Clay, Stone, Power

How Mesopotamian achievements helped cities function

AWH.C.2.4 "Describe the important achievements of Mesopotamian civilization (e.g., system of writing and its importance in record keeping and tax collection, monumental architecture, relief sculpture, mosaics, state-building)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each Mesopotamian achievement in the passage, then circle a phrase that shows what it helped people do or communicate.

A City Built on More Than Bricks

1 Imagine a boat delivering sacks of barley to a city in ancient Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. An official must know who brought the grain, how much arrived, and what portion is owed to the government. Beginning in the late fourth millennium BCE, scribes in southern Mesopotamia developed a writing system that became cuneiform. They pressed signs into wet clay tablets, which could dry and be stored. Written accounts helped officials track goods, collect taxes, and check whether a payment was missing. Writing also preserved laws and stories, but its everyday power lay in making information available after a conversation ended.

2 Now follow the grain toward a temple complex. In some Mesopotamian cities, builders raised a ziggurat, a stepped platform that supported a temple. Its height made the religious center visible across the surrounding area. Building such a structure demanded bricks, workers, and organized supplies. Rulers and temple leaders could direct these resources through institutions that governed city life. Mesopotamia was not one nation for its entire history: city-states such as Uruk and Ur had their own leaders, while later kingdoms brought larger territories under one ruler. Control over labor, land, and stored food helped these states build and maintain cities.

3 Art made public buildings speak without a written ledger. In later Mesopotamian kingdoms, carved stone reliefs on palace walls showed rulers, battles, and royal hunts. Their placement presented the ruler as powerful to people entering the palace, though the scenes reflected a ruler's chosen message rather than an impartial report. Mesopotamian artists also set small pieces of colored material into mosaics. The Standard of Ur, made in the third millennium BCE, uses arranged pieces of shell, red limestone, and blue lapis lazuli to show war and feasting. These works reveal skilled craft and offer evidence of how elites represented authority and social order.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did writing help officials collect taxes and keep track of goods?

2. How did building a ziggurat show that a city could organize people and resources?

3. How did reliefs and mosaics each communicate ideas about power or social order?

4. How did Mesopotamian states differ in size, and what resources helped their leaders govern?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A new Mesopotamian canal town must manage a shared grain store and make its leaders' authority visible. In four or five sentences, propose a plan using two different achievements from the passage, and explain one benefit and one possible limit of each.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.2.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each Mesopotamian achievement in the passage, then circle a phrase that shows what it helped people do or communicate. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did writing help officials collect taxes and keep track of goods?	**Clay-tablet accounts recorded goods and payments, allowing officials to track what arrived and check for missing taxes.**
2	How did building a ziggurat show that a city could organize people and resources?	**Construction required leaders to direct workers and organize bricks and supplies.**
3	How did reliefs and mosaics each communicate ideas about power or social order?	**Palace reliefs showed rulers in battles and hunts to present them as powerful. Mosaics such as the Standard of Ur showed war and feasting, offering evidence of how elites represented authority and social order.**
4	How did Mesopotamian states differ in size, and what resources helped their leaders govern?	**City-states had their own leaders, while later kingdoms ruled larger territories. Control over labor, land, and stored food helped leaders build and maintain cities.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would ask scribes to record each family's grain contribution on clay tablets so officials could check the store and collect taxes. A scribe's mistake could leave a delivery out of the record. I would place a carved relief at the storehouse entrance showing leaders organizing canal repairs. It could make their work visible and encourage people to cooperate. Because leaders choose what the relief shows, it might hide complaints about the work.

For Part 3, accept any two distinct achievements used in a plausible plan for the town. Each achievement needs a specific benefit and a reasonable limit.