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CUET · HISTORY · CLASS XI · CODE 314

Writing and City Life

CUET unit: World History — Background

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📌 Snapshot

- Mesopotamia (land between the Euphrates and Tigris, modern Iraq) was the cradle of the world's earliest cities and earliest writing system (c. 3200 BCE).
- Urbanism was linked to long-distance trade, division of labour, the temple economy, and the rise of kingship.
- Cuneiform script developed alongside the Sumerian–Akkadian–Aramaic language shift, and clay tablets are the primary archaeological sources.
- The key urban centres were Uruk (temple town), Ur (residential excavations) and Mari (trading town in a pastoral zone). Mesopotamia's legacy includes its mathematics and time-reckoning.
- This topic combines factual recall (dates, terms, geography) with conceptual claims (why cities arose, why writing developed).

📖 Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

- **Geographic setting:** Mesopotamia means "land between rivers" (Greek mesos = middle, potamos = river); it lies between the Euphrates and Tigris in present-day Iraq, with green plains in the north-east, an upland steppe in the north, and the southern desert where the earliest cities arose (NCERT §Mesopotamia and its Geography, p. 10–11).
- **Regional/linguistic divisions:** The urbanised south was called Sumer and Akkad; after 2000 BCE the southern region was called Babylonia; from c. 1100 BCE the north became Assyria. Sumerian was the first known language, replaced by Akkadian around 2400 BCE; Aramaic trickled in from 1400 BCE and spread widely after 1000 BCE (NCERT §Writing and City Life intro, p. 9).
- **Why southern desert supported cities:** The Euphrates and Tigris carried silt from northern mountains; flooded channels deposited fertile silt and functioned as irrigation canals, making southern Mesopotamian agriculture the most productive of any ancient system, even Rome's (NCERT §Mesopotamia and its Geography, p. 11).
- **Significance of urbanism:** Cities are not just large populations — they emerge when the economy develops beyond food production into trade, manufactures and services; division of labour, organised social organisation, storage and written

records become the marks of urban life (NCERT §The Significance of Urbanism, p. 12).

- **Bronze and trade dependency:** The earliest Mesopotamian cities date to the Bronze Age c. 3000 BCE; bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, both procured from distant lands, making long-distance trade essential. The south lacked stones, good wood and metals, so textiles and agricultural produce were traded for wood, copper, tin, silver, gold, shell and stones from Turkey, Iran and across the Gulf (NCERT §Movement of Goods into Cities, p. 12–13).
- **Transport:** The cheapest mode of transport was over water; canals and natural channels of Mesopotamia served as goods-transport routes between settlements, with the Euphrates functioning as a "world route" (NCERT §Movement of Goods into Cities, p. 13).
- **Development of writing:** The first Mesopotamian tablets, c. 3200 BCE, contained picture-like signs and numbers — about 5,000 lists of oxen, fish, bread loaves, etc. — recording goods brought into or distributed from the temples of Uruk. Writing began because city life produced transactions involving many people and goods (NCERT §The Development of Writing, p. 13).
- **Cuneiform:** Scribes pressed wedge-shaped signs into wet clay with a reed; the term derives from Latin cuneus (wedge) and forma (shape). By c. 2600 BCE letters became cuneiform and the language was Sumerian; cuneiform in Akkadian continued in use till the first century CE — over 2,000 years (NCERT §The Development of Writing, p. 14).
- **System and literacy:** Cuneiform signs represented syllables (not single consonants/vowels), so scribes had to learn hundreds of signs. Very few Mesopotamians could read and write; kings who could read boasted of it in inscriptions (NCERT §The System of Writing / Literacy, p. 14–15).
- **Uses of writing:** Beyond record-keeping, writing was used for dictionaries, legal validation of land transfers, narrating royal deeds, and announcing changes in customary law. The Enmerkar epic (king of Uruk) shows writing was associated with kingship, trade and Mesopotamian urban superiority (NCERT §The Uses of Writing, p. 15–16).
- **Temples as urban institutions:** From 5000 BCE settlements developed in southern Mesopotamia; the earliest known temple was a small shrine of unbaked bricks. Temples were residences of gods (e.g., Moon God of Ur; Inanna, Goddess of Love and War), had distinctive outer walls going in and out at regular intervals, and the god was the theoretical owner of agricultural fields, fisheries and herds. Temples organised production, employed merchants and kept written records (NCERT §Urbanisation in Southern Mesopotamia, p. 16).
- **Conflict, kingship and Uruk:** Repeated conflicts over land and water produced war leaders; victorious chiefs beautified temples and organised trade, gaining authority. Around 3000 BCE Uruk grew to 250 hectares — twice the later size of Mohenjo-

daro — and by c. 2800 BCE it had expanded to 400 hectares; it had a defensive wall and was occupied from c. 4200 BCE to c. 400 CE. War captives and locals were put to compulsory work (not agricultural tax) and paid rations. One temple required 1,500 men working 10 hours a day for five years to build (NCERT §Urbanisation in Southern Mesopotamia, p. 17–18).

- **Technological advances at Uruk c. 3000 BCE:** Bronze tools, brick columns (since no suitable wood existed for large hall roofs), painted clay-cone mosaics on temple walls, sculpture in imported stone, and the potter's wheel — appropriate to an urban economy as it permitted mass production (NCERT §Urbanisation, p. 18).
- **Cylinder seals:** Unlike Indian stamped seals, Mesopotamian cylinder seals were pierced down the centre, fitted with a stick, and rolled over wet clay to create continuous pictures; they carried the owner's name, god, and official position, and acted as marks of authenticity (NCERT §The Seal – An Urban Artefact, p. 19).
- **Life in the city / Ur:** A ruling elite emerged with major wealth (royal burials at Ur contained jewellery, gold vessels, lapis-lazuli-inlaid instruments, gold daggers). The nuclear family was the norm; the father headed the family; sons inherited the father's house, herds and fields. Ur's narrow winding streets, irregular house plots and absence of street drains indicate no town planning (in contrast to contemporary Mohenjo-daro). Drains were in inner courtyards; rainwater flowed via drainpipes into sumps. Omens recorded at Ur: a raised threshold brought wealth; a front door not opening towards another house was lucky (NCERT §Life in the City, p. 19–20).
- **Mari — a trading town in a pastoral zone:** After 2000 BCE the royal capital of Mari flourished upstream on the Euphrates (not on the southern agricultural plain). Most of its territory was pasturage for sheep and goats; communities included both farmers and pastoralists. Nomads (Akkadians, Amorites, Assyrians, Aramaeans) filtered in from the western desert. The kings of Mari were Amorites who respected Mesopotamian gods but also raised a temple at Mari for Dagan, god of the steppe (NCERT §A Trading Town in a Pastoral Zone, p. 21).
- **Palace of Zimrilim (1810–1760 BCE):** The great palace at Mari was the royal residence, administrative hub and a production site (especially for precious metal ornaments); it had 260 rooms over 2.4 hectares with a single northern entrance. Officers at Mari levied about one-tenth the value of goods on river-boat cargoes (wood, copper, tin, oil, wine; a single boat could carry 300 wine jars). Copper came from Alashiya (Cyprus) (NCERT §Palace at Mari / pp. 22–24).
- **Excavating Mesopotamian towns — Abu Salabikh:** About 10 hectares c. 2500 BCE with under 10,000 population; wall outlines were traced by "scraping" the mound surface; sieving recovered charred fish bones, plant seeds, and pig teeth (suggesting pigs roamed freely); microscopic floor studies identified roofed vs open rooms (NCERT §Excavating Mesopotamian Towns, p. 24).
- **Cities in Mesopotamian culture:** The Gilgamesh Epic (12 tablets) — Gilgamesh ruled Uruk after Enmerkar; after failing to find immortality, he consoled himself by

walking the city wall of Uruk that he had built with fired bricks. Mesopotamians took pride in cities (NCERT §Cities in Mesopotamian Culture, p. 25).

- **Legacy — mathematics and time:** Tablets c. 1800 BCE contain multiplication, division, square and square-root, and compound-interest tables. The square root of 2 was given as $1 + 24/60 + 51/60^2 + 10/60^3$. Division of the year into 12 lunar months, month into 4 weeks, day into 24 hours, hour into 60 minutes — all from Mesopotamia, transmitted via Alexander's successors → Roman world → Islam → medieval Europe. Solar/lunar eclipses and star positions were systematically recorded (NCERT §The Legacy of Writing, p. 25).
- **Assurbanipal's library (668–627 BCE):** The Assyrian king collected a library at Nineveh of about 1,000 texts amounting to ~30,000 tablets on history, epics, omen literature, astrology, hymns and poems, with cataloguing labels on baskets. Even in 650 BCE, tablets from 2000 BCE were intelligible because Sumerian continued to be taught in schools through bilingual sign-lists (NCERT §An Early Library, p. 26).
- **Nabonidus — the "early archaeologist":** Last ruler of independent Babylon; located a stele of a king dated c. 1150 BCE to dress his daughter as High Priestess of Ur, and repaired a broken statue of Sargon of Akkad (c. 2370 BCE). Babylon, the premier city of the world by then, exceeded 850 hectares with a triple wall, ziggurat and processional way; Achaemenids conquered it in 539 BCE and Alexander in 331 BCE (NCERT §An Early Archaeologist!, p. 27).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Mesopotamia	"Land between rivers" — from Greek mesos (middle) and potamos (river); the region between the Euphrates and Tigris (modern Iraq)	9
Sumer and Akkad	The earliest urbanised southern region of Mesopotamia (before 2000 BCE)	9
Babylonia	Term used for the southern region after 2000 BCE, when Babylon became an important city	9
Assyria	Northern region named after the Assyrians, who established their kingdom from c. 1100 BCE	9
Cuneiform	Wedge-shaped script pressed into wet clay tablets; from Latin cuneus (wedge) + forma (shape)	14
Bronze	Alloy of copper and tin; the metal that gives the Bronze Age its name	12
Stele	Stone slab with inscriptions or carvings	18
Sump	A covered basin in the ground into which water and sewage flow	20
Nuclear family	A man, his wife and children	19
Ziggurat	A stepped tower (mentioned in connection with Babylon under Nabopolassar's successors)	27

Term	Definition	Page
Steppe	Stretch of upland in the north where animal herding offers a better livelihood than agriculture	10
Scribe	A writer; one who pressed cuneiform signs into wet clay	13–14
Uruk	Earliest temple-city in southern Mesopotamia; 250 ha c. 3000 BCE, 400 ha by 2800 BCE; ruled by Enmerkar and Gilgamesh	17–18
Ur	Residential city excavated in the 1930s; first Mesopotamian site to be excavated systematically; royal cemetery yielded gold and lapis-lazuli grave goods	19
Mari	Trading town upstream on the Euphrates after 2000 BCE; Amorite kings; in a pastoral zone	21
Inanna	Sumerian Goddess of Love and War; one of the principal deities of Uruk	16
Cylinder seal	Pierced stone cylinder, rolled across wet clay to leave a continuous impression — mark of identity and authenticity	19
Dagan	God of the steppe, worshipped at Mari alongside Mesopotamian deities	21
Lapis lazuli	Deep-blue semi-precious stone, imported into Mesopotamia and used in inlay (e.g., Warka Head, royal lyres at Ur)	12, 19
Ziggurat	Stepped temple tower; a major feature of Babylon described under Nabopolassar's successors	27
Amorites	Nomadic group from the western desert; their dynasty founded the kingdom of Mari and (later) Babylon	21
Assurbanipal	Assyrian king (668–627 BCE) who collected ~30,000 tablets at his Nineveh library	26
Nabonidus	Last independent Babylonian king; called an "early archaeologist" for restoring earlier statues and steles	27
Gilgamesh Epic	12-tablet Mesopotamian epic about the legendary king of Uruk; emphasises pride in the city wall	25
Warka Head	Pre-3000-BCE white marble woman's head from Uruk; eyes inlaid with lapis lazuli, shell, and bitumen	12

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- **Map 1 (p. 10):** West Asia — locate Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and Tigris.
- **Map 2 (p. 11):** Mesopotamia divided into mountains, steppe, desert, and the irrigated southern zone where cities arose.
- **Map 3 (p. 21):** Location of Mari upstream on the Euphrates, in a pastoral zone.

- **Warka Head (p. 12):** White marble woman's head sculpted at Uruk before 3000 BCE; eyes/eyebrows would have had lapis lazuli, shell and bitumen inlays — example of imported hard stone.
- **Clay tablet with picture-like signs c. 3200 BCE (p. 13):** Each tablet ⩽ 3.5 cm; shows ox, fish, grain, boat, numbers.
- **Plan of the earliest temple c. 5000 BCE & later temple c. 3000 BCE (p. 16–17):** Note the in-and-out façade unique to temples.
- **Plan of Palace of Zimrilim at Mari (pp. 22–23):** 260 rooms over 2.4 hectares; single north entrance; courtyards 131 (outer) and 106 (inner, paved white); audience hall 132 with wall paintings; scribes' office with benches and clay bins.
- **Cylinder seals (p. 19):** Pierced cylinder rolled across wet clay to leave a continuous image — distinct from Indian stamped seals.
- **Timeline (p. 28):** Memorise key dates — 7000–6000 BCE agriculture in north; 5000 BCE earliest temples; 3200 BCE first writing; 3000 BCE Uruk; 2600 BCE cuneiform; 2400 BCE Akkadian replaces Sumerian; 2370 BCE Sargon of Akkad; 720–610 BCE Assyrian empire; 668–627 BCE Assurbanipal; 331 BCE Alexander conquers Babylon; 1850s cuneiform deciphered.
- **Process — how cuneiform was made:** A scribe (1) wetted river clay and patted it into a flat, palm-sized tablet; (2) used a sharpened reed to press wedge-shaped marks while the surface was still moist; (3) let the tablet dry in the sun (and for important records, baked it); (4) once dry the record was permanent and indestructible. Mistakes had to be corrected on a fresh tablet. This is why Mesopotamian archives survive almost intact — wet clay tablets in burnt buildings were accidentally baked harder (NCERT §The Development of Writing, p. 13–14).
- **Process — temple-economy cycle:** Cultivators delivered grain / wool / animals to the temple → the temple stored produce, employed weavers, smiths and merchants → finished goods (textiles, oil) were exchanged through merchants for wood, metal, stone → temple scribes recorded all incoming and outgoing items on clay tablets → priests redistributed rations to dependent labourers and war-captives. Writing, the temple, kingship and trade all reinforce one another (NCERT §Urbanisation in Southern Mesopotamia, pp. 16–18).
- **Process — how archaeologists "scrape" a mound (Abu Salabikh, p. 24):** Surface was hoed flat; differences in soil colour and texture exposed lines of mud-brick walls without full excavation; samples were sieved to recover bones, seeds and teeth; microscopic study of floors identified roofed vs open spaces. This non-destructive technique is heavily examinable.

2.5 Timeline / Key events

Year / Period	Event	Significance
c. 7000–6000 BCE	Agriculture begins in the northern Mesopotamian plains and foothills	Earliest food production in the region (NCERT timeline, p. 28)
c. 5000 BCE	First settlements in southern Mesopotamia; earliest temples of unbaked brick	Foundations of southern urbanism (NCERT p. 16)
c. 3200 BCE	First written tablets at Uruk — picture signs recording temple goods	World's earliest writing (NCERT p. 13)
c. 3000 BCE	Uruk grows to 250 hectares; bronze tools, potter's wheel, brick columns appear	Onset of full urban Bronze Age in Mesopotamia (NCERT p. 17–18)
c. 2800 BCE	Uruk expands to 400 hectares with defensive wall	Largest city of its time — twice Mohenjo-daro (NCERT p. 17)
c. 2600 BCE	Signs become wedge-shaped cuneiform; Sumerian language predominates	Mature script in use (NCERT p. 14)
c. 2400 BCE	Akkadian replaces Sumerian as the spoken language	Language shift; Sumerian retained only in schools (NCERT p. 9, 26)
c. 2370 BCE	Sargon of Akkad establishes the first Mesopotamian empire	First imperial state in West Asia (NCERT p. 27)
c. 2000 BCE	The southern region begins to be called Babylonia	Political reorganisation (NCERT p. 9)
1810–1760 BCE	Reign of Zimrilim; palace of Mari with 260 rooms built	Apex of Mari as trading capital (NCERT p. 22)
c. 1400 BCE	Aramaic trickles in from the west	New language layer (NCERT p. 9)
c. 1100 BCE	Assyrian kingdom established in the north	Rise of Assyria (NCERT p. 9)
720–610 BCE	Assyrian empire dominant	Largest Mesopotamian empire to date (NCERT p. 28)
668–627 BCE	Reign of Assurbanipal; Nineveh library of ~30,000 tablets compiled	World's first systematic library (NCERT p. 26)
539 BCE	Achaemenid Persians under Cyrus conquer Babylon	End of independent Babylonian rule (NCERT p. 27)
331 BCE	Alexander of Macedon conquers Babylon	Hellenistic phase begins (NCERT p. 27)
	Cuneiform in Akkadian goes out of use	

Year / Period	Event	Significance
1st century CE		End of a 2,000-year script tradition (NCERT p. 14)
1850s CE	Cuneiform deciphered by European scholars	Mesopotamian past becomes intelligible to modern historians (NCERT p. 28)

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Mesopotamia vs Babylonia vs Assyria vs Sumer-Akkad.** All refer to overlapping regions/periods; NTA will swap them. Sumer-Akkad = early south; Babylonia = south after 2000 BCE; Assyria = north from c. 1100 BCE.
- **Sumerian vs Akkadian vs Aramaic.** Sumerian was first (earliest known language); Akkadian replaced it around 2400 BCE; Aramaic trickled in from 1400 BCE and became widely spoken after 1000 BCE. Watch the dates.
- **Why cities arose:** NTA loves the trap "agricultural prosperity caused cities." This is false — cities arose from division of labour, trade, social organisation and the lack of local raw materials (forcing trade).
- **Ur vs Mohenjo-daro:** Ur had NO street drains and NO town planning — opposite of Mohenjo-daro. Drains were inside courtyards (sumps).
- **Mari was prosperous but NOT militarily strong;** it flourished on trade, not conquest. Don't confuse with Assyrian empire.
- **Cylinder seal (Mesopotamia) vs stamped seal (India).** Mesopotamian seals were rolled, Indian seals stamped.
- **Uruk size (250 ha at 3000 BCE; 400 ha by 2800 BCE).** "Twice as large as Mohenjo-daro" is a favourite NTA fact.
- **Compulsory labour was NOT a tax in grain;** war captives and locals worked for the temple/ruler and were paid rations.
- **Cuneiform was syllabic, not alphabetic.** Each sign stood for a syllable, so scribes had to memorise hundreds of signs — this is why literacy was so restricted, not because writing was a state secret.
- **Date confusion — 3200 BCE first writing vs 2600 BCE cuneiform vs 1850s CE decipherment.** NTA loves to swap these. First tablets = 3200 BCE; mature cuneiform = 2600 BCE; decipherment = 1850s CE.
- **Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh held ~30,000 tablets, not 30,000 books.** "Texts" numbered about 1,000; the 30,000 figure refers to the physical clay tablets that carried them.
- **Sargon of Akkad (c. 2370 BCE) vs Nabonidus (last Babylonian king, 6th century BCE).** Both are mentioned together in connection with Nabonidus's "archaeological" restoration of Sargon's broken statue — do not confuse the periods.

🎯 Practice MCQs

📊 PYQ Alignment

In CUET (UG) History 2023–25, "Writing and City Life" has consistently yielded 4–6 MCQs per cycle, focused on (a) the geography and etymology of Mesopotamia, (b) dates and stages of cuneiform's development, (c) features of Uruk, Ur and Mari, and (d) the legacy of Mesopotamian mathematics and time-reckoning. Statement-based and match-the-following formats dominate; assertion–reason questions on the causes of urbanisation (denying agricultural prosperity as the sole cause) recur frequently. Browse the full bank at /pyq/history to track period-wise recurrence.