Exercise A: Reading

Life in Sumer

A Sumerian spent most of his life working. Whether farming, brick-making or keeping accounts, Sumerians worked all year and for many hours a day. Most farmers lived close to a big city. Any produce their families did not need for food could be traded in the city. Craftsmen, tradesmen, teachers, clerks and others who worked in the city, could trade with the farmers. Although life was hard, the Sumerians had many advantages that earlier people did not have. Life was more secure. There were laws to tell people what they could or could not do. The army kept invaders away. Although each family had to pay a portion of their wealth to the Temple in taxes, these taxes were used to pay wages to the army and on important building projects that would affect everyone in the city such as city walls.

Life in Sumer depended on the rivers. They made the land fertile and helped bring water even when there was no rain. Farming was more successful because taxes from the farmers were used to build dams and canals. This irrigation helped protect the farmlands from floods and brought water when it was needed. The wild grains found in Mesopotamia were one of the main reasons that civilization flourished in this region. Emmer, wheat and barley grew naturally. Man discovered that these plants could be harvested and eaten. The Sumerians relied on grains. Barley was the most important as it was used to make flat loaves of bread and beer. Archaeologists excavating a Sumerian marketplace have found evidence of peas, beans, onions, cucumbers, apples, spices, cheese and dates. They also found the bones of fish, ducks, pigs, goats, sheep and cows. Many necessary resources could not be found in Sumer. However, the resources could often be obtained from near-by. Traders took the surplus goods of Sumer to other lands. There they exchanged them for metals and other resources that Sumer did not have.

Sumer was a theocratic society. This means that even though the men could vote for representatives of the city, all the important decisions and laws were made by the Priests. Taxes were paid to the temple and the priests decided on what the taxes should be spent on. Grain was then given to the farmers from the temple to sow their crops. Clerks worked at the temple to keep track of the population and the taxes. The temple was also a place of learning; teachers and students would learn about writing, mathematics, astronomy, biology and medicine. Schools were very strict and only the sons of rich and important people could afford to go there. Writing was done using a slab of clay and a reed or stick. The reed was pressed into the clay at certain angles to make marks which would still be there when the clay hardened. This form of writing was known as ‘cuneiform’, from the Latin for ‘wedge’.

Men dominated Sumerian society. Only men voted and only men could hold important positions of authority. Sumerian women had some freedoms often denied to women of other ancient societies. They were allowed to own property (land) and were allowed to run a business; but they were forbidden to go to school and had to obey their husbands or fathers. Children had to obey their parents or would receive a beating at the hands for their father. Although most Sumerians were free citizens, there were slaves. These people were usually prisoners of war or people who became slaves because of a debt they could not pay back. A man could sell himself or his family into slavery for a certain amount of time to clear a debt; he could also buy freedom for his family or himself by using any money earned to clear the debt.

Source: ‘Life B.C.’ by Glen Garden
Exercise B: Comprehension

1. Give a definition for the following terms;
   - Temple -
   - Mesopotamia -
   - Theocratic -
   - Slavery -
   - Surplus -
   - Cuneiform -
   - Authority -

2. Describe some of the advantages of paying taxes?

3. Why did life in Sumer depend on the rivers?

4. What is the importance of surplus produce to Sumerians?

5. Write your own response to ‘Do you think slavery was a fair practice in ancient Sumer?’ You can agree or disagree but remember to back up your opinion with facts.
Exercise C: Cloze

Read the text and fill in the blanks using the words in the WORD BOX.

Houses in _______ cities were made of mud brick, with a flat roof, and built around a courtyard forming a compound. The outer walls of the _________ had no windows but the walls facing the courtyard did. The walls were plastered and white-washed. ___________ people could afford to build double storey houses in their compounds. Most compounds were small and huddled together, along _______ lanes. They were a big contrast with the _________.

It was important to Sumerians to please their _________. The temple (Ziggurat) was the largest building in each city, shaped like a stepped _______ they were up to 60m high. The Sumerians believed that by building the temples in this way, the gods could use them to __________ from the heavens.

Each ________ in Sumer had its own god. Enlil was the god of the air and was the patron deity of the city of Nippur. Enki was the god of freshwater, male fertility, and knowledge; he was the patron __________ of Eridu. Nanna was god of the moon in the city of Ur. Ninurta was the god of war and ____________ whose main temple was in the city of Lagash.

Exercise D: Cross curricular

Using the information from exercises A & C, draw and label features of a typical Sumerian city and surrounding area.