

Agriculture, Food, and History in Mesopotamia

Grade: 7th

Season: Any

Objective: Students will understand agriculture's importance in the birth of civilization, particularly the first system of writing.

Connections to IGS Goals:

- Appreciate the farming profession
- Know that everyone can grow food

Connections to Priority Standards:

- Describe how location leads to development of civilization
- Be able to describe and understand the progression from hunter-gatherers to civilizations
- Mesopotamia/Phoenicia: know and understand how inventions, creation of laws and religion furthered civilization

Materials (for two classes):

- 4 slabs of clay
- Paper
- Stylus and roller for each student
- *Ancient Recipes* Powerpoint

Introduction: *What does civilization mean? (A human system that includes cities, governments, religion, social distinctions, artistic expression, and writing) What is the difference between a garden and a natural environment full of edible plants? A garden grows foods that were intentionally chosen by the gardener. In a garden, plants that we don't want are weeded out. The choice of hunter gatherers to grow edible plants (i.e. to farm) was one of the foundations of civilization. The first people to farm lived in Mesopotamia, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates River (show map).*

- *How might agriculture have changed how people lived? (People became sedentary, crops required irrigation system, crop surplus created opportunity for economic specialization, trade required record-keeping) Show barley dues cuneiform tablet (<http://metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/321814#fullscreen>). The need to keep track of traded crops led to the birth of written language, originally used for counting agricultural and manufactured goods. By bringing a lot of people together in one place, creating the options for economic specialization, and causing the necessity for writing, agriculture was causal in the birth of civilization.*

Activity 1:

- In the spring we are going to plant barley, one of the first domesticated crops and one of the staple foods in Mesopotamia, in our school garden.
- Today we are going to practice the Sumerian's written language, cuneiform, on clay tablets. *Show cuneiform writing related to agriculture* (http://www.ancientscripts.com/images/su_signs.gif . These tablets are going to decorate our garden bed. You can choose one of the following agriculture-related words to write in cuneiform – then write its translation in English on the other side of your tablet.
- Cut clay into slabs, give each student a slab on a piece of paper, a rolling pin, and a stylus. Have students roll out clay, and write on clay with their stylus, then let clay dry.
- Discuss the evolution of the cuneiform text

Introduction to next activity: *show culinary cuneiform tablets and recipe translations* (<http://www.library.yale.edu/neareast/exhibitions/food/images/C-YBC%204644-recipes.jpg>).

Have students read recipes out loud. We will make 2 of these recipes next class:

- **Recipe 1:** mersu: dates and pistachio nuts.
- **Recipe 2:** turnips (or barley) with herbs: turnips, herbs, butter, water, onion, garlic, flour, blood
- Discuss limitations of knowledge about recipes due to limitations of translation of ancient text

Activity 2:

Objective: Students will understand that culinary options in Mesopotamia were limited by native crops, climactic conditions, and culinary implements. Students will smell, taste, and harvest different herbs from the garden

Connections to IGS Goals:

- Know that everyone can grow food
- Feel confident in making healthy choices
- Recognize the difference between the industrial and local food systems

Connections to Priority Standards:

- Be able to describe and understand the progression from hunter-gatherers to civilizations
- Mesopotamia/Phoenicia: know and understand how inventions, creations of laws and religion furthered civilization

Materials:

- Crock pot
- Pre-cooked turnips
- Fat
- Water
- Dates

- Pistachios/sunflower seeds/ any seed or nut
- Mortar and pestle(s)
- Spoon
- Cutting board and knife (for chopping herbs)

Introduction: Review recipes. *What kind of implements would have been used to make these recipes? Why are there no avocados, potatoes, or bananas in the recipes of the culinary tablets?* The Sumerians were limited by the plants that grew in their native region, as well as by climactic conditions. Mesopotamia was a hot and dry region with a mild winter, and only the land flooded by the river was fertile enough for crops and livestock. Date and pistachio trees both thrive in hot, dry climates – a good reason to grow them there and *not* to grow them here on Martha’s Vineyard. *What are some things that are easier to raise or harvest here than they would have been in Mesopotamia?* Leafy greens and a diverse array of seafood!

Activity: Go outside to harvest herbs. Wash hands and herbs. Add water and oil to pre-cooked turnips in crock-pot. Add herbs (one student adding each herb) to turnips. Crush pistachios and dates with mortar and pestle (passing mortar and pestles around classroom). Have each student roll his or her own segment of the mixture into a ball or shape. Eat!

- Ask questions: what do you like or not like about the dish? Which herbs do you like? Could you make something like this at home? Do you cook at home? What do you like to cook? Does anyone have an herb garden at home?
- Note that students can make the pistachio/date ball at home with mortar and pestle or food processor, using raisins as a substitute for dates and any nut or seed as a substitute for the pistachios. Discuss why this is a healthy snack!

Assessment: Give students a written assessment to fill out at a later time, asking questions such as:

What is the different between a natural environment and a garden or farm?

Why was agriculture important to the birth of civilization?

Why would Sumerian recipes include dates and pistachios?

Which dish did you prefer and why?