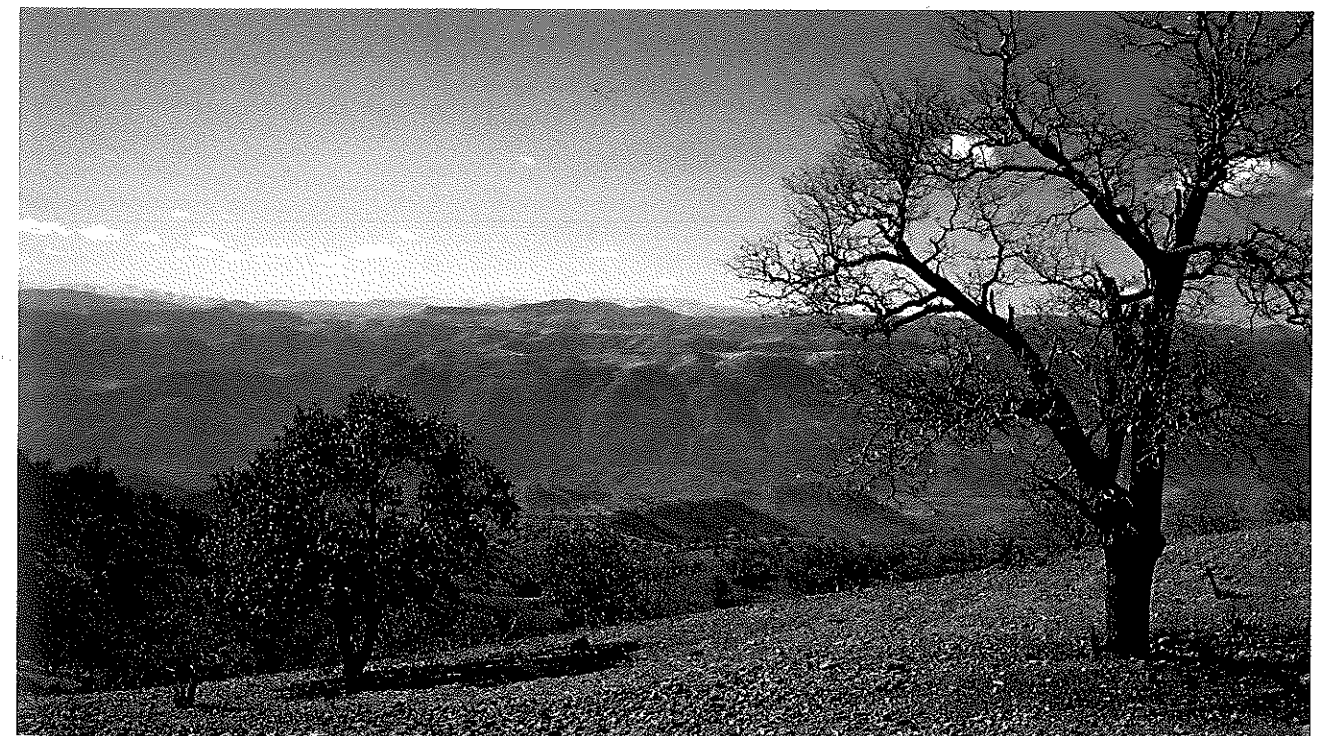
Below the foothills and to the south, the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers ran through flat plains. The plains covered a large area of land, and no one lived there. During most of the year, the land was very hard and dry. And the plains lacked trees and stones for making shelters and tools.

Yet the plains held promise, too. In the spring the rivers flooded, bringing precious water. Perhaps farms could be built there.

Driven by the need for food, people moved out of the foothills and onto the plains. This region became known as Sumer, and its people would be called the **Sumerians**.

Sumerians ancient people
who lived in the geographic
region of Sumer

The Zagros foothills were an ideal
place to farm.



4.4 Uncontrolled Water Supply in the River Valley

The farmers who moved to Sumer faced many challenges. One of the biggest problems was the uncontrolled water supply.

During the spring, rain and melted snow from the mountains flowed into the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, causing them to flood across the plains. But no one could be sure exactly when the floods would come. If it happened after farmers planted their crops, their young plants would be washed away. For much of the rest of the year, the sunbaked soil was dry and hard as stone. Hot, strong winds blew thick layers of dust across the ground.

Faced with such dramatic seasonal changes, farmers had to constantly struggle to raise crops. Either they had too little water, or they had too much. To succeed in growing food, they needed a way to control the water so they would have a reliable water supply all year round.

So, Sumerian farmers began to create irrigation systems to provide water for their fields. They built earth walls, called **levees**, along the sides of the river to prevent flooding. When the land was dry, they poked holes in the levees. The water flowed through the holes and into the thirsty fields.

Over time, the Sumerians learned other ways to control the supply of water. They dug canals to shape the paths the water took. They also constructed dams along the river to block the water and force it to collect in pools they had built. The water was stored in these reservoirs for later use.

levee a wall of earth built to prevent a river from flooding its banks

The Euphrates is the longest river in southwestern Asia.

4.5 Difficulties in Building and Maintaining a Complex Irrigation System

Irrigation systems provided enough water for Sumerian farmers to grow plenty of food. But now a new problem arose: how to maintain the irrigation system across village boundaries.

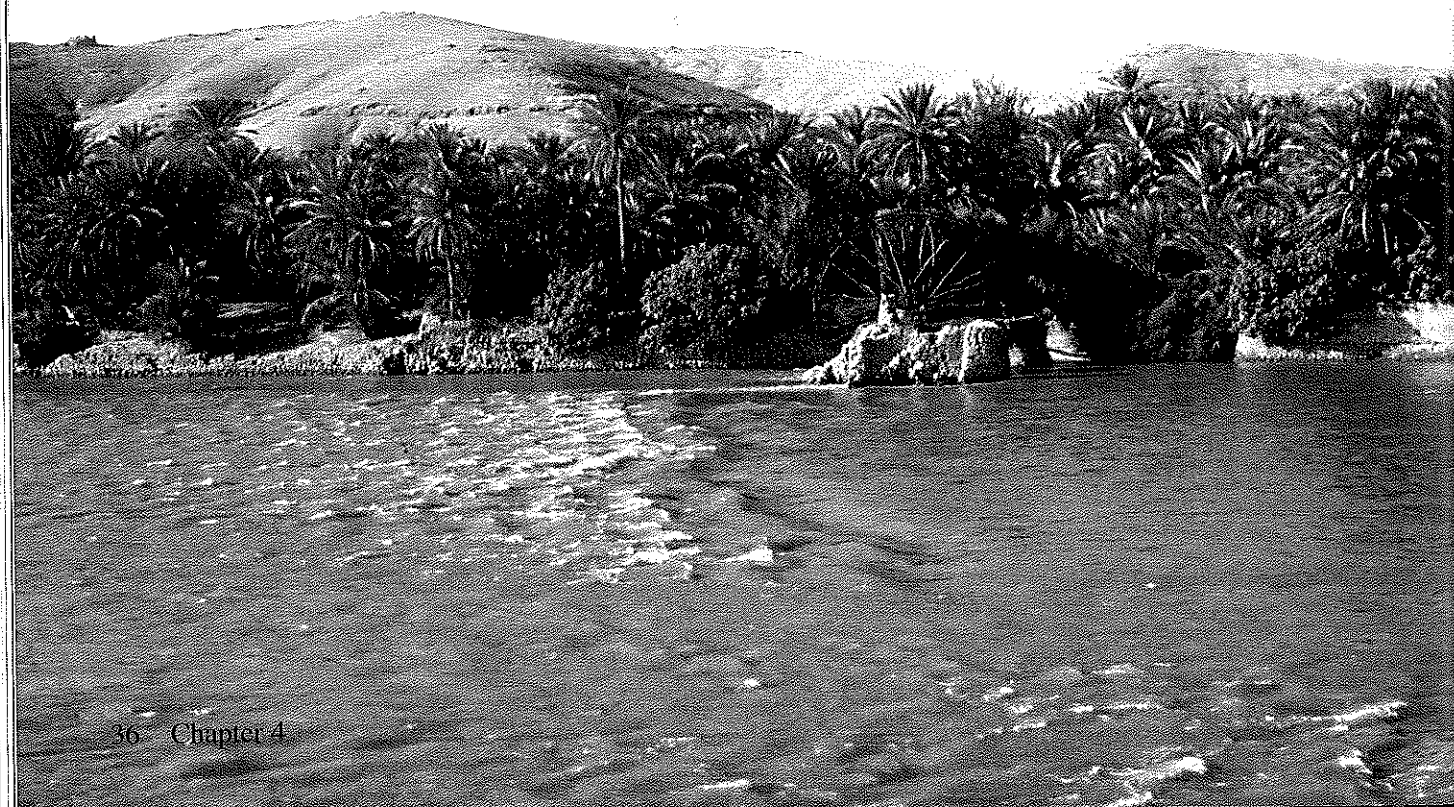
The irrigation system passed through many villages as it carried water from the river to the fields. The system had to be maintained constantly. The canals had to be cleaned regularly as they became clogged with silt (very fine mud). One clogged canal could spoil the entire system.

Farmers could no longer live apart, or in small groups. They were connected for miles around by the canals. They had to work together for the common good.

Gradually, villages came to depend on each other to build and maintain their complex irrigation system. Workers from different villages probably worked together. They cleared the silt from the canals to keep them from clogging. They scooped water from one reservoir into another to make sure the water levels were balanced.

As the Sumerians worked together, they began to create larger communities. Between 3500 and 3000 B.C.E., villages grew into towns. Some towns in Sumer became cities with populations as great as several thousand people.

The Euphrates River still irrigates fields in Iraq today.



4.6 Attacks by Neighboring Communities

As Sumerian cities grew, they fought over the right to use more water. Sometimes cities located upriver (closer to where the river begins) built new canals or blocked other cities' canals. In this way, they kept water from reaching the cities that were downriver (farther from where the river begins). Fights over water became so intense that they led to bloodshed and killing.

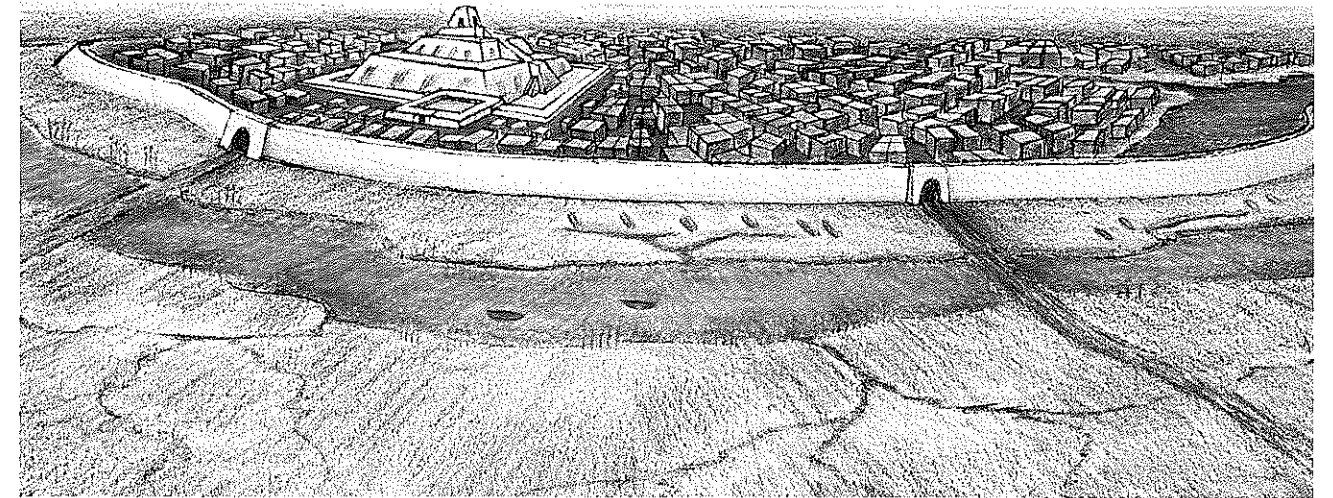
Sumerians began to look for ways to protect their cities from their neighbors. The plains provided no natural barriers for protection.

There were no mountain ranges or rushing rivers to keep out enemies. So, Sumerians began to build strong walls around their cities. The walls were made of mud bricks that were baked in the sun until they were hard. The Sumerians also dug moats outside the city walls to prevent enemies from entering the city. Most people lived in houses behind the walls, while the farms lay outside. In case of attack, farmers fled the fields and took safety inside the city walls.

The walled cities of Sumer were like independent countries. Historians call them city-states. By 3000 B.C.E., most Sumerians lived in city-states.



A stele is an upright slab of stone inscribed with letters and pictures in memory of important events. This part of the Stele of the Vultures, which was found in Iraq, pictures an attacking army.



4.7 From Small Farming Villages to Large City-States

As you've seen, beginning around 3500 B.C.E., the Sumerians went from living in small farming villages to building large, walled cities. How and why did this happen? The answer lies in the problems the Sumerians faced and how they solved them.

A basic challenge for any group is how to provide food for itself. Food shortages had forced settlers in Mesopotamia to move from the foothills down to the river valley. There, farmers faced the problem of having either too much water or too little.

To control the water supply, Sumerians built a complex irrigation system. The system crossed village boundaries, so the Sumerians had to cooperate with one another. This led them to live in larger communities—the first cities.

Each of these cities was like an independent country. Often these city-states fought with one another. To defend themselves, Sumerians built walls and dug moats around their cities. By 3000 B.C.E., most Sumerians lived in walled city-states.

A Sumerian city-state was like a tiny country. The city walls helped protect the city against enemies.

4.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you've learned how villages in Mesopotamia grew into large cities. The people of Mesopotamia had to solve a series of problems in order to live successfully in their challenging environment. Their solutions to these problems gradually led them to build the large communities we call *city-states*.

Living in cities led to a new way of life. In the next chapter, you'll take a closer look at the culture that developed in the Sumerian city-states.