2-2c Mathematics and Chronology

Like almost all agrarian civilizations, Mesopotamians' sense of time was shaped by the cyclic nature of seasonal change. The year was based on the passage of seasons, and their way of reckoning this was by observing and recording the positions of heavenly bodies as well as the recurring changes in their surroundings. Their calendar was subdivided into lunar months, corresponding to the period between one full moon and the next. In calculating the year's length, the Sumerians arrived at a figure close to our own—although not quite as close as the Egyptians—by using their solar calendar. All in all, Sumerian math (along with its further development by the Babylonians and Persians) has held up well and has been influential in all later Western science, including that of the Greeks.

After the invention of writing, perhaps the most dramatic advances made by these early inhabitants of Mesopotamia were in mathematics and chronology. Sumerian math was based on units of sixty and its divisors; this, of course, is the reason that we still measure time in intervals of sixty seconds and sixty minutes. Much of our basic geometry and trigonometry, such as the 360 degrees of a circle, also originated with the Sumerians.

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2c Mathematics and Chronology
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