Name: _____ Date: _____

Study Guide #2: In the Land of Sumer

The Geography of Mesopotamia. The first known civilization arose in the Fertile Crescent, a rich area of land between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in present-day Iraq. This region is also known as Mesopotamia. Nomadic herders and agricultural communities lived in the deserts and hills surrounding the Fertile Crescent. Eventually these people migrated into the river valleys, where life was easier.

The rivers affected the land and its people both positively and negatively. They supplied the water that was necessary for farming, but they also brought yearly floods that caused great destruction. These floods left **silt**—deposits of mud and sand—in the soil of the Fertile Crescent, which made the soil very rich.

In the southern region of Mesopotamia, known as Sumer, the silt built up, often causing the rivers to overflow their banks. Farmers began to dig canals and dikes to channel the water into the fields. Such projects required people to work cooperatively. This cooperation gave rise to Sumerian civilization.

The Sumerian City-States. As people worked together to control the floodwaters, some of the small villages of Sumer grew into towns and, by about 3500 B.C., true cities. Due to competition with each other for water and other resources, the **city-states** of Sumer never unified into one country.

Sumerians believed the priests who led their cities knew about the spirits or gods who were thought to inhabit all natural forces, such as lightning, rain, wind, and thunder. This specialized knowledge allowed the priests to know how to control the rivers and when to plant crops. The priests organized the complex Sumerian society. Sumerians constructed large temples called **ziggurats** to honor their gods.

Gradually, war leaders who led the fight against nomadic raiders and other Sumerian cities took control from the priests. These leaders often acted as the gods' high priests, conducting important sacrifices, and came to be known as kings. Sumerian society developed a strict **hierarchy**, with kings, priests, nobles, and government officials at the top level. Farmers, merchants, and artisans occupied the middle level and slaves were at the bottom.

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Sumerian city-states began to trade with other peoples of Southwest Asia, enabling them to obtain raw materials such as wood, stone, and metals that were not available in Mesopotamia. Kings and priests usually financed this trade.

Sumerian Culture. Sumerian cities had a rich culture, producing art and developing mathematics and music. They had a complex religious structure that was **polytheistic**, which means that they worshipped many gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses controlled the natural elements and were generally seen as cruel.

Perhaps the most important development of the Sumerians was writing. Sumerian writing first developed so Sumerians could keep records for their trading. They drew **pictographs**, which conveyed messages using small pictures. Because pictographs were difficult to create, Sumerians gradually began to simplify the pictures. Soon, pictures began to stand for sounds instead of objects. This new script was known as **cuneiform**.

Sumerians began using writing to record the activities and ideas of daily life. By 2450 B.C. writing was well established in Sumer. Traders may have spread the use of writing to other areas. Because they wrote about events, myths, and stories, Sumerians moved from prehistory into the historical era.

Answer the questions below in your own words. Highlight your evidence.

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1. What factors led people to settle in Mesopotamia?

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2. Why did Sumerians begin to work cooperatively?

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3. Why did Sumerian priests decide when to plant crops?

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4. Who ruled the Sumerian city-states?

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5. Why did Sumerians first develop writing?

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6. As their script developed, what did Sumerians write about?

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