

Sumerian Contributions to Civilization

1. System of Writing

The Sumerians developed an early form of writing called “cuneiform”, which are wedge shaped symbols pressed on clay tablets. Writing allowed a society to keep accurate records, maintain knowledge of previous practices and events, and communicate ideas in new ways.



2. Religion

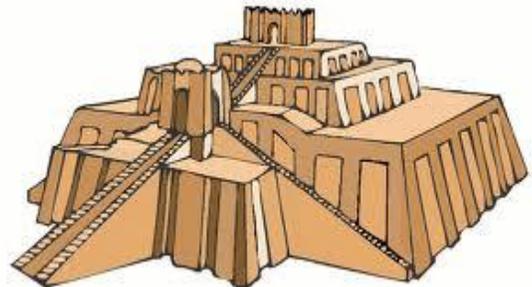
The polytheistic Sumerians believed in many powerful gods and goddesses, who had human qualities. Each city-state had its own special god or goddess. Most gods and goddesses were closely tied to the forces of nature. Keeping these divine beings happy was considered important to the well-being of the city-state.

3. Architecture

The Sumerians were the world’s first city-builders. They lacked stone and timber, so they made their buildings from mud bricks and crushed reeds. They constructed walled cities and huge pyramid-like temples called “ziggurats” to honor the chief god or goddess of each city-state. A ziggurat had steps that people could climb to reach the shrine of that particular city-state’s chief god or goddess.

4. Mathematics as Astronomy

The Sumerians developed a number system based on the unit 60. Today we use this unit in measuring time. The Sumerian calendar divided the year into 12 months. The Sumerians also developed algebra and geometry.



5. Specialization of Labor

The first labor skill was the ability to farm. As the food supply increased, some people became available to do other kinds of work and develop other skills, such as porters, scribes, builders, government leaders, and religious leaders.

6. Invention of the Wheel

The Sumerians built the first wheeled vehicles. This made transportation easier.

7. Economy

Many Sumerians grew rich from trade. Traders traveled along rivers and over the desert. Historians know that Sumerian trade was extensive because evidence of goods from as far away as Egypt and India has been found there.

Questions to Answer

1. Why did Sumerians develop “cuneiform” writing?
2. Why did the Sumerians build “ziggurats”?
3. How did labor become specialized?
4. Why was the invention of the wheel important?