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Date _____

The Fertile Crescent

"We're in That Fertile Crescent"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Many historians consider the Fertile Crescent, a large chunk of land between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, to be the birthplace of civilization. The Fertile Crescent occupied the area now divided into modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Southern Turkey and Northern Egypt. Most of the land was surrounded by desert and irrigated by two enormous rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, on one side, and the mighty Nile on the other. The rivers frequently overflowed their banks, leaving behind a rich soil that was ideal for growing crops.

The area between and around the Tigris and Euphrates, on the Eastern side of the Fertile Crescent, was called Mesopotamia. On the Persian Gulf end of Mesopotamia, an area now divided between Kuwait, Iraq and Iran, was a region called Sumer. Early Sumerian farmers worked together to create irrigation and drainage ditches to direct water where they wanted it and help prevent the great rivers from flooding the cities.

Many city-states grew in the Fertile Crescent: Babylon, Ur, Uruk, Eridu. City-states were just what they sound like: cities so large and independent that they became much like states are today, governed by a single ruler and each with their own justice system, trade and military.

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2. The Sumerians are credited with some amazing inventions. They invented the arch. They made wagons, the first-ever wheeled vehicles (the wheel itself was probably invented earlier). They accurately tracked the stars. They decided to divide time into blocks of 60: They put 60 seconds in a minute, and 60 minutes in an hour.

Sumerians were a polytheistic people. That means they believed there was not just one but many gods, whose favor they needed to live good lives. Each city-state had a particular favorite or patron god. In honor of these deities, the people built huge temples, like pyramids with stairs up the sides called ziggurats. Ziggurats were often the centerpieces of city-states.

The Mesopotamians used etchings on stone tablets to tell their stories and display their rules. They developed some of the earliest forms of writing. The system used by Sumerian scribes was called cuneiform, and it used small geometrical shapes scratched into wet stone that later dried and hardened to recount stories and keep track of trade, taxes, military issues and more. Thanks to the widespread use of cuneiform, historians know much about Mesopotamian culture and the many transformations it went through over the centuries.

3. After the Sumerians came the Akkadians. A ferocious Akkadian king who called himself Sargon (2334-2279 BCE) is thought to be the first ruler in world history to have a permanent, standing army. The Akkadian army was one of the first to use bows and arrows. Sargon used his troops to create the world's earliest empire, a huge territory in the Middle East.

The Babylonians were the next power-hungry army to conquer Mesopotamia. The Babylonian army was led by a mighty leader named Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE). He rose to power by driving wedges between city-states and systematically conquering each one in turn. He had a well-trained army of ax- and spear-toting foot soldiers.

Babylon became famous for what was long thought of as the first written code of laws (though historians now think there were earlier written laws). These laws were called Hammurabi's Code. They included 282 laws based largely on the principle of retribution: If you poke out a person's eye, your eye is poked out, too. It meted out harsh punishments for crimes, especially when they were committed by people of the lower class. Mesopotamian society was strongly divided by class and it gave men far more rights than women.

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4. In about 700 BCE the Assyrians, a people who lived in the hills at the end of the Tigris River, moved into the area that Hammurabi had ruled. Using iron weapons, they soon acquired all of the Fertile Crescent and much of the surrounding territory.

After the Assyrians invaded Babylon, they burned it to the ground. But all was not lost. One of the great things they did was build a royal library in the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, which housed many ancient Babylonian texts, including one of the oldest stories ever written down: The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Epic of Gilgamesh is a long poem about a legendary king named Gilgamesh. The poem is often regarded as the earliest surviving work of great literature.

5. The Assyrians were toppled in part by the Chaldeans, who came from present-day Syria. Their King, Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BCE), was the next great ruler of the area. He rebuilt Babylon, making it once again the most important city in the region.

Legend has it that Nebuchadnezzar's wife once told him she missed the green, mountainous land where she came from. So her husband had a terraced garden, overflowing with plants and trees, constructed for her. By all accounts it was extraordinary. From a distance, the greenery seemed suspended in air. It was known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Scholars now aren't sure the gardens were actually in Babylon, or if they even existed. Whether or not the story is true, a great earthquake destroyed any evidence of the gardens around 200 BCE.

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6. Along the Mediterranean coast of the Middle East, a unique civilization was doing things a little differently. They were the Phoenicians. One of their legacies is our modern-day alphabet. Their alphabet was adapted by the Greeks and then the Romans; it's not too different from the one we use today.

The Phoenicians built a trading empire that connected various tribes and civilizations around the Mediterranean. They invented glassblowing, but their truly hot product was purple dye. They got the dye from a special kind of sea snail that basically sneezed it out. Only the Phoenicians lived near the snails, so only they had the royal purple dye. The dye was so expensive, it was worth its weight in silver. In fact, the word Phoenician means "purple people" in Greek.

In nearby Turkey in 687 BCE, the Lydians rose to power. Their king was Gyges, who was friendly with the Greeks (who were gaining power to their west). The Lydians wrote themselves into history by issuing the first gold coins. Before then, no government had ever come up with its own single currency.

7. Meanwhile, on the Mediterranean coast in a place known as Canaan, the Hebrews were organizing a state under a series of kings. The Hebrews, now known as the Jewish people, differed from other cultures in the region because they were monotheistic. That means they worshipped a single god, who was known as Yahweh. They were also nomadic, following their herds instead of building cities.

In the mid-1000s BCE, King Saul united them, getting all the tribes together to face the Philistines, who lived on the same seacoast. This began a battle that still continues to this day in the Israeli-Arab conflict in Middle East. After Saul, King David defeated the Philistines and other enemies and conquered the city of Jerusalem, which he made his capital.

In about 965 BCE, King David's son Solomon came to power. King Solomon made the Hebrew control over the area complete. He built an empire for his people and, according to the Bible, the First Temple in Jerusalem.

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