Sumer and the First Cities of the Ancient Near East

The earliest of the city states of the ancient Near East appeared at the southern end of the Mesopotamian plain, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. It was here that the civilization known as Sumer emerged in its earliest form in the fifth millennium. At first sight, the plain did not appear to be a likely home for a civilization. There were few natural resources, no timber, stone, or metals. Rainfall was limited, and what water there was rushed across the plain in the annual flood of melted snow. As the plain fell only 20 meters in 500 kilometers, the beds of the rivers shifted constantly. It was this that made the organization of irrigation, particularly the building of canals to channel and preserve the water, essential. Once this was done and the silt carried down by the rivers was planted, the rewards were rich: four to five times what rain-fed earth would produce. It was these conditions that allowed an elite to emerge, probably as an organizing class, and to sustain itself through the control of surplus crops.

It is difficult to isolate the factors that led to the next development—the emergence of urban settlements. The earliest, that of Eridu, about 4500 B.C.E., and Uruk, a thousand years later, center on impressive temple complexes built of mud brick. In some way, the elite had associated themselves with the power of the gods. Uruk, for instance, had two patron gods—Anu, the god of the sky and sovereign of all other gods, and Inanna, a goddess of love and war—and there were others, patrons of different cities. Human beings were at their mercy. The biblical story of the Flood may originate in Sumer. In the earliest version, the gods destroy the human race because its clamor had been so disturbing to them.

It used to be believed that before 3000 B.C.E. the political and economic life of the cities was centered on their temples, but it now seems probable that the cities had secular rulers from earliest times. Within the city lived administrators, craftspeople, and merchants. (Trading was important, as so many raw materials, the semiprecious stones for the decoration of the temples, timbers for roofs, and all metals, had to be imported.) An increasingly sophisticated system of administration led in about 3300 B.C.E. to the appearance of writing. The earliest script was based on logograms, with a symbol being used to express a whole word. The logograms were incised on damp clay tablets with a stylus with a wedge shape at its end. (The Romans called the shape cuneus and this gives the script its name of cuneiform.) Two thousand logograms have been recorded from these early centuries of writing. A more economical approach was to use a sign to express not a whole word but a single syllable. (To take an example: the Sumerian word for " head” was “sag.” Whenever a word including a syllable in which the sound “sag” was to be written, the sign for “sag" could be used to express that syllable with the remaining syllables of the word expressed by other signs.) By 2300 B.C.E. the number of signs required had been reduced to 600, and the range of words that could be expressed had widened. Texts dealing with economic matters predominated, as they always had done; but at this point works of theology, literature, history, and law also appeared.

Other innovations of the late fourth millennium include the wheel, probably developed first as a more efficient way of making pottery and then transferred to transport. A tablet engraved about 3000 B.C.E. provides the earliest known example from Sumer, a roofed boxlike sledge mounted on four solid wheels. A major development was the discovery, again about 3000 B.C.E., that if copper, which had been known in Mesopotamia since about 3500 B.C.E., was mixed with tin, a much harder metal, bronze, would result. Although copper and stone tools continued to be used, bronze was far more successful in creating sharp edges that could be used as anything from saws and scythes to weapons. The period from 3000 to 1000 B.C.E., when the use of bronze became widespread, is normally referred to as the Bronze Age.

Paragraph 1: The earliest of the city states of the ancient Near East appeared at the southern end of the Mesopotamian plain, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. It was here that the civilization known as Sumer emerged in its earliest form in the fifth millennium. At first sight, the plain did not appear to be a likely home for a civilization. There were few natural resources, no timber, stone, or metals. Rainfall was limited, and what water there was rushed across the plain in the annual flood of melted snow. As the plain fell only 20 meters in 500 kilometers, the beds of the rivers shifted constantly. It was this that made the organization of irrigation, particularly the building of canals to channel and preserve the water, essential. Once this was done and the silt carried down by the rivers was planted, the rewards were rich: four to five times what rain-fed earth would produce. It was these conditions that allowed an elite to emerge, probably as an organizing class, and to sustain itself through the control of surplus crops.

1. Which of the following is NOT mentioned in paragraph 1 as a disadvantage of the Mesopotamian plain? （C）

○There was not very much rainfall for most of the year.

○ Melting snow caused flooding every year.

○ The silt deposited by rivers damaged crops.

○ Timber, stone and metals were not readily available.

2. According to paragraph 1, which of the following made it possible for an elite to emerge? （D）

○ New crops were developed that were better suited to conditions on the Mesopotamian plain.

○ The richest individuals managed to gain control of the most valuable cropland.

○ Control over the few available natural resources made some people four to five times richer than everyone else.

○ The building of canals to increase agricultural output required organization.

3. The word “sustain" in the passage is closest in meaning to （C）

○ defend

○ promote

○ maintain

○ transform

Paragraph 2: It is difficult to isolate the factors that led to the next development—the emergence of urban settlements. The earliest, that of Eridu, about 4500 B.C.E., and Uruk, a thousand years later, center on impressive temple complexes built of mud brick. In some way, the elite had associated themselves with the power of the gods. Uruk, for instance, had two patron gods—Anu, the god of the sky and sovereign of all other gods, and Inanna, a goddess of love and war—and there were others, patrons of different cities. Human beings were at their mercy. The biblical story of the Flood may originate in Sumer. In the earliest version, the gods destroy the human race because its clamor had been so disturbing to them.

4. According to paragraph 2, Eridu and Uruk are examples of urban settlements that （B）

○ lacked the features usually found in other early urban settlements

○ developed around religious buildings

○ grew much more rapidly than most of the urban settlements found in Sumer

○ were mysteriously destroyed and abandoned

5. The word “sovereign" in the passage is closest in meaning to （B）

○ counselor

○ master

○ defender

○ creator

Paragraph 3: It used to be believed that before 3000 B.C.E. the political and economic life of the cities was centered on their temples, but it now seems probable that the cities had secular rulers from earliest times. Within the city lived administrators, craftspeople, and merchants. (Trading was important, as so many raw materials, the semiprecious stones for the decoration of the temples, timbers for roofs, and all metals, had to be imported.) An increasingly sophisticated system of administration led in about 3300 B.C.E. to the appearance of writing. The earliest script was based on logograms, with a symbol being used to express a whole word. The logograms were incised on damp clay tablets with a stylus with a wedge shape at its end. (The Romans called the shape cuneus and this gives the script its name of cuneiform.) Two thousand logograms have been recorded from these early centuries of writing. A more economical approach was to use a sign to express not a whole word but a single syllable. (To take an example: the Sumerian word for " head” was “sag.” Whenever a word including a syllable in which the sound “sag” was to be written, the sign for “sag" could be used to express that syllable with the remaining syllables of the word expressed by other signs.) By 2300 B.C.E. the number of signs required had been reduced to 600, and the range of words that could be expressed had widened. Texts dealing with economic matters predominated, as they always had done; but at this point works of theology, literature, history, and law also appeared.

6. According to paragraph 3, which of the following led to the appearance of writing? （A）

○ An increasingly sophisticated administrative system

○ Coordination between secular and religious leaders

○ The large volume of trade, particularly imports

○ A rapidly expanding and changing population

7. In paragraph 3, why does the author provide the information that the number of signs in use had dropped from 2,000 to 600 by 2300 B.C.E.? （D）

○ To argue that the development of writing involved periods of growth followed by periods of decline

○ To demonstrate that earlier written texts used a larger vocabulary than later texts, which were aimed at a broader audience

○ To support the claim that the range of words expressed by logograms varied widely depending on time period and type of text

○ To provide evidence for the increased efficiency of using signs to express syllables rather than whole words

8: According to paragraph 3, ancient texts most commonly dealt with （C）

○ theology

○ literature

○ economics

○ law

Paragraph 4: Other innovations of the late fourth millennium include the wheel, probably developed first as a more efficient way of making pottery and then transferred to transport. A tablet engraved about 3000 B.C.E. provides the earliest known example from Sumer, a roofed boxlike sledge mounted on four solid wheels. A major development was the discovery, again about 3000 B.C.E., that if copper, which had been known in Mesopotamia since about 3500 B.C.E., was mixed with tin, a much harder metal, bronze, would result. Although copper and stone tools continued to be used, bronze was far more successful in creating sharp edges that could be used as anything from saws and scythes to weapons. The period from 3000 to 1000 B.C.E., when the use of bronze became widespread, is normally referred to as the Bronze Age.

9. According to paragraph 4, the earliest wheels probably （B）

○were first developed in areas outside Mesopotamia

○were used to make pottery

○ appeared on boxlike sledges

○ were used to transport goods between cities

10. The word “engraved” in the passage is closest in meaning to （A）

○ carved

○ produced

○ dated

○ discovered

11. Which of the sentences below best expresses the essential information in the highlighted sentence in the passage? Incorrect choices change the meaning in important ways or leave out essential information. （A）

○ Also around 3000 B.C.E., it was discovered that mixing copper, known from about 3500 B.C.E., with tin would create a much harder metal known as bronze.

○ Although copper had been known since 3500 B.C.E in Mesopotamia, the discovery of bronze did not occur until around 3000 B.C.E.

○ Another major development around 3000 B.C.E. was the discovery that copper could be mixed with a much harder metal known as tin.

○ The development of bronze by mixing copper and tin probably occurred around 3000 B.C.E. but may have happened as early as 3500 B.C.E.

12. The word “widespread” in the passage is closest in meaning to （D）

○ obvious

○ significant

○ necessary

○ common

Paragraph 3: It used to be believed that before 3000 B.C.E. the political and economic life of the cities was centered on their temples, but it now seems probable that the cities had secular rulers from earliest times. ■Within the city lived administrators, craftspeople, and merchants. (Trading was important, as so many raw materials, the semiprecious stones for the decoration of the temples, timbers for roofs, and all metals, had to be imported.) ■An increasingly sophisticated system of administration led in about 3300 B.C.E. to the appearance of writing. ■The earliest script was based on logograms, with a symbol being used to express a whole word. ■The logograms were incised on damp clay tablets with a stylus with a wedge shape at its end. (The Romans called the shape cuneus and this gives the script its name of cuneiform.) Two thousand logograms have been recorded from these early centuries of writing. A more economical approach was to use a sign to express not a whole word but a single syllable. (To take an example: the Sumerian word for " head” was “sag.” Whenever a word including a syllable in which the sound “sag” was to be written, the sign for “sag" could be used to express that syllable with the remaining syllables of the word expressed by other signs.) By 2300 B.C.E. the number of signs required had been reduced to 600, and the range of words that could be expressed had widened. Texts dealing with economic matters predominated, as they always had done; but at this point works of theology, literature, history, and law also appeared.

13. Look at the four squares [■]that indicate where the following sentence could be added to the passage.

**City life was diverse, and the population was engaged in a variety of occupations.**

Where would the sentence best fit? （A）

14. **Directions:** An introductory sentence for a brief summary of the passage is provided below. Complete the summary by selecting the THREE answer choices that express the most important ideas in the passage. Some sentences do not belong in the summary because they express ideas that are not presented in the passage or are minorideas in the passage. This question is worth 2 points. （CEF）

Irrigation made it possible for the civilization known as Sumer to arise on the Mesopotamian plain in the fifth millennium B.C.E.

Answer Choices

○ The scarcity of natural resources on the plain made it necessary for a powerful elite to emerge and take charge of trade and imports.

○ The economy of each city was based on a craft such as pottery or metal working, and the city of Eridu was known for its saws, scythes and weapons.

○ Writing appeared in the form of logograms and later developed into a system using signs to represent syllables rather than whole words.

○ Priests were powerful figures in the ancient civilization and controlled the political and economic life of the cities.

○ The earliest city states had one or more patron gods and were built around central temple complexes.

○ The development of the wheel and the creation of bronze were important innovations in Sumer