SUMERIAN RELIGION, PRIESTS, AND TEMPLES

Sumerian Religion

Sumerians believed that humans were put upon this earth to serve the gods. When the gods were displeased, humans suffered. If the Tigris River flooded, for example, and a whole village was destroyed, that meant humans had not been successful at keeping the gods happy. Sumerians believed it was essential for the survival of the city-state to have people who knew what the gods liked and disliked. A priestly class arose out of this need. Priests specialized in practicing rituals. They could divine (predict or understand) the will of the gods, what to do if the gods were displeased, and how to gain the gods' favor. This made priests extremely important to the Sumerians, and they became some of the most powerful people in society. Sumerian priests also developed the first system of writing to keep records of crop yields brought to the temples and record observations of the stars and heavens.

1. Who were the most important and powerful people in Sumeria? Why?

The Ziggurat

Sumerian city-states consisted of homes and buildings around a central temple. Eventually these temples became huge, tiered structures. They were several stories high with a large, square base. These huge temples were called ziggurats. Ziggurats were dedicated to the main god that protected the city. Ziggurats served as administrative (government), religious and economic centers. In some ziggurats the ground level was used as a market center and storage center for taxes and paid goods. The second level consisted of apartments for officials and meeting rooms, and the third level housed the royal family. The fourth and highest level was the temple area, where sacred rituals were performed.
2. What were the different uses of a Ziggurat?

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3. In the second paragraph, the word tiered is describing how the Ziggurats looked and were built. Use all of the context clues and text features in the paragraph to explain what you think tiered means and why.

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Schools

The Sumerians created the first known education system. These schools taught the skills of a scribe. A scribe was basically a professional writer. Learning to be a scribe was a possible pathway to the most powerful profession in ancient Mesopotamia - a priest. Priests needed to know how to read and write to keep the records of the ziggurat and to monitor the sun, moon, stars and planets. Scribes could also go to work for the government (keeping track of taxes, building projects, etc.) or for business owners (sales records, recording harvests, etc.)

Learning to be a scribe was not easy. First, you had to be a male member of a wealthy family. It is unlikely that you could get into scribe school if you were the son of a poor farmer. Second, you had to attend school for many years to learn the written language of cuneiform and the number system. Much of scribe school consisted of memorizing and copying cuneiform texts from one tablet to another. Teachers were often very strict. Beatings were not uncommon for students that did not perform well or misbehaved. School was not easy, but scribes were some of the most powerful people in Mesopotamia because they controlled information and knowledge. Anytime you can do something that most people cannot, you have a good chance to be respected, powerful, and possibly very wealthy.
4. What were some of the jobs a scribe could have in Mesopotamia? What jobs could you compare these to today?

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5. Compare and contrast schools in Mesopotamia to today. Include 3-4 pieces of information for each box.

Sumerian Schools

Both

Schools Today

6. Having an education in Mesopotamia was very important, and most people did not have the chance to go to school. The last paragraph states that “Anytime you can do something that most people cannot, you have a good chance to be respected, powerful, and possibly very wealthy.” What does this quote mean? Is this still true today? Give some examples and explain your thinking.

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