Name _____ Date _____

Mesopotamia: Rivers, City-States and Early Writing

Directions: Read the passage about Mesopotamia. Then answer each question, and look back at the passage whenever you need to.

Cities Between Two Rivers

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow from eastern Turkey to the Persian Gulf. The land along them is called Mesopotamia, Greek for "between rivers." Most of it lies in today's Iraq.

Southern Mesopotamia gets very little rain. Each spring, though, melting mountain snow made the rivers flood. As the water went down, it left silt, a fine soil good for crops. But floods were hard to predict and could wash away a village. So farmers cut canals to lead river water to their crops and built earth walls against floods.

The south had little stone or wood but plenty of mud, so people built with sun-dried mud bricks.

Farmers grew more grain than their families needed, so some people could become priests, traders or scribes. By about 3000 BCE, Sumer, in the far south, had a dozen or more city-states, such as Ur. A city-state was a city that governed itself and the farms around it. Neighboring city-states often fought over land and water.

The Sumerians worshipped many gods and believed each city had its own protector god. In time, many cities built a ziggurat, a giant mud-brick tower that rose in steps to a temple.

To count the grain and animals that came in, officials started sketching simple pictures in wet clay. Later, scribes pressed a cut reed into the clay, which left wedge-shaped marks. This writing, called cuneiform, is one of the earliest known writing systems. Over the centuries, people used it for laws, letters and stories.

1. Use the passage about Mesopotamia to complete the sentences.

Word bank
Iraq • rivers • mountains • Egypt

The name Mesopotamia is Greek for "between _____." Most of Mesopotamia lies in today's _____.

2. According to the passage, why did farmers in southern Mesopotamia dig canals?

A. The canals let boats sail straight to Egypt.
B. Very little rain fell, so they needed river water for their fields.
C. The canals drained away silt that harmed their crops.
D. The canals gave them stone for building.

3. Why did people in southern Mesopotamia build with mud bricks?

A. Mud bricks lasted longer in floods than any stone.
B. Traders brought the bricks from the highlands of Turkey.
C. Their kings saved all the stone for building tombs.
D. Their land had little stone or wood, but plenty of mud.

4. What does the passage mean by a city-state?

A. A city that governed itself and the farms around it

B. A giant tower that rose in steps

C. A city that obeyed a faraway emperor

D. A small farm village that had no ruler

5. Which sentence from the passage best supports the idea that Sumer's city-states were rivals?

A. Each spring, though, melting mountain snow made the rivers flood.

B. Over the centuries, people used it for laws, letters and stories.

C. Southern Mesopotamia gets very little rain.

D. Neighboring city-states often fought over land and water.

6. Which description of a ziggurat matches the passage?

A. A giant mud-brick tower that rose in steps to a temple

B. A wall of earth that held back the spring floods

C. A clay tablet used to record grain and animals

D. A stone tomb built to hold the body of a king

7. Which two statements about life in Sumer does the passage support? Select 2.

☐ A. The Sumerians believed each city had its own protector god.

☐ B. City-states never fought with one another.

☐ C. All of Sumer was ruled by one king from Egypt.

☐ D. Most homes were carved out of solid stone.

☐ E. Extra grain let some people work as priests, traders or scribes.

8. What first led officials in Sumer to start making marks in clay?

A. They needed to record the laws of a great empire.

B. They needed to keep track of grain and animals.

C. They wanted to write down long stories about heroes.

D. They had to send letters to kings in faraway lands.

9. Which sentence from the passage best shows that early writing in Sumer changed over time?

A. Southern Mesopotamia gets very little rain.

B. Later, scribes pressed a cut reed into the clay, which left wedge-shaped marks.

C. Farmers grew more grain than their families needed, so some people could become priests, traders or scribes.

D. This writing, called cuneiform, is one of the earliest known writing systems.

10. The passage says that over the centuries, people used cuneiform for laws, letters and stories. What does this detail show?

A. Cuneiform was used only to count grain and animals.

B. Writing that began as record keeping came to be used for many purposes.

C. Scribes stopped writing because clay was hard to find.

D. Cuneiform was forgotten soon after it began.