The Zagros foothills below the mountains were an ideal place to farm. Many people still live in the fertile area today.

2. Food Shortages in the Hills

In Neolithic times, people in some areas of the world began farming. One of the areas that had good conditions for growing crops was the rolling foothills of the Zagros (ZAH-grihs) Mountains in northern Mesopotamia.

Mild weather and plentiful rains made the foothills a good place to farm. The nearby wooded hills provided timber for building shelters, and plenty of stones for toolmaking. Over several thousand years, these good conditions allowed the number of people in Mesopotamia to grow dramatically.

Then problems arose. Some historians believe that by 5000 B.C.E., farmers in the Zagros foothills did not have enough land to grow food for the increasing population. As a result, villages began to suffer from food shortages.

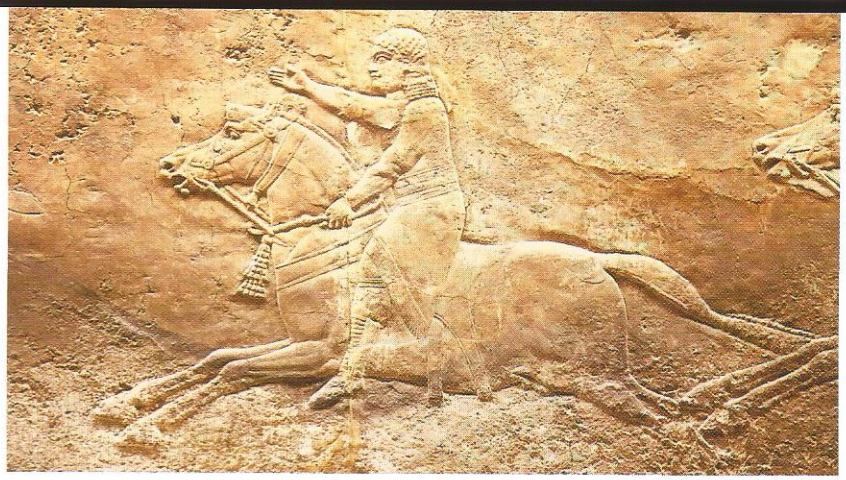
Below the foothills and to the south, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers ran through flat plains. The plains covered a large area of land, and few people lived there. During most of the year, the land was very hard and dry. And the plains lacked trees and stones for making shelters and tools.

Yet, the plains still held promise. In the spring, both of the rivers flooded, bringing precious water to the land. Perhaps farms could be successful there.

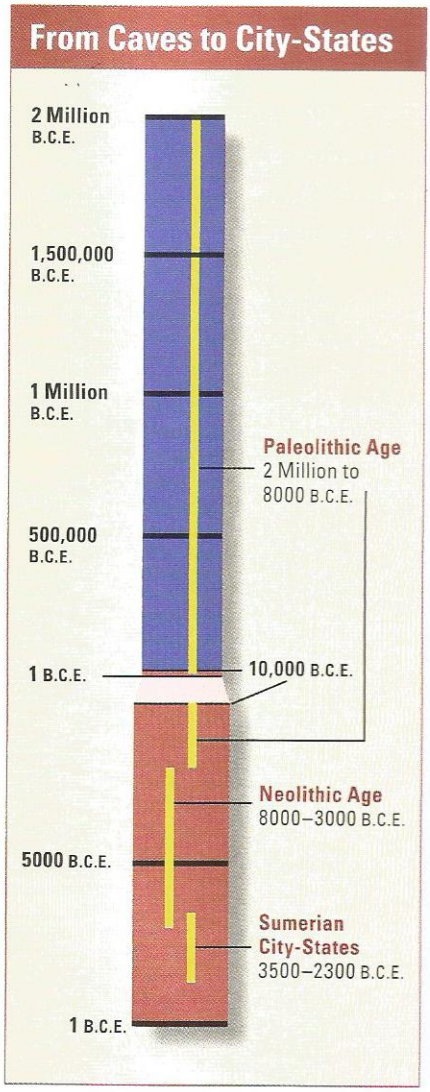
Driven by the need to grow food, people moved out of the foothills and onto the plains. This region became known as **Sumer** (SOO-mer), and its people, the Sumerians.

Sumer an area in southern Mesopotamia, where cities first appeared

A stele (STEE-lee) is an upright slab of stone inscribed with letters and pictures to depict important events. This particular stele shows a warrior on horseback riding into battle.



city-state an early city that was like a small, independent country with its own laws and government



5. Attacks by Neighboring Communities

As Sumerian cities grew, they fought over the right to use more water. Sometimes, people in cities located upriver (closer to where the river begins), built new canals, or blocked other cities' canals. In this way, they kept water from reaching the cities that were downriver (farther from where the river begins). **Disputes** over water became so intense that they often led to bloodshed.

The Sumerians looked for ways to protect their cities from neighboring communities. The plains provided no natural barriers. There were no mountain ranges or rushing rivers to keep out enemies. Around the cities, the Sumerians began constructing strong walls out of mud bricks that were baked in the sun until hard. The Sumerians also dug moats outside city walls to help prevent enemies from entering their cities. Most people lived in houses within the walled cities, but the farms lay outside. In case of attack, farmers fled the fields for safety within the city walls.

The walled cities of Sumer were like independent countries. Historians call them **city-states**. By about 3000 B.C.E., most Sumerians lived in city-states, enjoying the benefits of a protected and governed independent area.

6. From Small Farming Villages to Large City-States

As you've seen, beginning around 3500 B.C.E., the Sumerians progressed from living in small farming villages to building large, walled city-states. How and why did this happen? The answer lies not only in the problems the Sumerians faced, but also in their solutions. A basic challenge for any group of people is how to provide food for itself. Food shortages had forced settlers in Mesopotamia to move from the foothills down to the river valley. There, farmers faced the problem of having either too much water or too little.