Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent

Section 2

MAIN IDEAS
1. The Sumerians created the world’s first advanced society.
2. Religion played a major role in Sumerian society.

Key Terms and People
- **rural** having to do with the countryside
- **urban** having to do with the city
- **city-state** a political unit consisting of a city and the surrounding countryside
- **Sargon** the Akkadian king who defeated Sumer and built the world’s first empire
- **empire** land with different territories and peoples under a single rule
- **polytheism** the worship of many gods
- **priests** people who performed religious ceremonies
- **social hierarchy** a division of society by rank or class

Academic Vocabulary
- **role** a part or function

Section Summary

AN ADVANCED SOCIETY
In southern Mesopotamia about 3000 BC, people known as the Sumerians (SOO-MER-een) created an advanced society. Most people in Sumer (SOO-muhr) lived in **rural** areas, but they were governed from **urban** areas that controlled the surrounding countryside. The size of the countryside controlled by each of these **city-states** depended on its military strength. Stronger city-states controlled larger areas. Individual city-states gained and lost power over time.

Around 2300 BC **Sargon** was the leader of the Akkadians (uh-KAY-dee-unhs), a people who lived to the north of Sumer. Sargon built a large army and defeated all the city-states of Sumer as well as all of northern Mesopotamia. With these conquests,
Sargon established the world’s first empire. It stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. The Akkadian empire lasted about 150 years.

RELIGION SHAPES SOCIETY
Religion played an important role in nearly every aspect of Sumerian public and private life. Sumerians practiced polytheism, the worship of many gods. They believed that their gods had enormous powers. The gods could bring a good harvest or a disastrous flood. They could bring illness or good health and wealth. The Sumerians believed that success in every area of life depended on pleasing the gods. Each city-state considered one god to be its special protector. People relied on priests to help them gain the gods’ favor. Priests interpreted the wishes of the gods and made offerings to them.

A social hierarchy developed in Sumerian city-states. Kings were at the top. Below them were priests and nobles. The middle ranks included skilled craftspeople and merchants. Farmers and laborers made up the large working class. Slaves were at the bottom of the social order. Although the role of most women was limited to the home and raising children, some upper-class women were educated and even became priestesses.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY
Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences You are the king of a Sumerian city-state. Write a letter to your priests asking them to make offerings to the gods in order to protect your farms from a possible flood.
DIRECTIONS  On the line provided before each statement, write T if a statement is true and F if a statement is false. If the statement is false, write the correct term on the line after each sentence that makes the sentence a true statement.

_____  1. Land with different territories and peoples under a single rule is called an empire.

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_____  2. Social hierarchy is a division of society by rank or class.

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_____  3. Countryside areas are considered to be urban.

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_____  4. Priests are people who perform religious ceremonies.

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_____  5. A city-state consists of a city, which is the political center, and the surrounding countryside.

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_____  6. The practice of worshipping many gods is called social hierarchy.

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_____  7. Rural areas are considered to be the countryside.

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