

1.1 The Geography of Ancient Mesopotamia

Long after Çatalhöyük was settled, Southwest Asia was home to another group of people. They lived between two flowing rivers in a fertile land. Because of the advances in government, culture, and technology that took place there, the region is often called a “cradle of civilization.”

MAIN IDEA

The geography of Mesopotamia helped create the conditions for civilization.

THE LAND BETWEEN THE RIVERS

As you have learned, the Fertile Crescent sweeps its way across Southwest Asia. In the west it bends down the coast of the Mediterranean. In the east it follows the course of the **Tigris (TY-gruhs) River** and the **Euphrates (yu-FRAY-teez) River** until they merge and empty into the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. Today this river valley lies mostly in the country of Iraq. Historians call this flat, fertile area **Mesopotamia** (meh-suh-puh-TAY-mee-uh), which means “land between the rivers.” The people who once lived there are known as Mesopotamians.

The people of Mesopotamia called the Tigris “swift river” because it flowed fast. The Euphrates flowed more slowly. It frequently changed course, leaving riverside

settlements without water. Both rivers flooded unpredictably. Mesopotamians never knew when or how much water would come. Too much, too little, or too late spelled disaster for crops.

On the plus side, the often-destructive floodwaters deposited **silt**, an especially fine and fertile soil, that was excellent for agriculture. In this way, the rivers brought life to the otherwise dry land of Mesopotamia and supported the early civilization that was developing there. As farming thrived in this river valley, populations grew and cities developed.

FARMING IN THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Farming began as early as 9800 B.C. in the Fertile Crescent. It eventually spread throughout Mesopotamia. However, Mesopotamia was far from perfect for agriculture. In addition to flooding, farmers had to deal with hot summers and unreliable rainfall. However, the region's fertile soils promised plentiful crops, such as wheat, barley, and figs—if the people could come up with a way to control the water supply.

Irrigation, or watering fields using human-made systems, was the answer. Farmers in Mesopotamian villages cooperated to dig and maintain irrigation canals that carried water from the rivers to the fields. Farmers also stored rainwater for later use and built walls from mounds of earth to hold back floodwaters. The people developed important new technology, such as the ox-driven plow, a tool that broke up the hard-baked summer soil and prepared large areas for planting. These creative methods enabled farmers to use the rich soil to their advantage.

The result was a reliable and abundant agricultural surplus. The ample food fed the area's growing population. Because food was plentiful, the people of Mesopotamia could afford to develop art, architecture, and technology. The agricultural surpluses allowed a great civilization to develop.



1.2

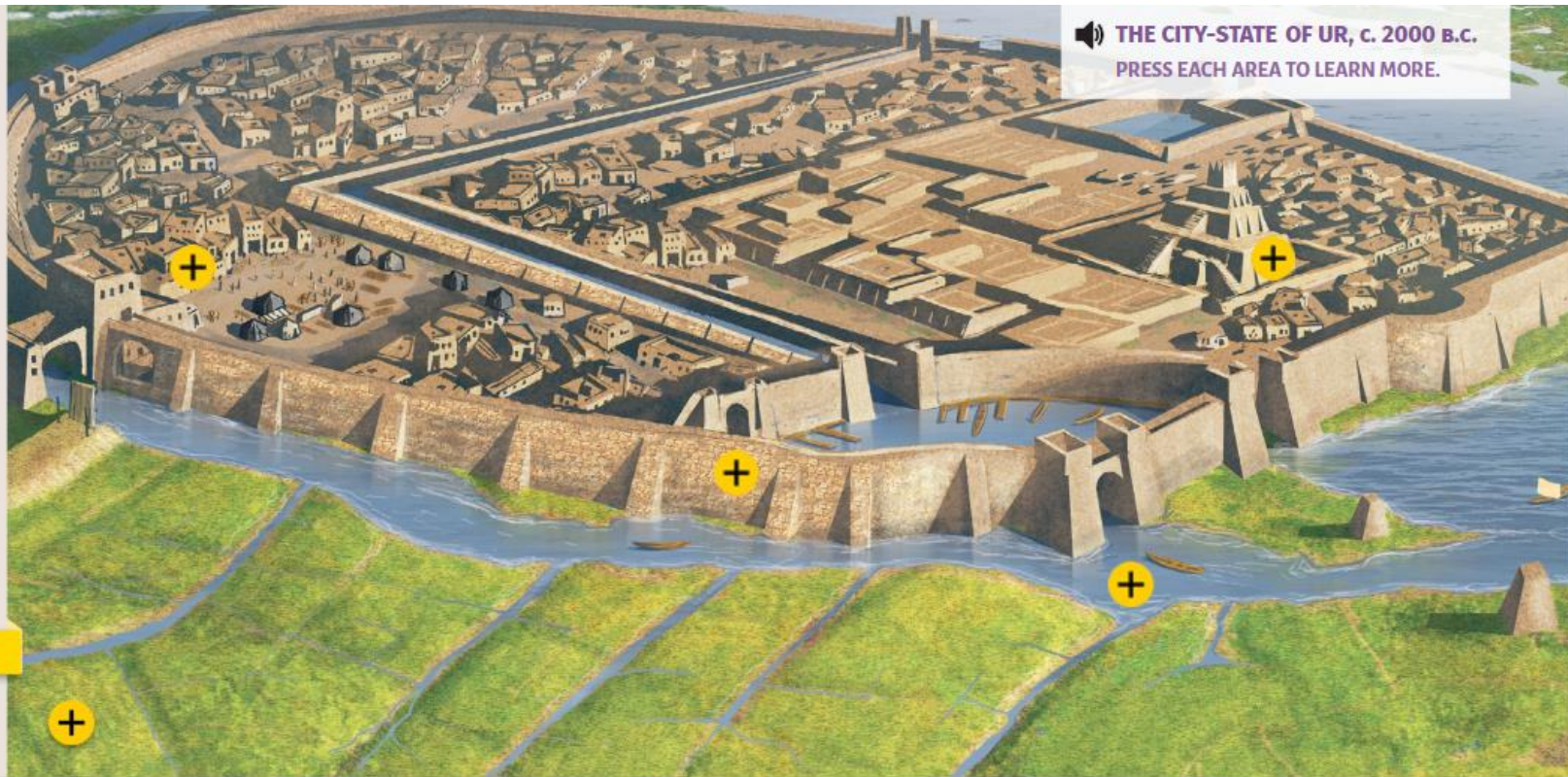
City-States Develop



The present-day location that was once Mesopotamia is made up of windswept deserts. It's hard to imagine that 5,500 years ago this dusty land was filled with people living their busy city lives. The city streets were not just filled with people—there were also buildings and temples so tall they seemed to rise up to the heavens.

MAIN IDEA

The city-states of Sumer formed Southwest Asia's first civilization.



THE CITY-STATE OF UR, c. 2000 B.C.
PRESS EACH AREA TO LEARN MORE.

mt SUMER

Around 3500 B.C., Mesopotamia's first civilization arose in **Sumer** (SOO-mur), an area in the southern part of the region. (See the map in Lesson 1.1.) Sumer was not controlled by a single, unified government. Instead, the area was made up of a dozen advanced, self-governing city-states. A **city-state** included the city and its surrounding lands and settlements. These units developed when villages united to build major irrigation projects.

Most of Sumer's 12 city-states, including Ur, were built on the Tigris or Euphrates rivers. City-states also clustered close to the coast of the Persian Gulf, where

the people developed fishing and trade. Frequent wars were fought between city-states to protect fertile land, limited natural resources, and profitable trade routes.

CENTERS OF CIVILIZATION mt

Surplus food gave Sumerians time to learn new skills and encouraged trade. Though Sumer had productive farmland, the area lacked important natural resources, such as tin and copper. These resources had to be acquired through trade. When combined, tin and copper produce bronze, a strong metal used by Sumerians to create tools and weapons. Because of the importance of bronze, the period around 3000 B.C. is called the Bronze Age.

Surplus food also led to a growth in population. New government systems had to be established to meet the challenge of managing so many people. Kings arose to provide strong leadership, and administrators supervised taxes and kept order. Because of the wealth created by agricultural surpluses, Sumerians could afford to support these government administrators.

Sumerian society was organized by **social class**, an order based on power and wealth. Kings ruled at the top, with priests just beneath them. Next came administrators, scribes, merchants, and **artisans**, or people who are skilled at making things by hand. These groups in turn looked down on farmers and less-skilled workers. However, even people at the bottom of this system ranked higher than Sumerian slaves.

REVIEW & ASSESS

- 1. READING CHECK** How did the organization of Sumerian society affect the way different roles were viewed by others?
- 2. INTEGRATE VISUALS** In what ways did the rivers support agriculture and the city-states?
- 3. ANALYZE CAUSE AND EFFECT** How did food surpluses encourage local and long-distance trade?

1.3

Religion in Sumer



In the blazing sun, Sumerian priests carry food offerings step by step to the top of the great temple. The purpose of this feast is to secure the gods' favor for another day. In the dangerous and unpredictable world of Sumer, it's important to keep the gods on your side.

MAIN IDEA

Sumerians took religion seriously and built monumental structures to please their gods.



VOTIVE STATUES

To demonstrate their devotion to the gods, Sumerians placed small statues called votives in temples. Sumerians believed that while they worked on earthly activities like farming or fishing, the statues would pray on their behalf.

LAND OF MANY GODS

Sumerian lives depended on natural forces they could not control, including rivers that flooded and changed course. The people worshipped hundreds of gods, who they believed could control these forces. A belief in many gods is called **polytheism**.

Sumerians believed that their gods ruled the earth and had created humans to serve them. They also believed that the gods possessed superhuman powers. Unfortunately, the gods could use these powers to cause droughts, floods, and disease. For example, Ishkur was a storm god who was believed to have the power to cause destructive rains and floods whenever he liked.

To keep the gods happy, Sumerian priests tried to please them. Everyone paid a temple tax, which was offered to the gods in elaborate public **rituals**, or formal series of acts always performed in the same way. By observing natural events, including the movement of the sun, moon, and stars, priests tried to predict what the gods were planning. These observations helped the Sumerians develop a calendar, astronomy, and mathematics.

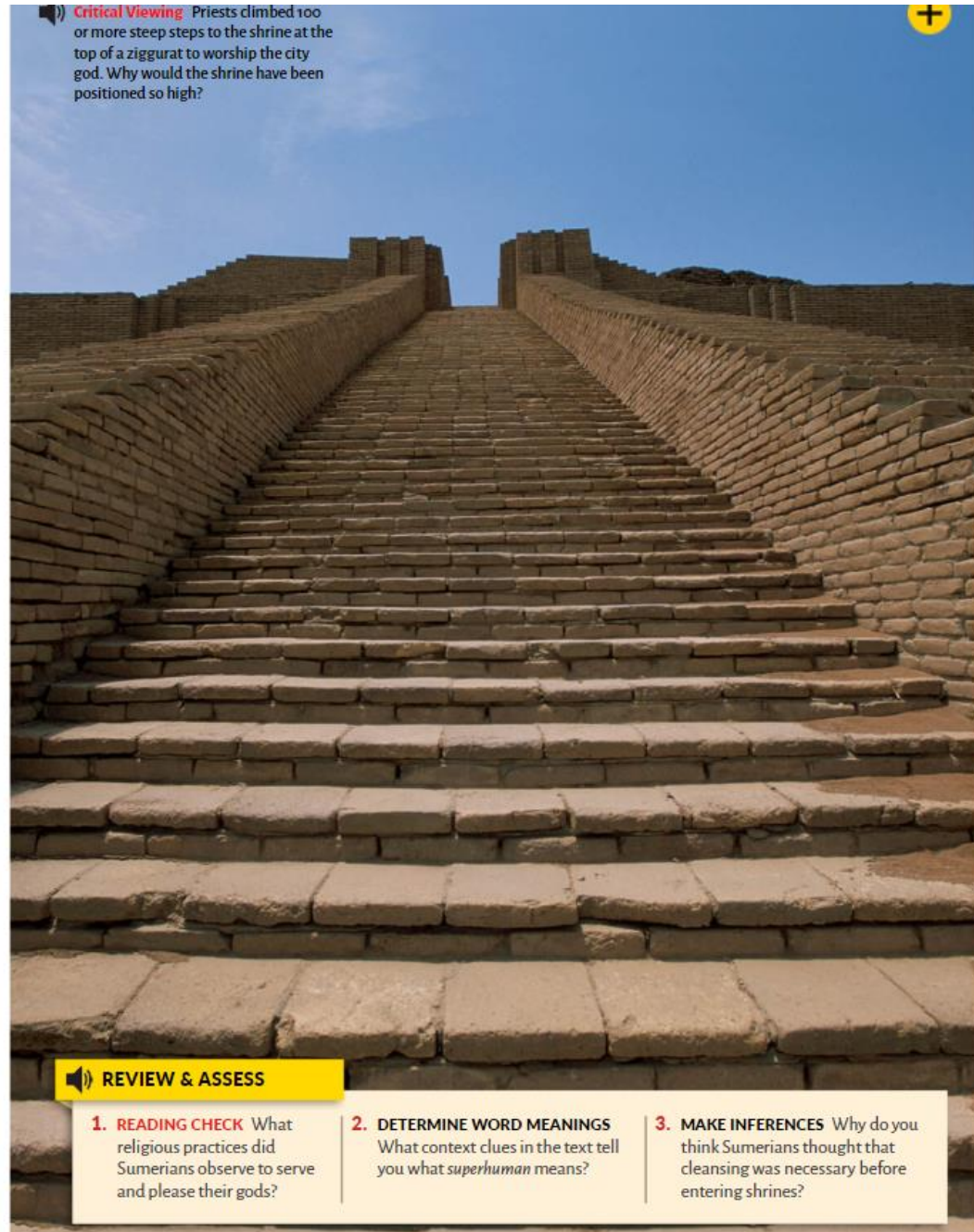
OFFERINGS AT THE TEMPLES

City-states were important religious centers. The most important building within a city-state was a huge pyramid-shaped temple called a **ziggurat** (ZIH-guh-rat). *Ziggurat* means "mountaintop." Every city was dedicated to a major deity, a god or goddess, who was its guardian. Sumerians believed that the deity lived in a shrine, or sacred place, on top of the ziggurat. People reached the shrine by climbing long, external flights of stairs.

Priests were responsible for conducting religious practices at the ziggurat. These practices included various rituals, such as offering food to the city god or goddess. A statue representing the deity was placed in a space called the *adytum* (A-duh-tuhm), or holy place. A meal was set on a table before the statue. Sumerians believed that the god or goddess would eat the meal.

Priests also performed purification, or cleansing, rituals using holy water. This purification process was often used on kings before they entered shrines where the deities were believed to dwell.

Critical Viewing Priests climbed 100 or more steep steps to the shrine at the top of a ziggurat to worship the city god. Why would the shrine have been positioned so high?



REVIEW & ASSESS

- 1. READING CHECK** What religious practices did Sumerians observe to serve and please their gods?
- 2. DETERMINE WORD MEANINGS** What context clues in the text tell you what *superhuman* means?
- 3. MAKE INFERENCES** Why do you think Sumerians thought that cleansing was necessary before entering shrines?

1.5

Sargon Conquers Mesopotamia



Have you heard the expression, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown”? It applied well to Sargon the Great. He conquered many peoples, lands and cities, including Sumer. As ruler, Sargon was expected to keep his people safe, peaceful, happy, and fed. His role involved much responsibility. It was not easy being in charge of what was, at that time, the world’s largest civilization.

MAIN IDEA

Sargon conquered Sumer and other lands in Mesopotamia to create the world’s first empire.

mt AN OUTSIDER TAKES OVER

Sargon the Great was an ancient Mesopotamian ruler who has inspired stories for nearly 4,500 years. It is difficult to separate fact from fiction about his life. According to one story about his childhood, Sargon’s mother was a royal priestess who abandoned him as a baby. A humble gardener from Kish raised him after finding him in a basket floating in a river.

Kish was a city-state in Akkad (AH-kahd), an area in central Mesopotamia. Akkadians

and Sumerians shared a similar culture but had different ethnic origins and spoke different languages. Before becoming a ruler, Sargon was a servant to the king of Kish. After serving in the royal court, Sargon became a powerful official in Kish and eventually overthrew the king.

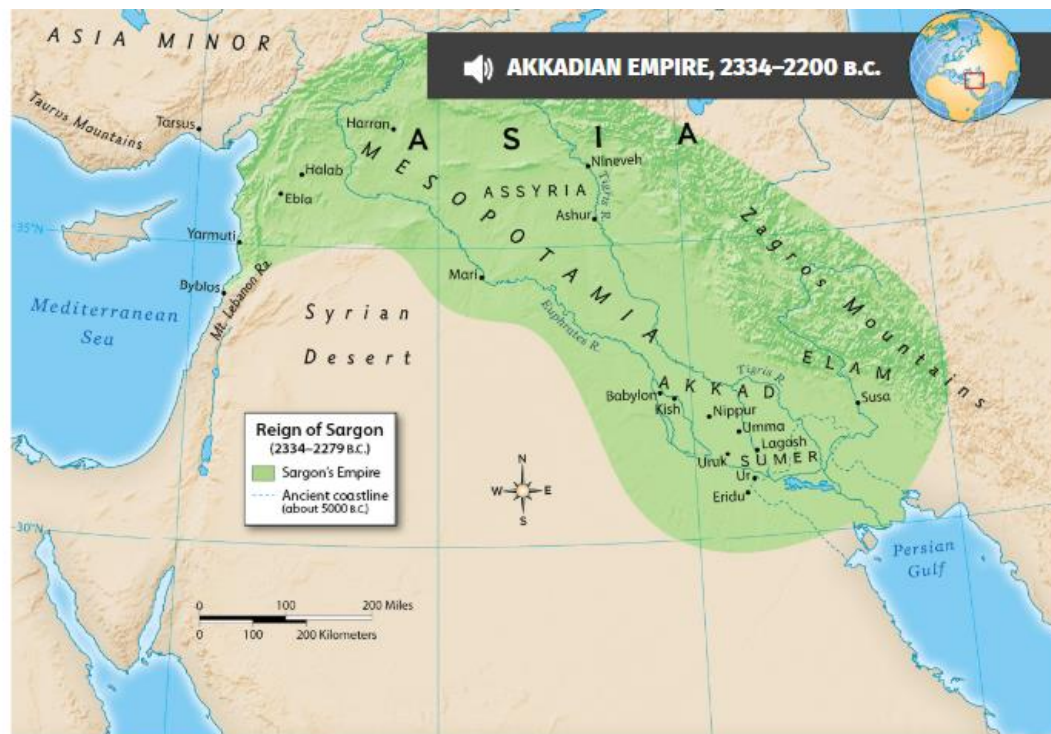
While Sargon gained power, Sumer was weakened by internal wars and invasions. In 2334 b.c., Sargon’s armies swept through Sumer, conquering it completely. They also took control of northern Mesopotamia. These conquests created the world’s first **empire**, a group of different lands and people governed by one ruler. Sargon’s empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. He ruled the Akkadian Empire from Akkad, his now long-lost capital city.

EMPIRE AND EXPANSION mt

The Akkadian Empire lasted 150 years, and Sargon ruled for 56 of them. He personally led the fight to expand the empire and claimed to have won 34 battles and taken 50 rulers prisoner. Sargon was an effective warrior and skilled at managing people and projects.

In the lands he conquered, Sargon allowed the people to keep their local rulers and customs. However, they had to obey him and pay a protection tax called a **tribute**. Sargon’s policy helped keep peace and win the loyalty of people throughout his empire. He also introduced standard weights and measures and made Akkadian the official language of the government.

Sargon’s powerful empire brought prosperity to his people and encouraged trade. Akkad’s farmers managed agriculture so well that 100 years went by without **famine**, or widespread hunger. Sargon’s wars were spread over large areas. As a result, Akkad traded with distant suppliers for timber, metal, and other raw materials Mesopotamia lacked. His wars concentrated on controlling trade centers and protecting natural resources, such as cedar forests.



Despite Sargon’s abilities, the empire became too big to control. After he died, his sons took over but were unable to maintain order. City-states rebelled, and a great deal of time and effort went into trying to keep the peace. Enemies from the northeast raided the empire’s unprotected borders. Famine returned, spreading suffering and unrest among the people. By 2200 b.c., the Akkadian Empire had come to an end.



SARGON THE GREAT

To guarantee loyalty from the governors who ruled parts of his empire, Sargon gave trusted relatives powerful positions. To keep control of his army, he created a group of professional soldiers whose sole purpose was to fight for him.

< This sculptured head is believed to depict Sargon with his crown and long beard.

REVIEW & ASSESS

- 1. READING CHECK** What measures did Sargon take to unite his empire?
- 2. INTERPRET MAPS** Where were most of the cities of the empire located? Why do you think that was so?
- 3. DRAW CONCLUSIONS** What conclusions can you draw about Sargon’s abilities as a ruler?

2.1

Hammurabi's Code of Laws



Would you know how to play a game if you didn't know its rules? Probably not. This is how people from Mesopotamia must have felt when it came to following laws enforced by rulers. Though they did exist, laws were not laid out in a clear fashion. This changed when a king decided it was time to literally spell out the laws for his people.

MAIN IDEA

Hammurabi changed civilization by organizing laws and displaying them.

mt NEW EMPIRE IN MESOPOTAMIA

After the fall of Sargon's Akkadian Empire, a tribe called the Amorites invaded western Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C. They established their capital at Babylon (BA-buh-lahn), a city-state overshadowed by powerful neighbors. (See the map in Lesson 1.5.) Then in 1792 B.C., **Hammurabi** (ha-muh-RAH-bee) became the sixth king of Babylon. Hammurabi was Babylon's most influential and powerful ruler. He expanded the kingdom and established his Babylonian Empire across Mesopotamia and other parts of the Fertile Crescent.

Hammurabi spent the first 29 years of his rule working on domestic improvements. These included directing large projects,

such as creating straight streets, strong city walls, magnificent temples, and efficient irrigation canals. Hammurabi also skillfully built up a network of **alliances**, or partnerships. This helped him conquer all of Mesopotamia in just eight years and claim the title "King of Sumer and Akkad."

HAMMURABI'S CODE mt

Hammurabi was a skillful ruler, but he is best remembered for his Code of Laws. His vast empire contained many different peoples who all followed different laws. To help unite his empire, Hammurabi took the best existing laws, added new rules, and then organized them into a clear, written system. The Code of Laws marked a major step forward for civilization. The code helped bring justice to everyday life. It also serves as an important primary source for historians because it offers insight into Babylonian society, including its structures, priorities, problems, and attitudes.

The Code of Laws was often applied based on a person's social class. For example, landowners could be fined more heavily than slaves. Hammurabi also laid down detailed laws about agriculture and the buying and selling of goods, highlighting the importance of these activities.

Three experienced judges heard cases. They listened to statements, examined evidence, and heard from witnesses. The judges even assumed the defendant's innocence. Guilt had to be proven. (Courts in the United States today also assume that people are innocent until proven guilty.) Hammurabi's Code of Laws influenced later legal systems, including those of ancient Greece and Rome.

After Hammurabi's death in 1750 B.C., the first Babylonian Empire declined rapidly and disappeared about 150 years later. However, Hammurabi's achievements ensured that Babylon remained a center of political, cultural, and religious importance for centuries to come.

CODE OF HAMMURABI

Hammurabi's Code of Laws was carved into an eight-foot-high stone slab, called a stela (STEE-luh), for everyone to see and read. An introduction announced its purpose: "To prevent the strong from oppressing the weak and to see that justice is done to widows and orphans."

The code's 282 laws covered all aspects of life and dictated specific penalties for specific crimes. Punishments were often as brutal as the crime. For example, a son's hand would be cut off for striking his father, and those who robbed burning houses were burned alive. Additional examples of the numbered laws include the following:

- 196 If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.
- 197 If he [a man] break another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.



This top portion of the stela shows King Hammurabi receiving the Babylonian laws from Shamash, the god of justice.

REVIEW & ASSESS

- 1. READING CHECK** How was Hammurabi's court system similar to the one we have today?
- 2. IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS AND DETAILS** What details illustrate the improvements Hammurabi made as Babylon's king?
- 3. MAKE INFERENCES** Why was Hammurabi's Code of Laws displayed in public for everyone to see?