As civilization in Mesopotamia developed, so did life in the city-states. By 3000 B.C., most of the people in Sumer lived in one of over a dozen such towns. These cities were fiercely independent, each featuring its own type of government ruled by either a king, a class of priests, or some other leader.

The people living in the city-states were divided into three classes, or groups. The most important class in status consisted of the nobility and the priests. The nobility were privileged land-owners. The next class was made up of the commoners—those who labored in the fields of the nobility or worked in the cities as artisans, craftsmen, or unskilled workers. The lowest class of Sumerians was made up of slaves.

Just as a king might occupy the most important position in his city-state, so did a special type of building in Mesopotamia. Rising high above the streets of a typical city was a special temple called a ziggurat; from an Assyrian word *ziqquratu,* meaning “mountain top.”

Similar to the massive stone pyramids constructed by ancient Egyptians, the Mesopotamians built multi-leveled complexes of baked mud bricks. The typical ziggurat had three long staircases leading to the top of the structure—a height of perhaps 80 feet. These great temples were massive, often measuring 700 feet around the base.

The ziggurat was important to the Mesopotamians and their religion. The height of the temple symbolized the human desire to connect with heaven. Each ziggurat was dedicated to a special god. The stairs were an invitation to their god to come and visit them.

Unlike the typical Egyptian pyramid which featured smooth, sloping sides, the ziggurat had several flat terraces which were places of constant activity where everyone—from slave to king—gathered to worship.

Inside the ziggurat were special rooms and chambers, some serving as living quarters for temple priests. Other rooms were kept as sacred shrines and storage rooms.

While ziggurats dominated the skyline of the Sumerian city-states, the people lived in much smaller homes. The Mesopotamians recognized the right of private ownership of property and the typical commoner lived in a one-story mud-brick home. Such houses were often crowded together and lined the city’s narrow streets.

A ziggurat from Ur-Nammu, built around 2000 B.C.

Wealthy citizens might live in larger, two-story houses, complete with bedrooms, a kitchen, bathrooms, an inside courtyard, and storage rooms. Underground cellars might also be part of the home, where certain household goods, including foods, were kept cool.

Such homes commonly included a family chapel for private worship, as well as a family burial plot where the tombs of deceased family members served as a constant reminder of the family’s past.

Review and Write

1. What are some of the important buildings in your town or neighborhood? List them below.

2. Why do you think the Mesopotamians considered their ziggurats to be such important buildings?