The Ancient Fertile Crescent

Directions: Read the following article on the Ancient Fertile Crescent. Answer the questions which follow. Then construct a timeline from what you have read. You should find ten events within the text for your timeline.

The Fertile Crescent is a broad belt of rich farmland that arcs through the deserts of the Middle East. It includes the lands of Mesopotamia, which surround the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern-day Iraq. It also includes the lands of the Levant or Palestine, a belt of land which hugs the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea around the modern-day nation of Israel. There, the Jordan River flows from the Sea of Galilee on its way to the Dead Sea.

Historians call the Fertile Crescent the Cradle of Civilization. The lush rivers valleys of this land drew tribes of hunter-gatherers to their green floodplains. In time they learned how to raise crops and engaged in pastoralism. Like the rest of the agricultural world, they settled down in permanent villages, towns and cities as they tilled their fields. From these seeds the first civilized cultures in history sprang up, changing the face of humanity forever.

One of the first civilized cultures born in this region was that of the ancient Sumerians. Around 3500 BCE, many small kingdoms like Ur, Nippur, and Lagash sprang up in what is now Iraq. A king ruled each of these petty city-states, controlling the farmlands that surrounded it as well. These Sumerian kings went to war often over land, trade, and water rights. Some rulers, like Sargon the Great, carved out temporary empires from these city-states, but none of these empires lasted for more than a few centuries before collapsing.

In spite of constant warfare, the Sumerians developed a rich culture that astonished archaeologists in modern times. They were among the first cultures to create writing. Their writing was called cuneiform, which means “wedge-shaped” in Latin. To record information, they pressed reed styluses into damp clay, leaving wedge-shaped marks on the tablets. Sumerian scribes used these marks to make symbols that represented sounds, words, and whole ideas. With this system of writing, the scribes of Sumer recorded bills of sale, their myths and legends, and their laws.

One of the first cultures to codify its laws in the Fertile Crescent was that of Babylon. A people called the Amorites founded the city of Babylon on the banks of the Euphrates River ca. 2000 BCE. From this base, their armies marched out and captured many of the other cities in the region. Soon, the city had carved out a mighty empire under a king named Hammurabi.

History remembers Hammurabi as one of the first rulers to put his laws down in writing, a process known as codification. Around 1790 BCE, he had the laws of his land carved on a column of black stone known as a stele, which became known as the Code of Hammurabi to modern historians. This set of laws meted out harsh punishments (by today’s standards) to wrongdoers. For example, if a man put out the eye of another man, his eye was put out as punishment, a form of punishment known as “equal retribution.” Even so, his code sought to protect the common people of his empire from the rich and politically powerful people of his lands.

Other cultures also made achievements in the region. The Hittites began their empire in the rugged mountains of present-day Turkey. In this mineral-rich land, they learned to experiment with metallurgy. Around 1750 BCE, they may have been the first people in history to learn how to forge tools and weapons from iron. Armed with iron weapons, they became a power in the region, sweeping aside technologically weaker kingdoms who opposed them with bronze weapons and
armor. Even mighty Babylon fell to the iron blades of the Hittites.

In time, a people called the Assyrians also created an empire in the region. Around 1350 BCE, this kingdom started a campaign of conquest as it forged an empire, becoming known in its time for its cruelty and barbarity. When a city resisted their armies and refused to capitulate, they responded with brutal abandon. One story recorded that they tied the bodies of their own dead soldiers to the backs of enemy soldiers they had captured in battle. They forced them to bear these grisly loads until the cadavers rotted. The prisoners soon died, infected by the decaying corpses they bore on their backs.

The Hebrews also came from the Fertile Crescent, and were the ancestors of the modern-day Jewish people. They began as shepherds in the lands of Mesopotamia, but later moved to the lands of the Levant in modern-day Israel, prospering there. Eventually, a severe drought forced them to move to Egypt. There, the Egyptians enslaved them, holding them in bondage for generations. Around 1250 BCE, a prophet named Moses led the Hebrews in a successful rebellion against the Egyptians. In a journey known to Exodus, he led them back to the lands of Palestine, known as the Promised Land to the Hebrews.

When they arrived, the Hebrews found their lands inhabited by other people, but they soon cleared the land of these enemies in wars of annihilation recorded in the Bible. Under King David, they took the city of Jerusalem, which he made the capital of his new kingdom. Within this city his son, King Solomon, built the Temple ca. 950 BCE, forever making Jerusalem the spiritual focal point for the Jewish people. In time, however, their small kingdom fell prey to more powerful empires in the region. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all conquered them in turn. At times they marched them off into bondage far from their homeland, scattering the Jewish people all over Asia, Europe, and Africa.

As the Hebrews built their kingdom in Palestine, the Phoenicians built a maritime empire of their own not far to the north. Their ships trekked far and wide over the Mediterranean Sea, and they set up trading outposts in Africa, Europe, and Asia. They became master seafarers, becoming some of the first people to navigate their ships over open water with the sun and the stars. In order to keep track of their business, the Phoenicians invented an alphabet of 22 letters around 1200 BCE. Handed down to us through the Greeks, this alphabet became the source of the English alphabet.

Around 550 BCE, the Persian Empire arose to the east of the Fertile Crescent on the high Iranian Plateau. Cyrus the Great organized a large army that fought on horseback, and sent it sweeping out of Persia to conquer the lands of Asia Minor, the Fertile Crescent, and Egypt. Few nations seemed to be able to stand up to the Persian juggernaut as it ran riot on the plains of Asia.

Only the tough little Greek city-states seemed to be able to offer any resistance to the Persian Empire. They successfully turned back two invasions of their homeland under Darius I and his son, Xerxes. These wars severely weakened the Persian Empire, leaving it ripe for conquest.

In 334 BCE, Alexander of Macedon led a Greek army into the Persian Empire. Time and again he met the Persians in battle, and time and again he defeated them. In less than ten years, he had conquered all of the Persian Empire. When he died at the age of 32, he had created the largest empire the world had yet seen. It included all of Greece, Asia Minor, the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, Persia, and parts of India. Without Alexander the Great to hold the empire together, however, it soon fell apart into sovereign independent kingdoms ruled by his generals.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 9.6
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Directions: Read the article on the Ancient Fertile Crescent. Read the following questions and all their responses carefully. Circle the response that best answers the question.

1. Which of the following rivers flows through the Crescent?
   a. The Tigris
   b. The Euphrates
   c. The Jordan
   d. All of the above.

2. Which of the following statements best explains why the Ancient Fertile Crescent is known as the Cradle of Civilization?
   a. People had more babies there than elsewhere in the ancient world.
   b. It was walled in by high mountains, making it look like a crib or playpen.
   c. The first civilizations in the world sprang up there.

3. Which of the following leaders carved a temporary empire out of the city-states of Sumer?
   a. Sargon the Great
   b. Hammurabi
   c. King Solomon

4. What is cuneiform?
   a. A type of pottery made by the Hittites.
   b. A type of writing which uses wedge-shaped marks pressed into damp clay.
   c. Laws that were written by the Babylonians.

5. What people founded the city of Babylon?
   a. the Moabites
   b. the Semites
   c. the Amorites

6. The Hittites were among the first cultures to make weapons out of ___.
   a. copper
   b. bronze
   c. iron

7. Which of the following words best describes the Assyrians?
   a. sadistic
   b. forgiving
   c. peaceful

8. “They forced them to bear these grisly loads until the cadavers rotted.” What is the most likely meaning of the word “cadavers?”
   a. dead bodies
   b. crippled people
   c. severed heads

9. Which of the following prophets led the Hebrews out of Egypt?
   a. Moses
   b. Elijah
   c. David

10. What was the Hebrews’ escape from slavery in Egypt called?
    a. the Great Escape
    b. the Exodus
    c. the Passover

11. What city did David make the capital of his kingdom?
    a. Babylon
    b. Nineveh
    c. Jerusalem

12. What made Jerusalem the focal point for the Jewish people?
    a. The Great Pyramid at Giza
    b. The Temple of Solomon
    c. The Palace of King David
13. Which of the following peoples is the source of the English alphabet?
   a. the Greeks
   b. the Romans
   c. the Phoenicians

14. “Few nations seemed to be able to stand up to the Persian juggernaut.” Which of the following is the most likely definition for the word, “juggernaut?”
   a. an unstoppable force
   b. an army on horseback
   c. a large warship

15. What Persian kings launched two unsuccessful invasions of Greece?
   a. Darius I and his son, Xerxes
   b. Solomon and his son, David
   c. Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar

16. Which of the following best explains what happened to the empire of Alexander the Great when he died?
   a. It was absorbed by the stronger Parthian Empire.
   b. It broke apart into many kingdoms ruled by his generals.
   c. It persisted as a unified kingdom for many years.