Rivers and Rulers

How geography shaped Sumerian city-states

AWH.C.1.2 "Analyze the geographical and environmental factors that encouraged human communities to organize into complex states."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three environmental conditions and circle the ways people responded to them. Number two places where those responses led to new rules, jobs, or leaders.

Water, Work, and Power in Sumer

1 In southern Mesopotamia, near the Persian Gulf, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers crossed a broad, dry plain. By about 3500 BCE, towns in the region were growing into Sumerian city-states. Rain was too scarce for dependable farming, but river water and rich soil made harvests possible. Floods could arrive at difficult times, and river channels could shift. Farmers dug canals to bring water to fields and built banks to protect crops. A canal serving several villages needed regular clearing and rules about water use. Neighbors had reasons to plan work together, but they also had reasons to argue over who received water first.

2 Irrigation could produce more food than a farming household needed. In growing settlements such as Uruk, some people could spend their time making pottery, building, or trading instead of growing food. Managing stored grain and assigning work required people who could keep track of goods and labor. Sumerian officials used clay tokens and, later, written records on clay tablets. Temples played a major role in collecting and distributing resources, while rulers also gained authority over workers and land. Shared water systems did not automatically create a state. Decisions about who controlled food, labor, and canals helped turn neighboring settlements into organized city-states.

3 The plain offered few trees suitable for large beams and little building stone. People in Sumer exchanged goods with other regions for materials they could not easily find nearby. River routes helped move heavy cargo, but a city also had to organize workers, supplies, and agreements to support long-distance exchange. Competition for fields, canal access, and trade could bring neighboring cities into conflict. Leaders built walls and gathered fighters, adding another layer of organization. Geography created opportunities and pressures, not a single path: a river might support a harvest, yet disputes over its water could shape which city held power.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the dry climate and nearby rivers together make shared planning useful for farmers?

2. Why might a canal serving several villages lead to both cooperation and disputes?

3. Explain how irrigation-supported harvests made specialized jobs and record keeping possible.

4. How did the lack of local wood and stone, together with river routes, increase the need for organized leadership?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a group of small islands with sheltered harbors, abundant fish, little fresh water, and seasonal storms. In four to six sentences, explain how two of these conditions could encourage the islands to form a complex state, and include one decision people would need to make together.

ANSWER KEY

Rivers and Rulers

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.1.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three environmental conditions and circle the ways people responded to them. Number two places where those responses led to new rules, jobs, or leaders. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the dry climate and nearby rivers together make shared planning useful for farmers?	**Scarce rain made river water important for farming. Farmers had to plan together to build and maintain canals that brought water to their fields.**
2	Why might a canal serving several villages lead to both cooperation and disputes?	**Villages needed to clear the canal together, but they could disagree about who received water first.**
3	Explain how irrigation-supported harvests made specialized jobs and record keeping possible.	**Extra food allowed some people to make pottery, build, or trade rather than farm. Managing stored grain and workers also created a need to track goods and labor.**
4	How did the lack of local wood and stone, together with river routes, increase the need for organized leadership?	**Cities exchanged goods to obtain wood and stone from other regions. River routes made cargo transport possible, while leaders organized workers, supplies, and agreements for that exchange.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Sheltered harbors could help island communities exchange fish and tools, making ports important gathering places. Leaders might organize dock workers and settle disputes between traders from different islands. Because fresh water is scarce, communities could build shared storage tanks and decide together how much each island may use. Officials who manage ports and water across several islands might gain lasting authority, though people would have to choose to follow their rules.

Accept other passage-supported causal links in Part 2. For Part 3, look for two stated island conditions connected to organized authority and a specific shared decision, without treating state formation as inevitable.