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

Scholars call the Fertile Crescent the Cradle of Civilization. The lush rivers valleys of this land attracted drifting bands of ancient hunters. In time, they learned how to raise crops and herd animals. Soon, they settled down into permanent villages’ towns, and cities. From these seeds the first civilized cultures in history sprang, changing humankind forever.

The Sumerians were among the first. Around 3500 BC, they built cities like Ur, Nippur, and Lagash in modern-day Iraq. Kings ruled each of these small city-states. They each controlled a small city and the fields that around it. These Sumerian kings went to war often. They fought over land, trade, and water rights. Some rulers (like Sargon the Great), carved out empires by conquering a collection of these city-states. None of these empires lasted for more than a hundred years or so.

The land was wracked by constant war. Even so, the Sumerians developed a rich culture there. They were among the first cultures to write. Their writing was called cuneiform. This was a Latin world which means “wedge-shaped.” To write words and ideas, they pressed a reed pen into damp clay. These left wedge-shaped marks in the clay. Sumerian scribes used these marks to make symbols. These symbols represented sounds, words, and whole ideas. With cuneiform, the scribes of Sumer wrote down everything. They recorded sales of goods, their stories, and their laws with it.

Babylonia was one of the first cultures to write down its laws. A people called the Amorites founded the city of Babylon ca. 2000 BC. They built it on the banks of the Euphrates River. From this base, their armies fanned out to capture many of the other cities in the region. Soon, the city had carved out a mighty empire. Among many, a king named Hammurabi led it.

History remembers Hammurabi for one important feat. He was one of the first rulers to put his laws down in writing. Around 1790 BCE, he had the laws of his land carved on a column of black stone. It is known as the Code of Hammurabi. By today’s standards, this set of laws could be harsh in the way it dealt with crime. If a person took away something, he often had to pay for it in kind. Say, for example, he injured a man’s eye in a fight. His eye might be put out to pay for his crime. As harsh as it was, his code sought to protect the weak from the strong in his empire.

Other cultures also made achievements in the region. The Hittites built their empire among the mountains of present-day Turkey. In this rocky land, they learned to work many types of metals. Around 1750 BCE, they may have been the first people in history to learn how to work iron. These iron weapons helped them in wars with their neighbors. Even mighty
Babylon fell to the iron blades of the Hittites.

In time, a people called the Assyrians also carved out an empire from this region. Around 1350 BCE, this kingdom struck out to attack its neighbors. It created an army known in its time for cruelty. Woe to cities who opposed them. Any who did found themselves quickly crushed. One story recorded that they tied the bodies of their own dead soldiers to the backs of prisoners. They forced them to bear these grisly loads until the cadavers rotted. The captives soon died from infection.

The Hebrews also came from the Fertile Crescent. They were the ancestors of the modern-day Jewish people. They began as shepherds in the lands of Mesopotamia. They later moved to the lands of the Levant in modern-day Israel. There, they thrived. Eventually, a severe drought forced them to move to Egypt. The Egyptians enslaved them. Around 1250 BCE, a prophet named Moses led the Hebrews in a successful revolt against the Egyptians. In a journey known to Exodus, he led them back to the lands of Palestine. This land was known as the Promised Land to the Hebrews.

When they arrived, the Hebrews found other people lived on these lands. In a number of wars detailed in the Bible, they cleared the land of these foes. Under King David, they took the city of Jerusalem. He made it the capital of his kingdom. King Solomon (David’s son) built the Temple ca. 950 BCE. This made Jerusalem the focal point for the Jewish people from that point forward. In time, however, their small kingdom fell prey to stronger empires in the region. Many people like the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans conquered the Hebrews in turn. At times they marched them off as captives far from their homeland. As a result, they spread the Jewish people all over Asia, Europe, and Africa.

At the same time, the Phoenicians built an empire of their own not far to the north. Their ships sailed far and wide over the Mediterranean Sea. In Africa, Europe, and Asia they set up trading posts. They became master seamen. They became some of the first people to sail their ships at night by the stars. They also became master record keepers. The Phoenicians wrote with an alphabet of 22 letters around 1200 BCE. They handed this down to us through the Greeks. With a few tweaks, this system of writing became the source of the English alphabet.

Around 550 BCE, the Persian Empire formed to the east of the Fertile Crescent. Cyrus the Great trained a large army that fought on horseback. It swept out of Persia (in modern-day Iran) and seized the lands of Asia Minor, the Fertile Crescent, and Egypt. Few nations seemed to be able to stand up to the Persian juggernaut.

Only the tough little Greek city-states seemed to give the Persian Empire pause. They successfully turned back two invasions of their homeland under Darius I and his son, Xerxes. These wars sapped the Persian Empire’s strength. That left 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. Time and again he defeated them. In less than ten years, he had seized all of the Persian Empire. When he died at the age of 32, he had built the largest empire the world had yet seen. It spread from Greece in the west to India in the east. It also included the lands from the Black Sea in the north to the Nile River in the south. Without Alexander the Great, though, it soon fell apart. Soon after he died, his generals divided it up into small kingdoms that they ruled.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 5.5
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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.