

A Quick Summary of Sumerian Civilization in the Fertile Crescent

The Sumerians populated the area known as the "Fertile Crescent" about 3500 BC. The Fertile Crescent is located east of the Mediterranean Sea in an area that is now known as Iraq, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These peoples were among the first civilizations to use the pottery wheel in making clay into containers and other implements by heating the clay to "fire" it. They invented the wheel and used it for carts drawn by animals, and they developed the concept of the arch to span openings in clay brick walls.¹ The Sumerian civilization is credited with initiating the move from nomadic, food-gathering life to a settled life with agriculture conducted with irrigated fields; this produced a reliable cereal food supply that made available the time needed to dedicate to the inventions they made.

The Sumerians also invented the cylinder seal. A cylinder seal is a small round rod of clay or stone with a carved design on it. When the cylinder is rolled on clay it produces an oblong image that was accepted as the "signature" of the person who owned the seal. Cylinder seals were among the first form of written communication.

Sumer developed as a civilization with numerous separate city-states rather than as a single unified nation as did Egypt. Each Sumerian city-state probably had about 200,000 people and was organized around a temple dedicated to the deity that the city worshipped.

SUMMARY TIMELINE

- The Sumerians populated the area known as the "Fertile Crescent" about 3500 BC.
- They invented the wheel and used it for carts drawn by animals, and they developed the concept of the arch to span openings in clay brick walls in about 2500 BC.
- About 1750 BC the Babylonian Empire was formed with the combination of Semitic and Sumerian populations under King Hammurabi, who developed a set of laws that were made known to people by the use of large stone monuments inscribed with them under a carving of the king.
- The Assyrian Empire originated north of Babylon. Since the Assyrians had developed the use of the horse in warfare they were able to overrun and conquer the Babylonians about 1400 BC. They also overran northern Israel in 740 BC, dispersing 10 of the 12 Jewish tribes. These are known as the "10 lost tribes" since no organized return of these people to Israel ever occurred in ancient times.
- The Babylonian Empire regained its supremacy under king Nebuchadnezzar in about 570 BC. It's mentioned in the Bible since it invaded Judah (southern Israel), captured and destroyed Jerusalem, and led many of the Jews into exile.²

¹ The arch was known to the Greeks but was not used by them in their temple architecture; the Romans later made great use of the arch in many types of structures.

² This exile was ended in 539 BC when the Persian (Iranian) king Cyrus the Great, revered in the Bible, defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews of the two remaining Jewish tribes to return to Jerusalem.