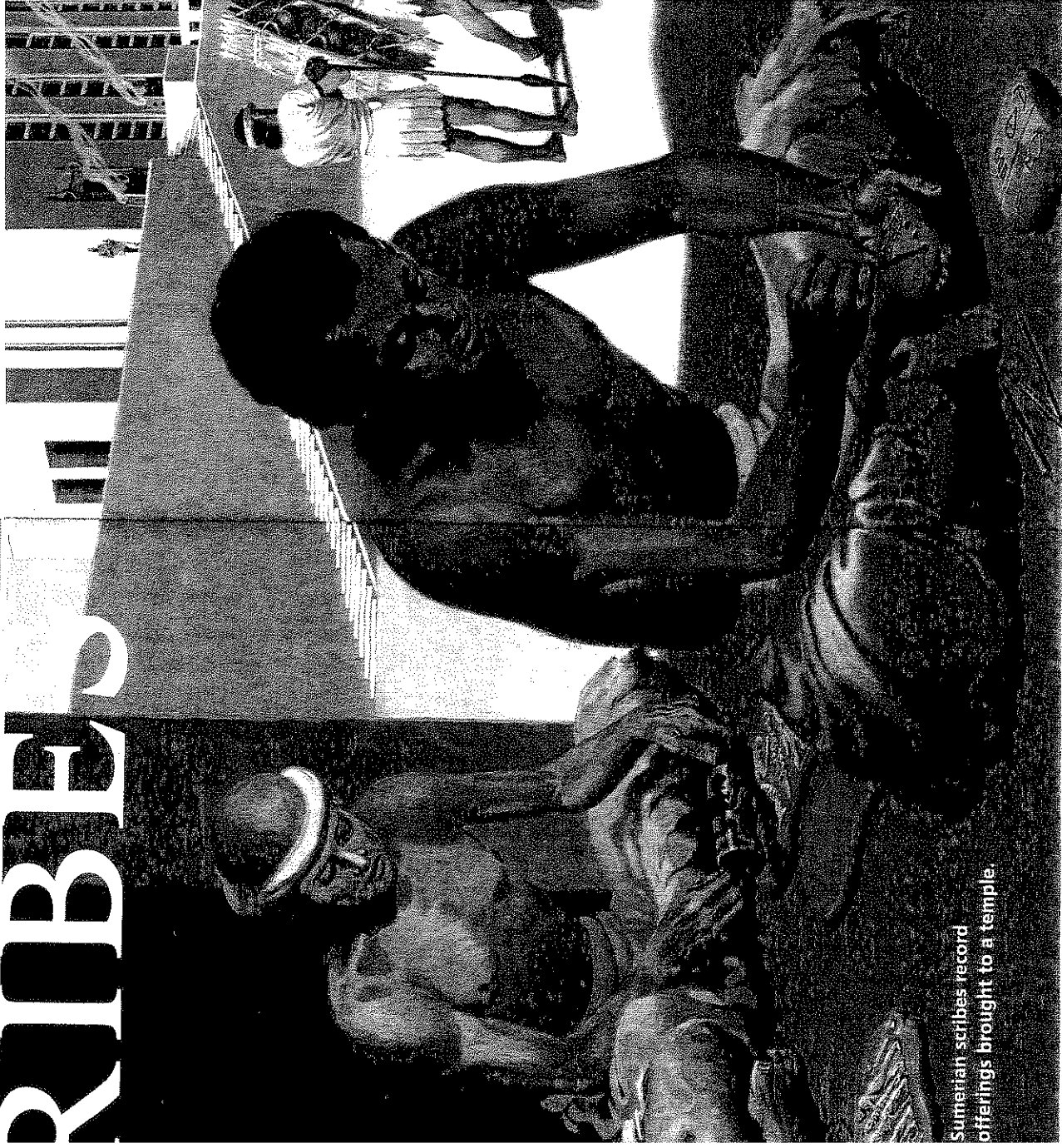


TOOLS FOR SCRIBES

Written records were essential to Mesopotamian civilization. The people who kept these records received special training that began when they were children.



Sumerian scribes record offerings brought to a temple.

Learning to write in ancient Sumer was much harder than just knowing your ABCs. Cuneiform writing included hundreds of different symbols that combined to form words. Few people learned to read and write this complex script. Those that did, called scribes, carried out very important work for Sumerian society.

The cities of Sumer employed many different types of scribes. Some scribes worked for the king. Others kept temple records. As with any kind of learning, some people became better scribes than others. One Sumerian proverb says that the best scribes could take notes while listening to a speaker. Some scribes, on the other hand, could not even spell properly.

As the cities of Sumer grew, they needed more and more scribes to keep their records. The first schools in history were created in Sumer to teach boys how to be scribes. Because scribes used a wedge-shaped instrument called a **stylus** to press cuneiform signs into wet clay tablets, the Sumerians called their schools “tablet houses.”

School Days in Sumer

The head teacher who ran each tablet house was the “school father.” A student was called a “school son.” Another teacher, known as “big brother,” assisted the school father. This assistant’s duties included checking the tablets that the students copied for practice. Archaeologists have found many of these practice tablets in the ruins of Sumerian cities. The cuneiform writing on them ranges from the crude work of beginners to the careful script of advanced students.

Most of the students at the tablet houses came from wealthy families. They spent 12 years studying nearly all day. First, the students learned how to write signs for basic sounds

and simple words. Later, they learned signs for special groups of words, such as legal and government terms, geographic terms, parts of the body, food, and drink. They learned how to write letters and inscriptions for monuments. They also learned mathematics and music.

► For more information about Sumerian civilization, see pages 59–60.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

To teach its scribes, Mesopotamia created the first organized system of education in human history. All the familiar elements of modern schools, including teachers, textbooks, and a curriculum, began in ancient Sumer.

WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

No girls attended the Sumerian tablet houses, but some were trained at home. Tutors taught them to be scribes. When their education was complete, they became priestesses of the Mesopotamian sun god Shamash (SHAH-mahsh) and especially of his goddess wife Aya. More than 140 of these female scribes lived at Aya’s temple in the city of Sippar. Like male scribes, they had endured years of hard training and came from wealthy families.

These priestesses bought and sold land and slaves. They kept the temple records, noting what money people gave for offerings and what the temple spent. They were important members of the community. A few of the priestesses were married, but none were allowed to have children. Much of what we know about the lives of Sumerian women comes from records they left behind.

