Updated: Unit 1 Early Humans/Mesopotamia (6th Grade)

Content Area: **Social Studies**
Course(s):
Time Period: **MP1**
Length: **9 weeks**
Status: **Published**

Targeted Standards

6.2.8.GeoPP.1.a	Compare and contrast the social organization, natural resources, and land use of early hunters/gatherers and those who lived in early agrarian societies.
6.2.8.GeoPP.1.b	Use maps to examine the impact of the various migratory patterns of hunters/gatherers that moved from Africa to Eurasia, Australia, and the Americas.
6.2.8.HistoryCC.1.a	Describe the influence of the agricultural revolution on population growth and the subsequent development of civilizations (e.g., the impact of food surplus from farming).
6.2.8.HistoryCC.1.b	Determine the impact of technological advancements on hunter/gatherer and agrarian societies.
6.2.8.HistoryCC.1.c	Describe how the development of both written and unwritten languages impacted human understanding, development of culture, and social structure.
6.2.8.HistoryCC.1.d	Demonstrate an understanding of pre-agricultural and post-agricultural periods in terms of relative length of time.
6.2.8.GeoSV.2.a	Compare and contrast physical and political maps of early river valley civilizations and their modern counterparts and determine the geopolitical impact of these civilizations, then and now (i.e., Mesopotamia and Iraq; Ancient Egypt and Modern Egypt; Indus River Valley and Modern Pakistan/India; Ancient China and Modern China).
6.2.8.GeoHE.2.a	Determine the extent to which geography influenced settlement, the development of trade networks, technological innovations, and the sustainability of early river valley civilizations.
6.2.8.HistoryCC.2.a	Evaluate the importance and enduring legacy of the major achievements of the early river valley civilizations over time.
6.2.8.HistoryCC.2.c	Explain how the development of written language transformed all aspects of life in early river valley civilizations.
6.2.8.HistoryCA.2.a	Analyze the factors that led to the rise and fall of various early river valley civilizations and determine whether there was a common pattern of growth and decline.
6.2.8.EconGE.3.a	Explain how classical civilizations used technology and innovation to enhance agricultural/manufacturing output and commerce, to expand military capabilities, to improve life in urban areas, and to allow for greater division of labor.

21st Century Skills: Career Readiness, Life Literacies and Key Skills

9.4.8.CT.2	Develop multiple solutions to a problem and evaluate short- and long-term effects to determine the most plausible option (e.g., MS-ETS1-4, 6.1.8.CivicsDP.1).
9.4.8.CT.3	Compare past problem-solving solutions to local, national, or global issues and analyze the factors that led to a positive or negative outcome.
9.4.8.DC.2	Provide appropriate citation and attribution elements when creating media products (e.g., W.6.8).
9.4.8.GCA.2	Demonstrate openness to diverse ideas and perspectives through active discussions to achieve a group goal.
9.4.8.IML.7	Use information from a variety of sources, contexts, disciplines, and cultures for a specific purpose (e.g., 1.2.8.C2a, 1.4.8.CR2a, 2.1.8.CHSS/IV.8.AI.1, W.5.8, 6.1.8.GeoSV.3.a, 6.1.8.CivicsDP.4.b, 7.1.NH. IPRET.8).
9.4.8.TL.3	Select appropriate tools to organize and present information digitally.

Rationale/Goals

The Origins of Civilization unit introduces students to the story of how human societies developed from small groups of hunter-gatherers into organized civilizations. Students begin by examining the lives of early humans, including how they adapted to their environments, developed tools, discovered fire, and worked together to survive. They then investigate the migration of early humans across the globe and explore how geography influenced where people settled.

As students continue through the unit, they examine the Agricultural Revolution and its impact on human history. They learn how farming allowed people to establish permanent settlements, increase food production, and create more complex societies. Students explore the characteristics of civilization—including government, religion, social structure, writing, technology, and specialized jobs—and analyze how these elements developed over time.

The unit culminates with an in-depth study of Mesopotamia, often called the "Cradle of Civilization." Students investigate how the geography of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers supported the growth of cities, governments, writing systems, laws, and technological innovations. Through primary and secondary sources, maps, timelines, and collaborative activities, students develop historical thinking skills by analyzing evidence, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, and understanding how the achievements of Mesopotamia continue to influence the modern world.

Essential Questions: Main Essential Question

How did early humans adapt to their environment and develop the first civilizations?

Essential Questions: Guiding Questions

Lesson 1: Early Humans

- What challenges did early humans face in order to survive?
- How did early humans adapt to different environments?
- How did the discovery of fire change human life?
- Why were tools important to early humans?
- How did cooperation help early humans survive?

Lesson 2: Early Human Migration

- Why did early humans migrate to new regions?
- How did geography influence where people traveled and settled?
- What evidence helps historians trace early human migration?
- How did migration lead to the spread of ideas, tools, and cultures?
- How did humans adapt to different climates around the world?

Lesson 3: The Agricultural Revolution

- Why did humans begin farming?
- How did farming change the way people lived?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of permanent settlements?
- How did a surplus of food lead to population growth?
- Why is the Agricultural Revolution considered a turning point in history?

Lesson 4: The Rise of Complex Societies

- What is a civilization?
- What characteristics do civilizations have in common?
- Why did people begin to specialize in different jobs?

- How did governments help organize growing communities?
- Why was writing an important development?

Lesson 5: Geography of Mesopotamia

- Why did civilization develop between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers?
- How did rivers help and challenge the people of Mesopotamia?
- How did geography influence farming, trade, and settlement?
- Why is Mesopotamia called the "Cradle of Civilization?"

Lesson 6: Achievements of Mesopotamia

- How did cuneiform improve life in Mesopotamia?
- Why was Hammurabi's Code important?
- How did irrigation help Mesopotamian farmers?
- What inventions and ideas from Mesopotamia are still important today?
- How did Mesopotamia influence later civilizations?

Vocabulary

People	Terms	Places/Events
	Prehistory	Africa
Lucy	Archaeology	Olduvai Gorge
Otzi the Iceman	Artifact	Fertile Crescent
Mary Leakey	Fossil	Mesopotamia
Louis Leakey	Nomad	Tigris River
Richard Leakey	Hunter-gatherer	Euphrates River
Sargon of Akkad	Paleolithic	Sumer
Hammurabi	Neolithic	Ur
Gilgamesh	Domestication	Uruk
	Agriculture	Babylon

Surplus	Bering Land Bridge (Beringia)
Civilization	
Culture	Early Human Evolution
Specialization	Early Human Migration
Irrigation	Discovery of Fire
Fertile Crescent	Development of Stone Tools
Mesopotamia	Neolithic (Agricultural) Revolution
City-state	Domestication of Plants and Animals
Cuneiform	Rise of Permanent Settlements
Polytheism	Development of Civilization
Ziggurat	Invention of Cuneiform
Empire	Development of Irrigation
Law Code	Rise of the Sumerian City-States
	Creation of the Akkadian Empire
	Hammurabi's Code

Content/Enduring Understandings

Prehistory and Early Humans

- The meaning of prehistory
- Archaeology and the study of the past
- Early human ancestors
- Hunter-gatherer lifestyles
- The Paleolithic (Old Stone Age)
- Adaptations for survival

- Development and use of tools
- Discovery and uses of fire
- Cave art and early culture

Early Human Migration

- The "Out of Africa" theory
- Causes of migration
- Land bridges and changing climates
- Adaptation to different environments
- The spread of humans across continents
- Evidence from fossils, artifacts, and DNA

The Neolithic Revolution

- The transition from hunting and gathering to farming
- Domestication of plants and animals
- Permanent settlements
- Food surplus
- Population growth
- Changes in daily life and society

The Rise of Complex Societies

- Characteristics of civilization
    - Stable food supply
    - Government
    - Religion
    - Social classes
    - Job specialization
    - Writing

    - Arts and architecture
    - Technology
- Development of villages into cities
- Trade and economic systems

Geography of Mesopotamia

- Location of Mesopotamia
- The Fertile Crescent
- The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers
- Advantages and challenges of river civilizations
- Irrigation systems
- Natural resources and trade

Mesopotamian Civilization

- Sumer and the first city-states
- The role of kings and priests
- Social structure
- Polytheistic religion
- Ziggurats
- Cuneiform writing
- Inventions and technological achievements
- Wheel, sail, plow, and irrigation
- Hammurabi and Hammurabi's Code
- The importance of laws in civilization

Skills

- use geographic tools
- explain
- cause and effect
- use sources (primary and secondary)
- make evidence based inferences and claims
- cite textual evidence
- argue
- identify
- examine
- analyze
- cite primary and secondary sources
- assess
- compare and contrast

Learning Targets

Prehistory and Early Humans

- I can explain the meaning of prehistory and how it differs from recorded history.
- I can describe how archaeologists study the past using artifacts and fossils.
- I can identify the characteristics of early human ancestors.
- I can explain how hunter-gatherers met their basic needs.
- I can describe life during the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age).
- I can explain how early humans adapted to survive in different environments.
- I can identify the importance of the development and use of early tools.
- I can explain how the discovery of fire changed the lives of early humans.
- I can analyze what cave art tells us about early human culture and beliefs.

Early Human Migration

- I can explain the "Out of Africa" Theory of human migration.
- I can identify the reasons why early humans migrated.
- I can describe how land bridges and climate changes influenced migration.
- I can explain how humans adapted to new environments as they spread across the world.
- I can trace the movement of early humans to different continents using maps.
- I can evaluate the evidence from fossils, artifacts, and DNA that supports early human migration.

The Neolithic Revolution

- I can explain how the Neolithic Revolution changed human life.
- I can compare hunting and gathering with farming.
- I can describe how the domestication of plants and animals affected societies.
- I can explain why permanent settlements developed.
- I can describe how a food surplus led to population growth.
- I can explain how farming changed daily life, jobs, and social organization.

The Rise of Complex Societies

- I can identify the characteristics of a civilization.
- I can explain why a stable food supply is necessary for civilization.
- I can describe the roles of government and leaders in early civilizations.
- I can explain how religion influenced early societies.
- I can identify the different social classes found in early civilizations.
- I can explain why job specialization became important.
- I can describe how writing improved communication and record keeping.
- I can identify the importance of arts, architecture, and technology in civilizations.
- I can explain how villages grew into cities.
- I can describe how trade and economic systems helped civilizations develop.

Geography of Mesopotamia

- I can locate Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent on a map.
- I can identify the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and explain their importance.
- I can explain the advantages and challenges of living near rivers.
- I can describe how irrigation systems improved farming.
- I can explain how natural resources and trade supported Mesopotamian civilization.

Mesopotamian Civilization

- I can explain why Sumer is considered the world's first civilization.
- I can describe the role of city-states in Mesopotamia.
- I can explain the responsibilities of kings and priests.
- I can describe the Mesopotamian social structure.
- I can explain the beliefs of the Mesopotamian polytheistic religion.
- I can identify the purpose of ziggurats.
- I can explain the importance of cuneiform as one of the world's first writing systems.
- I can identify important Mesopotamian inventions, including the wheel, sail, plow, and irrigation systems.
- I can explain how Mesopotamian technological innovations improved everyday life.
- I can describe Hammurabi's Code and explain why laws are important in a civilization.
- I can analyze how written laws helped create order and justice in early societies.

Resources (Savvas My World Interactive: World History Copyright Savvas Learning Company LLC. 2023)

Topic	Lesson	Subtopics
Topic 1: Origins of Civilization	Lesson 1: The Distant Past (week of Sept. 28th)	*Main Focus* -Studying Early Humans -Where Did Human Ancestors Live?

	-How Hunters/Gatherers Lived
	Additional Focus
	-How archaeologists use evidence to learn about the distant past.
	- How early humans survived and adapted to changing environments.
	Main Focus
	-Life of Later Stone Age People
	-Early Human Migration
Lesson 2:	-How did humans adapt to their environment?
Humans Spread Out	
(week of Oct. 5th)	
	Additional Focus
	-What is the "Out of Africa" theory?
	-Development of hominids to humans
	Main Focus
	-When did people begin to create art?
	-Cave Paintings
	-What do we know about Stone Age religion?
Lesson 3:	
Developing Complex Cultures	-When did people start to farm?
(week of Oct. 19th)	
	Additional Focus:
	-What are some early religious practices?
	-How did domesticated plants and animals change people's lives?
	-What new tools did people make?

		Main Focus -Where did farming begin and how did it spread? -How did farming change human culture? -How did cities begin?
	Lesson 4: New Ways of Life (week of Oct. 26th)	*Additional Focus* -What kinds of shelters did people build? -How did farming change clothing? -How did farming change social organization? -How did cities become centers of wealth?
		Main Focus -How did cities lead to civilizations? -What are the features of civilizations?
	Lesson 5: Rise of Civilization (Mesopotamia) Teach: G.R.A.P.E.S. Method (week of Nov. 2nd)	- *Additional Focus* -Organized government -Established religion -Job specialization -Arts and Architecture -System of writing (Cuneiform)

Topic	**Lesson**	**Subtopics**
Topic 8: Civilizations and Peoples of the Fertile Crescent	Lesson 1: Civilization of Mesopotamia Emerges	*Main Focus* -How was agriculture important in Mesopotamia?

	(week of Nov. 2nd)	-City-States of Sumer *Additional Focus* -What was the role of religion in Sumer? -Sumerian government -Sumerian achievements -Sumerian writing system -Sumerian Law (Hammurabi's Code) -Gilgamesh
	Lesson 2/3: The First Empires (Akkadia, Babylon,Assyria and Persia) (week of Nov. 9th)	*Main Focus* -The Conquest of Sumer -Sargon and Akkad -The Babylonia Empire -Rise of Persian Empire (Sargon the Great)
	Lesson 4: Phoenicians (week of Nov. 9th)	*Main Focus* -Who were the Phoenicians? -How did they use the sea? -Development and the spread of the Alphabet
Benchmark Review/Benchmark	Week of Nov. 16th	

Supplemental Activities

- Savvas textbook

- Timelines
- Map Analysis
- BrainPop
- EdPuzzle
- Nearpod
- National Geographic
- Metropolitan Museum of Art
- TED-Ed
- PBS Learning Media
- History Channel Learning Videos
- Kahoot/Blooket Games
- Reading passages, Readworks, NewsELA
- Additional Films: The Croods, Ice Age

Lesson 1: Early Humans

Artifact/fossil "mystery box" station activity: students examine replica images of tools and fossils (e.g., Lucy, Otzi the Iceman) and infer what each reveals about early human life.
Jigsaw reading on Mary, Louis, and Richard Leakey's discoveries at Olduvai Gorge; each group reports findings and cites the passage that supports their claim.
BrainPop/EdPuzzle video on the Paleolithic Age followed by a guided cause-and-effect chart: discovery of fire → changes in diet, safety, and social behavior.
Cave art gallery walk (Metropolitan Museum of Art / National Geographic images): students analyze symbols and patterns to infer early belief systems and communication.

Lesson 2: Early Human Migration

Map analysis: students trace the "Out of Africa" migration routes and the Bering Land Bridge (Beringia) on a world physical map, labeling continents and land bridges.
Cause-and-effect flow chart: climate change and resource scarcity → migration → adaptation to new environments (tundra, forest, desert).
Evidence station rotation: students review fossil, artifact, and DNA evidence cards

and argue which type of evidence provides the strongest proof of a migration route.

Lesson 3: The Agricultural Revolution

Compare-and-contrast T-chart: hunter-gatherer societies vs. early agrarian (farming) societies, examining social organization, natural resources, and land use.
Cause-and-effect concept map: domestication of plants/animals → food surplus → population growth → permanent settlements → specialization.
Timeline activity: students place Paleolithic and Neolithic developments on a proportional timeline to demonstrate the relative length of pre- and post-agricultural periods.

Lesson 4: The Rise of Complex Societies

G.R.A.P.E.S. graphic organizer: students identify and examine the characteristics of civilization (Government, Religion, Achievements/Arts, Politics/Social structure, Economy/specialization, Structures/Science-writing) using textbook evidence.
Small-group debate: "Which characteristic of civilization is most essential for a society to succeed?" — students argue and defend a position using evidence.
Primary source excerpt analysis (early writing samples) to assess how writing transformed communication and record-keeping.

Lesson 5: Geography of Mesopotamia

Physical vs. political map comparison: students use geographic tools to compare an ancient map of the Fertile Crescent with a modern map of Iraq, examining the geopolitical impact then and now.
Geography-impact cause-and-effect chart: river flooding/silt → irrigation → farming surplus → city-state growth → trade networks.
Document-based mini-inquiry: students examine excerpts describing river valley advantages/challenges and make evidence-based claims about why civilization developed there.

Lesson 6: Achievements of Mesopotamia

Cuneiform "decode and create" station: students examine cuneiform tablets, identify the purpose of writing in record-keeping, trade, and law.

Primary source excerpt study of Hammurabi's Code: students cite specific laws and assess their fairness and purpose in Sumerian/Babylonian society.
Legal-systems comparison chart: Code of Hammurabi, Justinian Code, and Israelite Law compared with basic features of the American legal system.
Innovation showcase: small groups research and present one Mesopotamian invention (wheel, sail, plow, irrigation) and argue its lasting impact on the modern world.

Evidence/Assessments

- tests/quizzes
- writing
- primary source analysis
- benchmark assessment
- image analysis
- map and chart analysis
- warm ups
- exit tickets

Interdisciplinary Connections

ELA (2023 NJSLS-ELA, Grade 6)

W.WR.6.5Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

W.NW.6.3Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Math (2023 NJSLS-Mathematics, Grade 6)

6.NS.C.5: Understand that positive and negative numbers are used together to describe quantities having opposite directions or values... use positive and negative numbers to represent quantities in real-world contexts, explaining the meaning of 0 in each situation.

Science: Living vs Nonliving things (artifact vs fossil); The use of carbon dating for archaeologists
(MS-LS4-1: Analyze and interpret data for patterns in the fossil record that document the existence, diversity, extinction, and change of life forms throughout the history of life on Earth under the assumption that natural laws operate today as in the past. [Clarification Statement: Emphasis is on finding patterns of changes in the level of complexity of anatomical structures in organisms and the chronological order of fossil appearance in the rock layers.] [Assessment Boundary: Assessment does not include the names of individual species or geological eras in the fossil record.]
MS-LS1-1: Conduct an investigation to provide evidence that living things are made of cells; either one cell or many different numbers and types of cells. [Clarification Statement: Emphasis is on developing evidence that living things are made of cells, distinguishing between living and non-living things, and understanding that living things may be made of one cell or many and varied cells.]

-Art: Creation of cave paintings to show items of cultural value
VA:Re.7.1.6a : Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

Intersections of History

Black:

- Africa as the birthplace of humanity and early human migration
- The “Out of Africa” theory and migration to other continents
- African contributions to early human culture, technology, and survival
- The importance of Africa in the development of early civilizations
- Connections between ancient African civilizations and later world history

Hispanics:

- Early human migration into the Americas
- The Bering Land Bridge (Beringia) and settlement of the Americas
- Adaptation of early peoples to different environments in the Americas
- Development of early Indigenous cultures and communities in the Americas
- Connections to later study of Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations

Women:

- Roles of women in hunter-gatherer societies
- Women’s contributions to gathering food, caring for families, and community survival
- The role of women in the Agricultural Revolution
- Women’s contributions to farming and the domestication of plants and animals
- How permanent settlements and social classes changed the roles of women
- Women’s roles in religion, family life, crafts, and early communities

Persons with Disabilities:

- Archaeological evidence (e.g., healed and set bones in early human remains) showing injured or disabled individuals survived well past their injuries, indicating group care and cooperation
- Connections to the unit's guiding question on how cooperation helped early humans survive
- Evidence that early hunter-gatherer groups supported members who could not hunt or gather in traditional ways, assigning other valued roles instead
- How permanent settlements and job specialization in early civilizations created new kinds of work (crafts, record-keeping, religious roles) that could be filled by people with a range of physical abilities
- References to people with disabilities in early law codes, including provisions in Hammurabi's Code addressing responsibility, harm, and care
- Discussion of how archaeologists and historians use skeletal and artifact evidence to learn about the lived experience of people with disabilities in the past

LGBTQIA+:

- Note for teachers: evidence from prehistory and early Mesopotamia on this topic is limited and debated among historians, so this section focuses on documented religious and social roles rather than modern identity categories
- Documented Mesopotamian religious roles, such as certain temple personnel associated with the goddess Inanna, that ancient texts describe as outside typical male/female categories of the time
- How Mesopotamian society organized gender roles within family, work, and religious life, and what surviving texts and law codes reveal about those expectations
- Discussion of how scholars interpret incomplete ancient evidence, and why historians are cautious about applying modern labels to ancient peoples
- Connections to the unit's broader theme of how early civilizations structured social roles and how those structures changed over time