

CHAPTER TWO: THE EARLIEST CIVILIZATIONS

By 3500 B.C.E. humans were organized in many ways across the globe. Many were still hunters and gatherers, making their livings in much the same ways that their ancestor did. Others had settled into small villages as horticulturists or were following domesticated herds of animals to pasture. In a few places, generally those areas where agriculture had started early, large towns were forming. In southwest Asia, in a place that the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia, more complex organizations were beginning to grow into the first of the ancient civilizations.

Farming encouraged new forms of social organization partly because owning property was an incentive to make improvements, particularly in getting access to water. Building and maintaining irrigation ditches depended on cooperation among farmers, and irrigation needs led people to settle in villages rather than on isolated farms. These activities called for supervision and regulation, so the need for some type of formalized government arose. Once the number of people in a settlement grew so that more division of labor occurred, the village could be called a town. Even more growth and specialization led to the formation of the first cities where interconnected citizens lived in close proximity. It is no wonder, then, that the first civilizations grew up in river valleys where access to fresh water meant that crops could be irrigated and economic activities could be organized through interactions among cities, towns, and the countryside.

THE MEANING OF CIVILIZATION

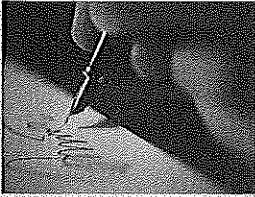
What developments must occur in order for a society to be called a “civilization”? Some important characteristics of civilizations are:

- 1) **Generation of reliable surpluses** – Agricultural technology allows farmers to produce more than their families need. In the earliest civilizations, farmers supported many city dwellers and filled food storage houses to provide a reliable food source in lean times.

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- 2) **Highly specialized occupations** – Whereas village and town life are characterized by division of labor, occupational specializations in the early civilizations were far more complex, including jobs in government, trade, merchandise, and religion.
- 3) **Clear social class distinctions** – With the growing complexity of occupations, the early civilizations set status distinctions among them, so that big differences appeared in prestige levels and wealth.
- 4) **Growth of cities** – Population centers in the ancient civilizations varied in size, but many were far larger than any that had been seen before. As economic, political, social, and cultural life grew more interrelated, towns grew into cities.
- 5) **Complex, formal governments** – The early needs for government to coordinate agricultural activities became even greater as more economic activities developed and cities grew larger.
- 6) **Long-distance trade** – The early civilizations first developed internal trade networks, and eventually developed long distance trade networks among different civilizations. This trade stimulated economic development, encouraged cultural development, and accentuated social class distinctions.
- 7) **Organized writing systems** – Most early civilizations developed forms of writing that enabled traders, religious leaders, and political leaders to communicate. An exception was the early development in the Andes region in South America, where even by the 16th century C.E., the highly organized Inca civilization did not have a writing system.

Using “civilization” as an organizing principle is controversial, partly because it may imply that “civilized people” are superior to “uncivilized” people. One criticism is that the very use of the word “uncivilized” implies that hunters and gatherers were inferior people. Indeed, a great deal of evidence points to the fact that early urban dwellers viewed nomadic people with disdain. Yet this point of view may not be justified because civilization often brings with it a “dark side” of increased crime, conflict over personal interests, a growing discrepancy between rich and poor, and devastation of the natural environment. On the other hand, the idea of civilization is useful in developing an understanding of the changing nature of early human social organization. Civilizations have allowed humans to reshape their environments and control other living species. Civilizations have built the foundation for great literature, scientific discoveries, works of art and architecture, and the efficient organization of work. Whatever its problem and merits, civilizations



ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS: ATTITUDES OF THE “CIVILIZED”

The attitudes of people in early civilizations toward the nomadic people around them is reflected in the connotations associated with “barbarians,” a term originated with the ancient Greeks. Do you see a point of view in the following quotes from ancient Romans?

“We must awaken again the ancient Roman spirit, fight our own battles, carry on nothing in common with the barbarians, drive them from every official position as well as from the senate...These barbarians, previous useful servants of our house, now intend to rule our nation!”

Synesius, 4th century Roman

“The people of the Huns...are quite abnormally savage...when they join battle they advance in packs, uttering their various war cries... None of them ploughs or even touches a plow-handle. They have no fixed abode, no home or law or settled manner of life...”

Ammianus Marcellus, 4th century
Roman historian

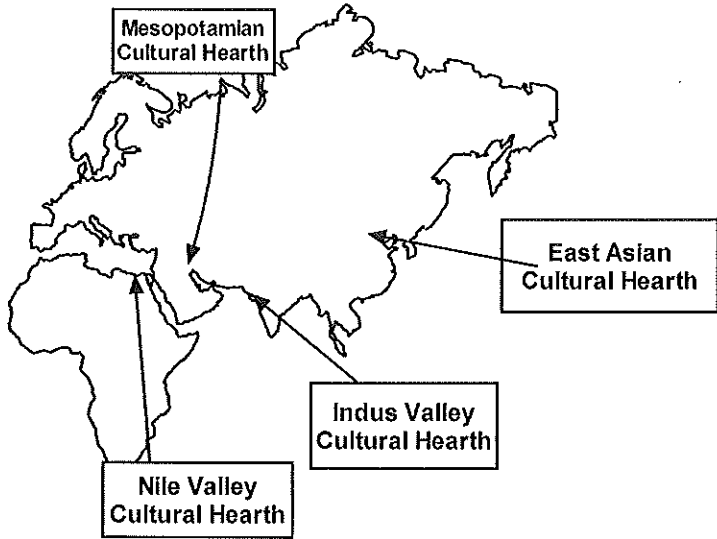
have shaped human development since its advent sometime in the 4th Millennium B.C.E.

CULTURAL HEARTHES

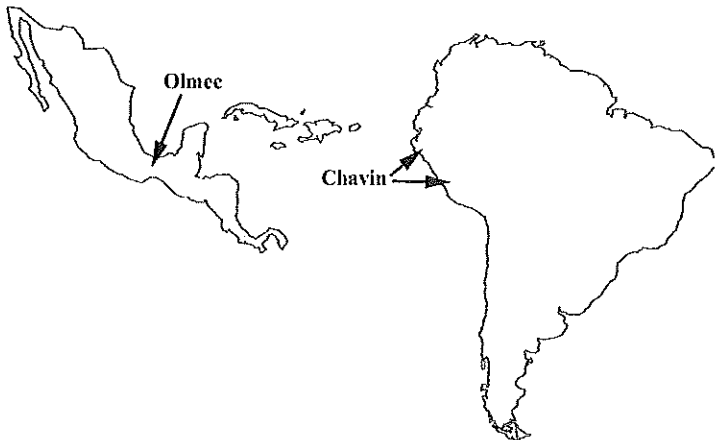
Historians specialize in the identification of **cultural hearths**, the areas where civilizations first began that radiated the ideas, innovations, and ideologies that culturally transformed the world. Early cultural hearths developed in southwest Asia and north Africa, south Asia, and east Asia in the valleys and basin of great river systems. Cultural hearths evolved much later in Central and South America, and their geography shaped cultural development not around river valleys, but around mountain ranges and central highlands. Another cultural hearth developed centuries later in west Africa, very much influenced by earlier hearths along the Nile River in northeast Africa. Another unique cultural

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hearth developed in the islands of the Aegean Sea, where the inhabitants were joined by easy water access among islands and mainland. From their centers, the hearths grew until they came into contact with one another, although their ability to travel to and contact other cultural hearths was limited by their levels of technology and distance.



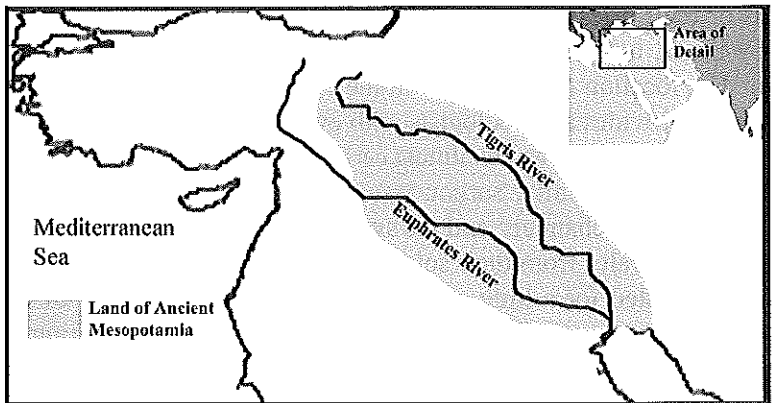
Earliest Cultural Hearths. The earliest cultural hearths were almost completely determined by their geographical locations. All were in river valleys where the soil was the most fertile and water most available for growing crops and transportation.



Cultural Hearths in the Americas. The origins of the earliest civilizations in the Americas – the Olmec and Chavin – are probably somewhat more recent than those of the cultural hearths in the Eastern Hemisphere, although recent discoveries give evidence that civilization may have existed in the Americas as early as 2000 B.C.E. Neither the Mesoamerican nor South American hearths were centered on river valleys, with the Olmec expanding out from the coastline, and the Chavin settling between the coastline and the Andes Mountain valleys.

CIVILIZATION IN MESOPOTAMIA

The earliest civilization is generally believed to have developed in **Mesopotamia**, or “land between the rivers,” in southwest Asia sometime during the 4th Millennium B.C.E. By 3500 B.C.E. writing had developed, and by 3000 B.C.E. governments were entrenched. The two rivers – the Tigris and the Euphrates – rise in modern day Turkey, parallel one another for about 400 miles, and finally join just before they empty into the Persian Gulf. Because the area is geographically accessible from many directions, it became a “crossroads” for diverse groups of people that sometimes settled and sometimes moved on. Many early settlers were members of the **Semitic** language family that was the precursor to both modern Hebrew and Arabic languages. A non-Semitic group called **Sumerians**, who came into lower Mesopotamia about 5000 B.C.E., is generally credited with building the earliest civilization with many of the characteristics listed on pp. 35-36. Gradually they created small competing **city-states**, each centered on a large town that governed the countryside around it. By about 3000 B.C.E. the Sumerians had subjugated many of the Semites in the area, either by coercion or consent, and the area of their control grew larger. Sumerian power was cemented by the brisk trade resulting from their conquests that brought food produced in villages to the towns and created economic ties among the towns. Despite the growing economic interdependence, the towns remained quarrelsome, and the Sumerians’ early history was characterized by unceasing warfare, often provoked by competition for control of precious irrigated lands.



Ancient Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian city-states grew up along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where river silt provided rich soil for their crops.

Economic Development

As in all ancient civilizations, the majority of people were farmers, herders, or workers directly associated with agriculture, such as wine pressers, millers, or

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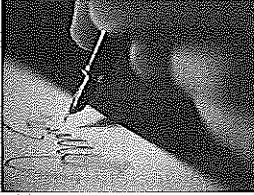
carters. Probably about 5% of the population lived in cities and did not grow their own food. Even those involved in trade were most likely to be involved in trading food, especially grain. However, the towns and cities were the birthplaces of literacy, and the numbers involved in occupations that required the ability to read and write - such as scribes, bookkeepers, and priests - grew as the populations grew. Craftsmen did not have to be literate, but metalworking, leather work, pottery and jewelry making, carpentry, and masonry all required special training. Many people were involved in the central task of early civilizations: creating and maintaining a reliable water source. **Labor systems** (coordinated efforts to get work done) were generally small, with craft shops usually family owned and perhaps two or three paid or slave laborers. Slaves made up a significant portion of the working population, and were often assigned unpleasant or dangerous work, such as mining or handling the dead.

Political Development

The Sumerian city-states were not politically unified until about 2300 B.C.E., when an invading Semitic group led by Sargon the Great conquered the entire area. He founded the **Akkadian Empire** that was dominated by the newly created town of Akkad. As a result of the political conquest, **cultural diffusion** of Sumerian ways spread throughout much of the area, influencing a wide swath of land from Mesopotamia to Egypt that came to be known as the **Fertile Crescent**.

Before Sargon's conquest most of the city states were **theocracies**, governed by gods or their priests. Sargon changed that tradition so that the cities were ruled by kings, but priests were so revered that the kings often obeyed their wishes. The location of the temple in the city's heart and the king's palace on the outskirts provides archaeologists with evidence for early control by priests. However, the constant warfare almost certainly increased the power of the warrior king, so that kings after Sargon assumed responsibility for the temples, city defenses, irrigation channels, and the system of justice. Sargon and his descendants secured loyalty from their soldiers by giving them land. The Akkadian Empire only lasted for a little over a century, and the city-state of Ur rose to replace Akkad in power. The government bureaucracy grew during this time, and a system of messengers and road stations speeded up communication in the area. During the 1700s B.C.E. **Hammurabi** led the **Babylonians** to conquer Mesopotamia, only to be followed by a series of other people that came through the crossroads over the centuries, including the **Hittites** in the 1500s B.C.E., the **Assyrians** in the 900s B.C.E., and finally the **New Babylonians** in the 500s B.C.E.

A significant “marker event” occurred under the Babylonians with the advent of the first known written law code (a systematic set of rules administered by a government). **Hammurabi’s Code**, inscribed on a black stone pillar, gave



**PRIMARY SOURCES:
HAMMURABI’S CODE
18TH CENTURY B.C.E.**

What do the following excerpts from Hammurabi’s Code tell us about Mesopotamian society under the Babylonians?

117. If a man has contracted a debt, and has given his wife, his son, his daughter for silver or for labor, three years they shall serve in the house of their purchaser or bondsman; in the fourth year they shall regain their original condition...
195. If a son has struck his father, his hands shall be cut off.
196. If a man has destroyed the eye of another free man, his own eye shall be destroyed.
197. If he has broken the bone of a free man, his bone shall be broken.
198. If he has destroyed the eye of a peasant, or broken a bone of a peasant he shall pay one mina of silver.
199. If he has destroyed the eye of a man’s slave, or broken a bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay half his value.
218. If a physician has treated a man with a metal knife for a severe wound, and has caused the man to die...his hand shall be cut off.

Source: Andrea, Alfred, and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record, Vol. 1*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

judges many examples of punishments for crimes meant to be used as standards for justice. These codes provide insight into much more than just laws, but also illuminate a rich assortment of beliefs and customs of the Mesopotamian people.

Social Distinctions

The Code of Hammurabi identified three distinct classes in Mesopotamia in the eighteenth century B.C.E.:

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- 1) The free land owning class, which consisted of the royal family, priests, warriors, high government officials, merchants, and some craftsmen and shopkeepers
- 2) A class of dependent farmers and craftsmen, who worked for the free land owning class
- 3) Slaves, who often did domestic work and less desirable jobs outside the home

Slaves were often prisoners of war, and others were debtors. However, slave labor was not as important as it was later to become in ancient Greece and Rome. They were identified by a particular hairstyle, not by permanent marks or chains, so those that won their freedom could easily rid themselves of their previous status. It was not uncommon for a debtor to become a slave for a few years and then be freed when the debt was paid.

Women lost social standing and freedom with the spread of agriculture, and in the ancient civilizations – including Mesopotamia – a food surplus made larger families possible, so women were tied to their responsibilities at home. Women could own property, control their dowries, and participate in trade, but men controlled political and religious life. The status of women appears to have declined significantly during the 2nd millennium B.C.E. as urbanization and private wealth increased. In later Mesopotamian history men could take a second wife if the first did not bear children, and kings and other rich men often had several wives. Daughters of nobility were married to noblemen of their family's choosing in order to enhance the family's wealth and status. It is possible that the wearing of veils dates back to this Mesopotamian era.

Cultural Characteristics

An important “marker event” in world history occurred in Mesopotamia about 3500 B.C.E. with the Sumerian invention of writing, which had its origin in little pictures of objects on clay cylinder seals. The earliest writing evolved from their pictures that turned into symbols and eventually into phonetic elements baked on clay tablets. Writers used a wedge-shaped stick to mark the symbols on the tablets, resulting in **cuneiform** - meaning “wedge shaped” – that was used for several thousand years in the Middle East. Cuneiform writing was difficult to learn because it involved several hundred signs, so specialized scribes were generally the only ones who knew it, giving them power and status that others did not have. By about 2000 B.C.E. compilers wrote down a famous story that had been passed down orally since at least the 7th millennium B.C.E. called *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a ruler of an early Sumerian city-state, probably Uruk. It explored human friendship, relations between humans and the gods,

and particularly the meaning of life and death. Gilgamesh went on an epic journey in pursuit of eternal life, which he ultimately did not find. The story was somber, and emphasized the control that the gods had over human destiny.



CONTINUITY OVER TIME: THE GREAT FLOOD

The Epic of Gilgamesh, a story that dates back to the 7th millennium, describes an ancient flood, according to Utnapishtim, a former mortal whom the gods had placed in an eternal paradise:

“...the world bellowed like a wild bull...Enlil [a god] heard the clamor and said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible,’ so the gods agreed to exterminate mankind...[Enlil] whispered... ‘tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life...Then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures’ ...I [Utnapishtim] loaded...all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen...For six days and six nights the winds blew...and flood overwhelmed the world...When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled...I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated...and she did not come back....Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and...he touched our foreheads to bless us...”

In about the 10th century B.C.E. the Hebrew Bible recorded the story, with a main character called Noah, who did the bidding of the monotheistic religion’s one god. During the 7th century C.E. the story was compiled by Islamic scholars for the Qur’an, with Noah communicating with only one God. The details of the story vary in other ways, but it is basically the same story that has been preserved over the eons, surviving the transition from polytheism to monotheism.

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Religious Beliefs

Mesopotamians, like most other people in ancient civilizations, believed that deities intervened regularly in human affairs, and that their very survival depended on their ability to please the gods. Each city had its own god who it held in higher esteem than all others, and a host of supporting priests devoted their lives to that deity. A temple dedicated to the special god was usually at the center of each urban area. The most distinctive were the **ziggurats** – large multi-story pyramids constructed by bricks and approached by ramps and stairs.

Priests passed their positions and their knowledge to their sons, and they enjoyed very high status in most of the city-states. The high priest performed great rituals, and others provided music, exorcised evil spirits, and interpreted dreams. Some divined the future by examining the remains of sacrificed animals. Archaeologists have also found **amulets** that were probably worn by individuals to protect them from evil spirits. Evidence also supports the regular occurrence of religious festivals in which priests read pleasing stories to the god's image in front of both nobility and ordinary people.

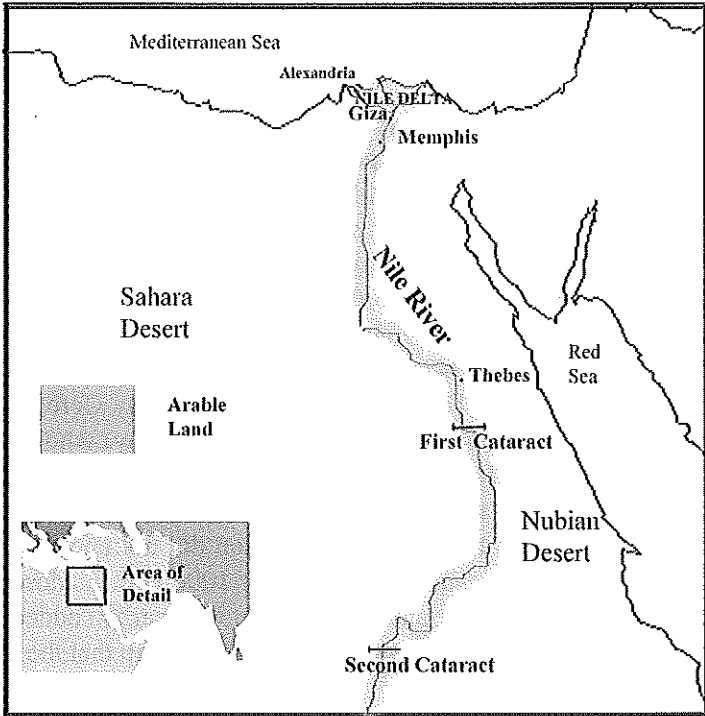
Gods were associated with various forces of nature, and they often displayed disagreeable human characteristics, such as quarreling and using their powers in selfish ways. Gods caused flooding (as reflected in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*), and the afterlife was seen as full of suffering, an early version of the concept of hell.

CIVILIZATION IN EGYPT

While Mesopotamian civilization was developing on one end of the Fertile Crescent, another was growing on the other end along the Nile River in north-eastern Africa. The great Egyptian civilization is arguably the longest lived in world history, stretching from its inception around 3100 B.C.E. until its conquest by the Persians in 525 B.C.E. After that conquest Egyptian rulers had to bow to more powerful civilizations, but they still participated in the interactions among civilizations for hundreds of years more. For example, the Ptolemy queen, Cleopatra, was a major player in the struggle for power in Ancient Rome after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E.

The Natural Environment

The natural environments of Mesopotamia and Egypt had many common characteristics. Both were in river valleys and were not a long distance apart, so they shared similar latitudes. The weather was generally hot and dry with mild winters and a rainy season. Neither could rely on consistent rainfall for their



Ancient Egypt: the Gift of the Nile. Unlike Mesopotamia, Egypt was protected from invaders by deserts to the east and west, and by cataracts on the Nile. As a result, the civilization developed in relative safety for many years.

crops, so irrigation was vital to their agricultural success. However, one important contrast in their geographical locations shaped very different political, economic, and cultural beliefs and practices: Egypt was isolated for much of its existence, while Mesopotamia was at a crossroads of population movements. As a result Mesopotamia was open to assault from several directions and was repeatedly conquered by invaders, whereas Egypt was surrounded by desert with few groups of people nearby. Additionally, it was protected from invasion along the Nile River from the south by a series of **cataracts**, or areas where the water was too swift and rocky to allow boats to pass. Another environmental difference was the seasonal flooding. Both areas were subject to heavy downpours that temporarily flooded the land. However, flooding in Egypt was regular and predictable, so that farmers and political leaders could take preventive and containing measures. In contrast, flooding in Mesopotamia was irregular and unpredictable, so that people had no choice but to react to, rather than prevent and contain, the damage that was done. Not only did this difference impact economic and political life, it may have led to differences in the way that people approached life, with Mesopotamians apparently gloomy and resigned to their

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fate in life, and Egyptians generally more optimistic about their ability to control their destinies.

Economic Development: Mesopotamia and Egypt Compared

Like the Mesopotamians, most Egyptians were farmers, and both economies became increasingly diverse as time passed. As cities grew, craftsmen refined techniques for making pottery and textiles, and others specialized in woodworking, leather production, brick-making, stone cutting, and masonry. About 3000 B.C.E. Mesopotamian metalworkers invented bronze by alloying copper and tin to make a harder, stronger metal. Bronze was used to fashion military weapons as well as farming tools and plows, giving both warriors and farmers important advantages in their respective occupations. Egyptians did not make use of this new invention until after the 17th century B.C.E. when they were attacked and defeated by the **Hyksos** (a people from modern day Turkey) who had superior military power because of their bronze weapons. Egypt's delayed adoption of bronze was partly because their natural environment provided neither tin nor copper, and partly because their physical isolation did not encourage them to experiment with different weapons. After about 1000 B.C.E. Mesopotamians began to develop tools and weapons made of iron with carbon added to control brittleness. By this time, societies were interrelated enough that the technology spread rapidly, including to Egypt.

Another important invention that increased job specialization and economic efficiency was the wheel. No one knows exactly when the wheel was invented, but the Sumerians probably used wheeled carts long before they began to organize into city-states in the mid-4th millennium B.C.E. Wheeled carts and wagons allowed heavy loads of bulk goods to be hauled over long distances, and the technology spread to nearby areas, including Egypt. Both Mesopotamia and Egypt experimented with maritime travel, with Sumerians learning to navigate in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, and the Egyptians sailing boats down the Nile and in the Red Sea. Specialized occupations in ship and boat building appeared in both civilizations.

Increasing job specialization and transportation improvements encouraged long-distance trade. Mesopotamians and Egyptians were already trading by 3500 B.C.E., and by 2300 B.C.E., the Sumerians were trading with Harappans in the Indus River valley (in modern day Pakistan). By the time of the Babylonians (about 1900 to 1600 B.C.E.), Mesopotamians were importing silver from Anatolia in the northwest, cedar from Lebanon in the southwest, copper from Arabia in the south, gold from Egypt, and tin from Persia in the southeast. After 3000 B.C.E. Egyptians traded actively in the Mediterranean, and a few centuries later, they established regular trade across the Red Sea and eventually to an east

African land they called Punt. Egyptians offered gold, linens, leather goods, dried lentils, and silver, and traded for ebony, ivory, cattle, slaves, cosmetics and myrrh (an aromatic).

Political Characteristics

Like those of all other ancient civilizations, Egypt's political system reflected the importance of religious beliefs. At the heart of the government was the **pharaoh**, who was not considered to be just a king, but instead was a god. Although Mesopotamians often believed that their kings had special access to the gods, they saw them as purely human, not gods themselves. According to Egyptian legend, the first pharaoh was **Menes**, who supposedly lived about 3100 B.C.E., although scholars are not at all sure that he actually existed. What is clear is that the middle and lower areas of the Nile were united under one ruler who was followed by an unbroken line of god-kings until about 2500 B.C.E. The pharaohs were believed to be reincarnations of **Horus**, the sky god, so pharaohs were often represented with a hawk, the symbol of Horus. In this role he maintained **ma'at**, the divinely controlled order of the universe. The pharaoh's will was law, since he was all-knowing and forever correct as the representation of the almighty gods. His regulations were carried out without question, and as a result, pharaohs enjoyed more power and prestige than almost any other rulers in world history.

The pharaoh was represented throughout the countryside by a group of officials who were responsible only to him. They were usually landed nobility that were trained in writing and law. Governors were appointed for key regions and were responsible for supervising irrigation and great public works. Although the pharaoh usually granted his top bureaucrats a great deal of local authority, the pharaoh's power was ultimate, and the state remained highly centralized. In contrast, Mesopotamia's political system was composed of city-states, whose constantly clashing leaders made centralized government very tenuous.

The pharaohs were most powerful during Egypt's early history, probably because few outsiders challenged their power and economic prosperity was the general rule. Ancient Egypt's long political history is often divided into three eras:

- **The Old Kingdom (3100 - 2500 B.C.E.)** – These were the years when pharaohs were most powerful and the economy was the strongest. The success of this era was capped by the construction of the first of the great pyramids constructed as tombs for the pharaohs between about 2600 and 2100 B.C.E., stretching into the years of the Middle Kingdom.

- **The Middle Kingdom (2100-1650 B.C.E.)** – After a period of instability with unknown causes, pharaohs regained their power during this long, relatively peaceful period. During this era, trade with neighbors became more extensive, and a small middle class of officials and merchants developed. The peace and prosperity was ended with the invasion of the **Hyksos**, a people who came from the north to conquer the Nile Delta.
- **The New Kingdom (1550 – 700 B.C.E.)** – The Hyksos ruled the native Egyptians for almost a century, but they were defeated by princes from Thebes, and the New Kingdom was inaugurated. Even though the Hyksos intermarried with Egyptians and assimilated Egyptian culture, they were still seen as foreigners, and the new rulers were determined to reassert Egyptian power. Realizing that they no longer had the luxury of ignoring the outside world, the pharaohs aggressively expanded their control, extending their territory north into Syria and Palestine and south into Nubia. These new territories provided a buffer zone from attackers, and the formerly isolationist Egyptians actively sought to convert their new subjects to Egyptian beliefs and practices. For the first 300 years of this era, Egypt's armies were generally successful, but military reversals began during the 1300s B.C.E., and by 1100, the pharaoh again ruled only the Nile Valley. After that, the kingdom gradually weakened to foreign invasion, and lost its independence.

Social Distinctions

The modern stereotype of an Ancient Egyptian is generally that of a person with dark, straight hair and clay colored skin. In reality, even before the New Kingdom Egyptians ranged from dark-skinned people related to the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa to lighter-skinned people related to inhabitants of southwest Asia. Egyptians tended to think of themselves as superior to other people, so foreigners were generally seen with some suspicion. However, Egypt had less pronounced social divisions than Mesopotamia, where more formal classes emerged. Clearly, though, the pharaoh and his high-ranking officials had superior social status, and lower-level officials – along with priests and other professionals, and artisans – appear to have had higher status than peasants at the bottom that made up the vast majority of the population. **Social mobility** (the ability of individuals to change their social status) appears to have been possible, since Egypt relied on professional military forces and an elaborate bureaucracy of administrators to serve the pharaoh. As in Mesopotamia, slavery existed on a limited scale, and slaves were often prisoners of war or debtors that were usually freed when their debts were paid off.

Like Mesopotamia, Egypt was a patriarchy dominated by men. However, it is probable that the status of women was higher in Egypt than in Mesopotamia, where women's position seems to have deteriorated in its later days. Egyptian women in the upper classes were respected because marriage alliances were important for preserving the continuity of the pharaoh's line and those of his high officials. Also, Egyptian religion deified its goddesses as sources of great creativity.

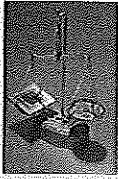


HISTORICAL EVIDENCE: ANCIENT PATRIARCHIES

Even though all ancient civilizations were patriarchies, Egypt had at least one female pharaoh, Hatshepsut, who ruled from 1473 to 1458 B.C.E. during the New Kingdom. She served first as regent (a stand-in ruler) for her son, but eventually ruled on her own. She is famous for sponsoring a great naval expedition south on the Red Sea to Punt (probably in eastern Sudan or Yemen) that returned with fine luxury goods, such as myrrh, rare woods, ivory, and exotic African animals. Even so, this female ruler reflected the values of male-dominated patriarchies in two of her behaviors: she often used the male pronoun in inscriptions in referring to herself, and she also wore a fake beard. After her death, her image was defaced and her name blotted out of records, perhaps an act of patriarchal defiance.

Cultural Characteristics

Egypt is of course famous for its pyramids, some of the most impressive monuments ever built. They held religious significance, and they contained impressive art and artifacts in the burial chambers. Egyptians also built large temples and great statues, illustrating that their mastery of stonework was unrivaled among the earliest civilizations. They excelled in other art forms, including fresco painting, pottery making, fine jewelry, and miniature sculpture.



COMPARATIVE WRITING SYSTEMS: CUNEIFORM AND HIEROGLYPHICS

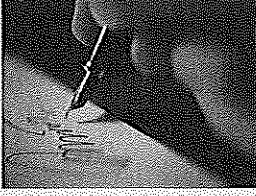
Both Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics made use of **pictographs**, or pictures representing animals, people, and objects. A writing system that depends on pictures was convenient for keeping trade records, but was very cumbersome for communicating abstract ideas. Beginning about 2900 B.C.E. the Sumerians began using graphic symbols to represent ideas, sounds, and syllables, and Egyptians, too, supplemented their hieroglyphics with symbols representing abstract ideas. The Egyptian writing remained more pictographic than cuneiform, but in both societies, the writing systems were complex, and their use was largely restricted to priests. Egyptians developed a new material to write on, **papyrus**, made from strips of a plant pressed together. Despite their sophisticated writing system, the Egyptians created no epic literary works, such as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Mesopotamian achievements in mathematics and astronomy were far more advanced than those of Egypt. The Sumerian system of numbers, based on units of 12, 60, and 360, are used for modern day geometry and for calculating time. Sumerians charted major constellations, and followed the movement of the sun and stars carefully, setting the foundation for the science of astronomy. The Egyptians had fewer mathematical and scientific achievements, but they did establish the length of the solar year, which they divided into 12 months, each with three 10-day weeks. The calendar was crucial to their ability to predict the Nile floods. They also had knowledge of a variety of drugs, and elements of their medical knowledge were passed down to the Greeks.

Religious Beliefs

Like Mesopotamia, Egyptian religion was polytheistic, and its chief deities were associated strongly with agriculture. Gods included **Amon-Re**, the god of the sun; **Isis**, goddess of the Nile and of fertility; **Osiris**, ruler of the afterlife; and **Horus**, son of Osiris and Isis, represented in the pharaohs. The Egyptians were very concerned with death and preparation for life in another world where supreme happiness could be achieved. They carefully mummified bodies and

held elaborate funeral rituals, especially for the rulers and bureaucrats. In the earlier days, these rituals were inscribed on the coffins and pyramids of the elite, but they became much more commonplace in later times. During the New Kingdom, many incantations of these rituals were collected into papyrus texts known today as *The Book of the Dead*. Divided into more than 150 chapters, it was mass-produced for a prosperous clientele who each purchased a scroll, filled in the name of the deceased, and buried it with the person's body.



PRIMARY DOCUMENTS: THE NEGATIVE CONFESSION

The Negative Confession is part of *The Book of the Dead*, a compilation of incantations for use in burial ceremonies in Ancient Egypt. The scene is the Hall of the Two Truths, or the Double Ma'at, where Osiris, king of the Underworld, presides over an assembly of minor deities. All together the deities judge the suitability of the deceased to become an eternally blessed spirit. The deceased makes the following statements:

“I have not done crimes against people,
 I have not mistreated cattle,
 I have not sinned in the Place of Truth [any holy place],
 I have not known what should not be known [secrets of the gods],
 I have not done any harm.
 I did not begin a day by exacting more than my due,
 My name did not reach the bark of the mighty ruler [Re].
 I have not blasphemed a god,
 I have not robbed the poor.
 I have not done what the god abhors,
 I have not maligned a servant to his master.
 I have not caused pain,
 I have not caused tears...”

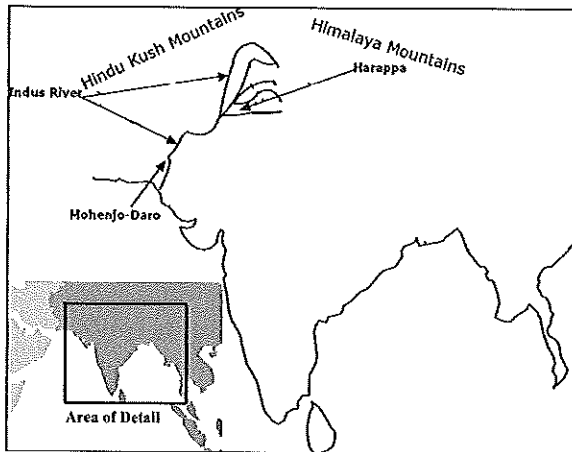
Source: Andrea, Alfred, and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record, Vol. I*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

A third “cradle of civilization” developed in the Indus River valley in what is now Pakistan. By 5000 B.C.E. agriculture had developed, and by 3000 B.C.E. the villages and towns had evolved into cities. Much about the people remains

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mysterious today, partly because archaeologists were generally unaware of the civilization until the 1850s, when the British construction of a railroad across the Indus led to discovery of the remains of one of the major cities, **Mohenjo-Daro**. Some controversy surrounds the origins of the civilization. Until recently, most scholars believed that the Indus Valley people spoke a **Dravidian** language similar to languages spoken in southern India. It was thought that they were conquered around 1500 B.C.E. by **Aryans**, invaders from the northwest who spoke Indo-European languages, and that some of them moved southeast into India to escape. More recent evidence, however, does not support a sudden change in body types or civilization patterns during that time, so there is still much to learn about these early people and what changes they may have experienced.



Indus Valley civilization. Mohenjo-Daro is the largest city that has been discovered, housing more than 100,000 people at its peak, probably between 2500 and 2000 B.C.E. Harappa was probably about 1/3 as big.

Geographical Features

Today the area around the Indus River is desert, with many of the ancient riverbeds now dried up. However, in ancient times it was forested, green, and lush, with plenty of game animals and good pasture for domesticated animals. The river system was formed by water running from melting snow in the world's highest mountain range, the Himalayas to the northeast, and the Hindu Kush Mountains to the northwest. The river and its tributaries have been fed by **monsoon rains** that are created by seasonal winds that blow from the seas toward the Indian subcontinent. Like the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates Rivers, the Indus River carried rich soil to the plains around it, allowing extensive agriculture to flourish.

The mountains provided some protection from invasion, but very early on, people discovered passes through them that allowed them to cross, particularly through the Hindu Kush. The **Aryans** probably used these passes as they travelled to the southeast, and eventually made their way into many parts of the Indian sub-continent, including the Indus River valley.

Economic Characteristics

The cities and towns in the Indus River valley were supported by an advanced agricultural system based on wheat, rye, peas, and perhaps rice. Cotton was cultivated, and many animals were domesticated, including chickens, cattle, goats, and sheep. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, abundant crops allowed job specialization in the cities to develop. Beginning in the 1850s, archaeologists have discovered the remains of the largest city, Mohenjo-Daro; a second city, **Harappa**; and a huge complex of towns and villages connected to them. Because the cities were not constructed in the same way that cities in Mesopotamia and Egypt were, they almost certainly were not colonies but were part of an independent civilization.

The cities were major trading centers, with contacts in China, Southeast Asia, southern India, Afghanistan, and Mesopotamia. Jade from China and precious jewels from Southeast Asia have been excavated in the Indus River valley, and Indus stone seals have been found in Mesopotamia. Small clay wheeled carts pulled by oxen have been found at various Indus sites, suggesting that they were used as land transportation among cities, towns, and villages in the valley. Judging by the size of the cities, job specialization had to be extensive, yet their craftsmen appear to have been inferior to those in Egypt and Mesopotamia. They did cast tools and weapons in bronze, but they lacked swords, used stone for arrowheads, and bronzed the tips of their spears so thinly that they could not have been very effective.

Political Development

Very little is known about political systems in the Indus River valley, but the construction of the cities suggests a well-organized government planned them. The main thoroughfares in Mohenjo-Daro were 34 feet wide, and a sophisticated sewage system with canals that ran from each house to a connecting canal in the street carried off household wastes. Some scholars speculate that Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were twin capitals, or that there may be other unexcavated cities that each ruled the countryside around it. The two cities both had fortifications and large granaries that were probably controlled by governments, but the pieces of evidence do not yet support a good knowledge of who governed and to what ends.



HISTORICAL EVIDENCE: ANCIENT SEALS

The most important clues for unlocking the mystery of the ancient Harappan script are the many seals from the Indus Valley culture that have been found all over the area, as well as in other trading centers from Mesopotamia to China. Seals were fixed to many different objects in ancient civilizations, including pottery, boxes, doors, baskets, and leather bags. In Mesopotamia, seals were cylindrical in shape, and in the Indus Valley they were square, soft stones, with impressions of animals and a written script. They were used by traders as a way to insure that containers weren't opened during transit, or perhaps to identify the merchants.

These seals are the best clues that archaeologists have for understanding the language of the Indus River valley people, but because the inscriptions are very brief, it is difficult to find consistencies that would allow them to decipher it. However, the fact that the distinct seals have been found in Mesopotamia, China, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan tells us that trade was a significant part of the Indus Valley economy.

Society and Culture

Although less is known about social distinctions in the Indus River valley than is known about Egypt and Mesopotamia, the evidence points to the existence of clear social classes. For example, house sizes in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa varied considerably, with most people living in single-room dwellings in larger barracks-like structures. The wealthy had individual houses of two and three stories, with several rooms and an interior courtyard. Most of the larger houses had their own wells and brick ovens. Indus River valley society was dominated by a powerful priestly class, which ruled from the cities. The priests mediated between the people and a number of gods and goddesses, although very little is known about the religion. One popular god depicted on the seals is a naked male with a horned head, sometimes pictured in a posture of meditation, leading some to speculate that the lotus position and/or yoga originated here. Mother-

goddesses appear to have been worshipped by ordinary people, whereas the horned god was favored by the priests. There is little evidence to support an interest in artistic endeavors, other than a few carved figurines of people and animals that reflect a strong interest in fertility.

If the Indus Valley writing system could be deciphered with any consistency, scholars would know much more about the civilization. Egyptian hieroglyphics were decoded with the very fortunate discovery of the **Rosetta Stone**, a tablet with a relatively long script in three languages: formal hieroglyphics, an informal Egyptian writing, and Greek. Since Greek was known, the tablet was used to find many parallel symbols in hieroglyphics. With that head start, scholars were able to decode most of the hieroglyphic writing samples that have been discovered. Archaeologists have had no such luck in the Indus Valley, but new discoveries may unearth some comparable clue in the future.

Decline of the Indus River Valley Civilization

The Indus valley cities were abandoned sometime after 1900 B.C.E., although the reasons for their decline are uncertain. No evidence of an invasion has been found, so one theory is that the civilization suffered **systems failure**, a breakdown of the political, social, and economic systems that supported it. There might have been a precipitating event, such as an earthquake or a flood, but gradual ecological changes appear to have occurred as well. The cities may have grown too fast, so that the large population put stress on the environment, burning trees to bake mud bricks for construction and farming land too intensely. Some argue that a radical change to a much drier climate occurred, or that the courses of the rivers shifted significantly, or that the population may have fallen victim to malaria. The decline was relatively gradual, with Mohenjo-Daro being abandoned in about 1200 B.C.E., and Harappa somewhat later. Almost certainly, the civilization was under stress by the time the Aryans came into the valley across the Hindu Kush Mountains sometime around 1500 B.C.E.

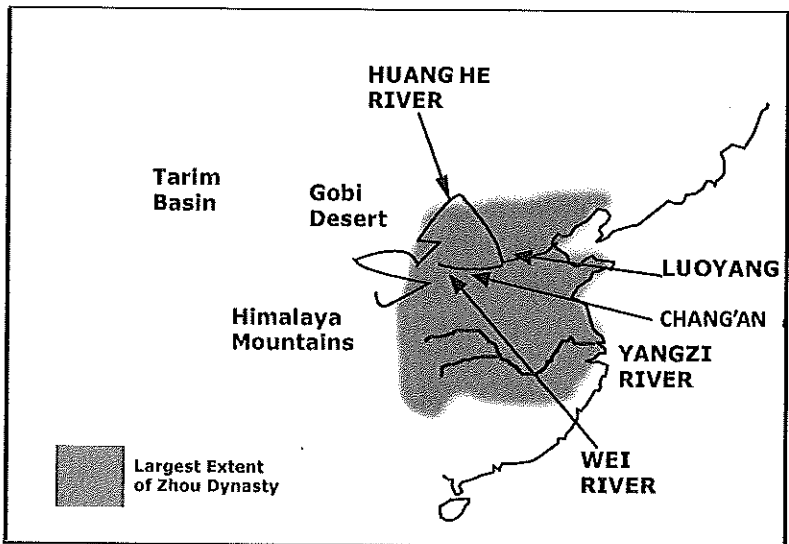
ANCIENT CHINA

Neolithic people of east Asia probably domesticated rice sometime about 7000 B.C.E., and by 5000 B.C.E. rice had become the staple of the diet in the Yangzi River valley. In later centuries, the people farther north around the Yellow (Huang He) River domesticated wheat, barley, and eventually millet that had probably arrived from Mesopotamia. After about 3000 B.C.E. villages along both rivers communicated and traded with others throughout the region, and by about 1700 B.C.E. they had established cities and complex political, cultural, and social systems that served as the foundation for civilization in China and other parts of east Asia.

Geographical Influences

Ancient China rose in a part of the world that was a long way away from the other centers of civilization. Although trade did exist between China and the others, distance and geographic barriers separated the areas so that in many ways east Asia developed independently from the others. Both agriculture and metalworking apparently were independently invented in China. The Huang He and Yangzi River valleys were rich with river silt, and were quite conducive to agriculture, whereas much of the land space that eventually became China was far less habitable. The Gobi Desert stretched to the north and west of the rivers; the Himalaya Mountains lay to the southwest; and the vast Tarim Basin – high, dry, and cold – occupied the west. These geographical features have shaped the development of Chinese civilization, and even today, the vast majority of China's population lives in the east along the rivers or the coastline.

The rivers absorbed a yellowish-brown dust (giving the Yellow River its name) from Central Asia so that it formed **loess**, a thick mantle of fertile and soft soil easy enough to be worked with wooden digging sticks. Like the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the East Asia rivers were prone to irregular flooding, and people responded by building dikes, channels, and basins to store river water and rainfall.



Ancient China. Geography shaped the development of Chinese civilization, with most people living along the river valleys in the east. The first known dynasty, the Shang, ruled an area around the Wei River, and the later Zhou Dynasty extended its control over a much larger area.

Economic Development

Because the Huang He (Yellow) River was so prone to unpredictable flooding, early Chinese farmers and leaders had to come up with methods to control it. Increasingly elaborate irrigation systems kept up with the expanding agriculture, and great earthen dikes were constructed to manage the flow of the river. An important early innovation was the hoe, a vast improvement over the digging stick since it had a wide, flat base. A later improvement was the four-pronged hoe that was used to turn over the soil for cultivation. Its use made Chinese agriculture much more productive so that it could support a larger urban population.

Ancient China's growth was also spurred by mastery of metallurgy, particularly in their production of bronze weapons and tools. Ruling elites controlled access to copper and tin ores, and employed craftsmen to produce bronze axes, spears, knives, and arrowheads. Bronze was also used for fittings for horse-drawn chariots, a technology probably first invented in Mesopotamia that diffused across Central Asia to the river valleys. A high level of craftsmanship is evident in bronze vessels created for religious rituals and household use for the rich. An important development that was to be of immense importance in the development of China was the pioneering of the key processes of silk manufacturing, raising silkworms on mulberry trees and carefully unraveling their cocoons to produce silk thread.

Cities were centers of political control and religion, and were surrounded by great walls of hardened earth. Large public buildings were constructed, such as palaces, political centers, storehouses, royal tombs, shrines of gods and ancestors, and houses of the nobility. Ordinary people lived in villages outside the city walls. The cities were laid out on a grid plan aligned with the north polar star, the gates opened to the cardinal directions, and all major buildings faced south, reflecting a concern with order.

Political Development

By the 18th century B.C.E. the areas north and west of the Huang He River were home to many nomadic groups who followed their domesticated animals from pasture to pasture. As would continue to happen for thousands of years, these nomadic groups often came into conflict with people that had settled into agricultural villages along the river valley. According to legend, an ancient dynasty (family-based kingdom) called the Xia came to control much of the area, but no archeological sites connected to it have been found, so their existence is still not proven. The history of China may be traced to the first written records that describe a distinctive culture with its own cuisine, beliefs, and practices in the

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area that emerged between 1750 and 1500 B.C.E. The culture is known as the **Shang Dynasty**, who conquered most of the other tribes, founded a kingdom that stretched north and south from the Huang He River valley, and lasted about 700 years.

The political system probably emerged from the need to control the great floods of the river, but the Shang tribe was still nomadic, and the leaders were warrior kings who fought on horseback with very effective bronze weapons. Their armies were made up of subject people, and the other warrior leaders swore fealty to the Shang monarch. The king was seen as the intermediary between a Supreme Being, Shangdi, and ordinary mortals, so the power he had was significant. Most of the people were governed by **vassals**, lords that served the king and were bound to him by personal ties. These warrior aristocrats collected **tribute** (payment usually in the form of produce) which supported the monarch and his court.

In the 12th century B.C.E., the Shang rulers were overthrown by the **Zhou Dynasty**, a group from farther west that became the longest-lived of all the Chinese dynasties. We know much more about the Zhou than we do about the Shang because they kept written records, including tax rolls, lists of imports and exports, and historical accounts of successes of the monarchs. The dynasty falls into two distinct phases: the Western Zhou (11th-8th centuries B.C.E.) with capital cities in the west, and the Eastern Zhou (8th-5th centuries B.C.E.) when the capital was moved east to Luoyang. The Zhou extended their territory far beyond the earlier borders of the Shang, but they also ruled through a system of decentralized loyalties, so that local rulers had a good deal of autonomy.

An important political development under the Zhou was the growing size and responsibility of professional bureaucrats, or **shi** (men of service). These administrators were the best-educated men in the empire, and they served as scribes, clerks, advisors, and overseers, both in the king's court and in the subordinate governments of the king's vassals. They came to specialize in keeping records, running public works or wars, or organizing rituals and ceremonies. The shi were the forerunners of a scholarly governing class that would gain great power and status in later dynasties.

Social Characteristics

During both the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, clear social distinctions characterized Chinese society. Social classes included:



“MARKER EVENT”: THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN

An important “marker event” in Chinese history occurred when the Zhou overthrew the Shang in the 12th century B.C.E. Probably to justify their forcible removal of the Shang dynasty, the early Zhou rulers claimed that they had been given the right (or mandate) to rule by “heaven,” or the supernatural deities who oversaw earthly life. As long as the rulers were just and fair, they retained the confidence of heaven, but if they were not, the mandate would be lost. Prosperity was a “sign from heaven” that the rulers still had the mandate, but misfortunes were usually interpreted as a communication from the deities that the ruler was not living up to their high expectations. If a ruler lost the mandate, his subjects not only had the right, but the responsibility to replace him.

The mandate of heaven is a central belief that guided China through **dynastic cycles** that lasted until the early 20th century. A dynasty rose, became strong, and then weakened, inviting takeover by a new dynasty. In between dynasties there was often a time of chaos, sometimes lasting for a few short years, but other times for several hundred years, in which other families challenged and eventually toppled the weakened dynasty.

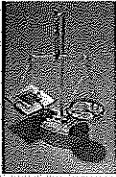
- 1) **The elite** - The royal family and allied noble families enjoyed great prestige, as well as economic benefits. Their houses were palatial, and they monopolized the use of bronze weapons, tools, and decorative objects. Less privileged classes used clay pots, and had much simpler diets than the elites, who consumed most of the meat. During Zhou times, a great deal of emphasis was placed on proper behavior, including strict requirements for table manners that precluded gulping food and making unpleasant noises.
- 2) **Free artisans and craftsmen** - These people worked almost exclusively for the elite, providing them with bronze objects, jewelry, embroidery, and silk textiles. They lived primarily in cities in relatively comfortable houses made of pounded earth, an expensive type of construction.

- 3) **Merchants and traders** – Long distance trade appeared in China even during the Shang era, despite the geographic barriers that stood between China and other major civilizations of the time. The tin for bronze work came from Southeast Asia, jade came from Central Asia, and military technology, such as horse-drawn chariots, came from Mesopotamia. Merchants and traders did exist, although little was written about them until the late Zhou era.
- 4) **Peasants** – Peasants owned no land, but worked the land that belonged to the nobility. They lived in small houses dug deep into the earth, protected by thatched walls and roofs. Their work became easier in the late Zhou Dynasty, when iron production increased in China, and iron farm utensils became available. However, peasants were burdened by their lords' demands for labor on roads, buildings, and irrigation projects.
- 5) **Slaves** – As in most other early civilizations, a sizeable class of slaves existed in Chinese society, most of whom were captives of war. They performed hard labor, such as clearing new fields and laying foundations of buildings and walls of cities.

Like other ancient civilizations, women lost status as civilization progressed. Military prowess was highly valued, and males dominated the political scene. The rituals honoring the ancestors especially venerated males as the important guiding forces in the lives of family members. During Neolithic times, the female line of descent was important in determining family power, but this **matri-lineal** characteristic disappeared during the Shang era. During the Zhou era, women appeared to lose even more status, since no temples were erected to honor queens, as they had been during the Shang era.

Cultural Developments

Organized religion did not play as important a role in the development of early China as it did in most other ancient civilizations. There was an emphasis on the will of "heaven" (such as the "mandate of heaven"), but the Chinese did not recognize personal deities who controlled human affairs, nor did they support a large priestly class. A few priests assisted royalty in their rituals, but connections between family members on earth and their ancestors that had passed on were a very important element of "heaven." Rulers and family patriarchs were interested in consulting the ancestors for guidance, and made use of **oracle bones**, specially prepared broad bones or turtle shells, each inscribed with a question. When properly heated, the bones would crack, and **shamans**, individuals who claimed the ability to contact the ancestors, would interpret the communication by the patterns formed. Many of these oracle bones have survived, and they tell us a great deal about early Chinese society and beliefs.



COMPARISONS: UNIQUENESS OF ANCIENT CHINA

Like other ancient civilizations, China under the Shang and Zhou was a patriarchy based on agriculture, and was characterized by large cities, specialized labor, advanced political coordination, a complex writing system, and massive public buildings. However, Chinese society differed from those in other parts of the world in several important ways:

- 1) The supreme importance of the family - All societies are organized into families, but the Chinese emphasized it more than most. One reason was the veneration of ancestors, based in the belief that spirits of dead ancestors continued to guide the prospects of the living.
- 2) The emphasis on this world - The main connections to the spiritual world were the continuing influence of the ancestors and the emperor's status as "Son of Heaven" through the mandate of heaven. Otherwise, the Chinese did not put emphasis on an array of agricultural gods, nor was there a priestly caste, such as existed in other ancient civilizations
- 3) Emphasis on learning and literacy - Perhaps because writing on oracle bones was a primary way to communicate with ancestors, literacy was highly valued, and eventually became an important basis for social status.

Oracle bones are also a great source of early Chinese writing, which by Zhou times was also commonly inscribed on bronze ceremonial dishes. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the earliest form of Chinese writing was the **pictograph**, a standardized picture of an object. Written Chinese did not include an alphabet, but pictographs were often combined to represent abstract ideas. The characters used in modern China are direct descendants of those from Shang times, and scholars have identified more than two thousand characters inscribed on oracle bones. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the complexity of the early language meant that only specially trained people could read and write, but in China writing was often associated with the king's court, not with merchants and long-distance trade.

Another early use of writing in China was the development of philosophy and religion, with **Confucianism** being the most famous one. Values and beliefs

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are reflected in the works that have survived, including *The Analects*, a collection of Confucianism; the *Book of Changes*, with instructions for shamans for divination; the *Book of History*, a collection of the deeds of Zhou rulers; and the *Book of Etiquette*, that taught the elite proper manners and behavior. Perhaps most notable is the development of early Chinese poetry, collected in the *Book of Songs*.



COMPARISONS: DIVINATION IN MESOPOTAMIA AND ANCIENT CHINA

Most people in ancient times believed that the gods controlled human destinies and shaped earthly affairs. As a result, most ancient civilizations practiced some form of **divination**, or method for communicating with the gods to determine their intentions, and to anticipate the future.

In China, divination was controlled by special shamans who used oracle bones (either animal bones or shells) to read messages from the spirit world, especially from the ancestors who had passed on. The questions varied, from the proper performance of a ritual, to the prospect for rain, to the likely outcome of war.

In Mesopotamia, priests inspected the organs of sacrificed animals to interpret the wishes of the gods. They also “read” the trail of smoke from burning incense, as well as patterns formed when oil was thrown on water. Mesopotamians saw their destiny in the stars and planets, and their belief that movements of objects in the heavens were communications from the gods led to their early accomplishments in astronomy.

EARLY CIVILIZATION IN THE AMERICAS

Until the late 15th century C.E., developing civilizations in the Americas were almost completely cut off from those in the Eastern Hemisphere, so agriculture was independently invented and cultural diffusion took place within the geographical boundaries of North and South America. In prehistoric days humans reached the Western Hemisphere from Asia, although scholars disagree about when and how those migrations took place. The crossing of the land bridge

(now the Aleutian Islands) from northern Asia to Alaska is widely accepted, although estimates of when the first migrations took place range from 35,000 years ago to about 15,000 years ago. Some contact with Polynesians may well have taken place, but the interactions did not continue on a regular basis.

Geographical Influences

The most basic impact of physical geography was the separation of the Western and Eastern Hemispheres by vast oceans and great distances. However, the tremendous distance north to south was important as well. The environments included frozen regions in the extreme north and south, tropical rain forests, vast plains, heavily forested areas, and high mountain ranges. These characteristics made farming impossible in many areas and quite possible in others, but long distances between arable areas made contact among groups difficult. The two areas where farming provided the basis for the development of early civilizations were Mesoamerica (now Mexico and northern Central America) and the Andean Mountains along the coast of northwestern South America.

The Olmec (1200-400 B.C.E.) of Mesoamerica

In Mesoamerica agricultural villages appeared by about 3000 B.C.E., and spread throughout the region over the next thousand years. They cultivated beans, peppers, avocados, squash, maize, and tomatoes – all completely different crops than those domesticated in the Eastern Hemisphere. In contrast to civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere, they domesticated a limited number of animals. They raised turkeys and dogs, but had access to no large animals (such as horses, cattle, goats, and sheep) that were domesticable. Human labor, then, did all the work of agriculture, and without the animals to pull them, wheeled vehicles were not used to facilitate the process. Civilization appeared with the development of religious centers along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which grew into cities with specialized labor and sharp class distinctions. By 1200 B.C.E. (or perhaps earlier) a complex society had emerged that archaeologists called the **Olmec**, or “rubber people.”

Economic Development and Social Distinctions

The Olmec civilization was based on agriculture, but they had no need for extensive irrigation because the area received abundant rainfall for cultivating crops. They built elaborate drainage systems to control water, as well as raised fields that allowed crops to grow in wetlands. The cities grew as religious and trade centers, exchanging products like salt, cacao (chocolate beans), clay for ceramics, and limestone. There is no evidence of competitive city states, such as those that developed in Mesopotamia.

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Like many other early civilizations, Olmec society was probably authoritarian and hierarchical. An elite group of priests dominated the early Olmec cities who conducted elaborate religious rituals at the temples in the center of the cities. They also provided practical advice about rainfall and other important crop conditions, and directed the planning of urban centers so that they aligned with the paths of certain stars. Clearly, astronomical events were considered to be significant influences on human affairs. Another elite group included the ruler and his family, who were able to require and direct labor for city building projects from the general population, who mostly lived in areas outside the relatively small cities. Skilled artisans did carvings and sculptures for the buildings, and also produced high-quality jade figurines, jewelry and ceremonial objects. A class of merchants probably did some long distance trading in jade, obsidian, and pottery.

Political and Cultural Characteristics

Little is known about the nature of political power, but some form of kingship that combined religious and secular responsibilities appeared in the major cities. These political elite had large, elaborately decorated houses and lived very different lifestyles than those of commoners who lived in simple small structures constructed of sticks and mud. The mysterious giant heads sculpted from basalt that the Olmecs are most famous for may well have symbolized the power of the ruling families. These heads range up to 11 feet high, and have clear, distinct facial characteristics that may have been carved to honor specific rulers. However, much about these carvings remains mysterious, including some with Negroid features that have led some to speculate that these early Americans were kin to Africans. No such connection has ever been made. The Olmecs were great carvers of jade, and they traded or conquered to get it. They developed a numerical system based on 30 and a 365-day calendar (combined with a 260-day ritual cycle) that became the basis of all later Mesoamerican calendars. What language they spoke is unknown, but some scholars believe that they were the ancestors of the great Maya civilization that followed.

The decline and fall of the Olmec civilization is still a puzzle, but it appears as if they destroyed their main ceremonial centers and then deserted the sites somewhere between 900 and 600 B.C.E. No clear evidence has been found of attack from outsiders, so most scholars speculate that some sort of internal conflict occurred that caused the cities to be abandoned. By 400 B.C.E. societies in other parts of Mesoamerica had risen, and the Olmec civilization had disappeared completely by about 100 B.C.E.

The Chavin of South America (900-250 B.C.E.)

At roughly the same time that the Olmec civilization was flourishing in Mesoamerica, the Chavin dominated a heavily populated region that included both

the Peruvian coastal plain and foothills of the Andes. Both civilizations differed from those of the Eastern Hemisphere in that they did not develop in river valleys, but the geographic challenge for the Chavin was particularly strong. The coast of Peru has little rainfall, and in some places is quite narrow, but the abundance of fish and other sea life provided a dependable supply of food. The Andes Mountains rise dramatically from this coast plain, with many peaks rising above 20,000 feet before they drop on their eastern slopes, and the terrain changes to thick jungle that surrounds the massive Amazon River Basin. The Chavin civilization rose in this unlikely environment that combined dry coast and high mountain valley.



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE: HOW OLD IS ANDEAN CULTURE?

Historians have generally agreed that agriculture started later in the Americas than it did in southwest Asia, with many estimating its occurrence about 3500 B.C.E. However, some recent excavations have challenged this assumption with the discovery of squash seeds that archaeologists believe to be about 10,000 years old. The seeds were discovered in the Nanchoc Valley on the western slopes of the Andes Mountains in northern Peru, and were dated through some new techniques of radiocarbon dating and analysis of the actual plant remains. The excavations also yielded peanut hulls that were about 8500 years old and cotton fibers that were about 6000 years old.

These results were published in 2007, and if they are accepted by the scientific community, it is possible that agricultural communities and the later civilizations actually started much earlier than presumed, perhaps not long after those in the Eastern Hemisphere developed.

Economic Development and Social Distinctions

The Chavin capital, Chavin de Huantar, was located in a high mountain valley of about 10,300 feet altitude at an intersection of trade routes connecting the west coast with mountain valleys, and mountain valleys to tropical lowlands to the east. This location helped them to control trade and gain important eco-

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conomic advantages over surrounding peoples. Agriculture was based on maize (probably from Mesoamerica), which could be grown in the coastal areas. Potatoes and fruits were raised in the mountain valleys, and cotton and coca leaves (a mild narcotic) in the tropical areas. Exactly how labor was organized for public works is unknown, but in later times, people were organized by communities to share the responsibility. In contrast to the Olmec, the Chavin had a domesticated beast of burden – the llama – to help with their chores. They were first domesticated in the mountains, where they carried large bundles of goods up and down mountain paths in organized trading caravans.

The Chavin independently invented metallurgical techniques that probably diffused to Mesoamerica. Craftsmen worked in silver and gold, creating decorative and ceremonial items for buildings and religious objects. Advanced techniques of production were used for pottery and textiles that were first produced along the coast, but eventually in the mountains as well. Superior-quality textile and gold crowns distinguished rulers from commoners, and the skilled artisans were probably a social class that served the elite.

Political and Cultural Development

Since the area encompassed three ecological zones that abruptly began and ended, one motivation for empire was to control all of them, as well as the connecting trade routes. Since arable land was limited, some kind of political organization was needed for irrigation and protection of land. There is evidence of early warfare, so political rulers probably directed wars, but we don't really know the nature of their rule. The fact that Chavin culture diffused over a large area is some proof that the civilization was politically well organized.

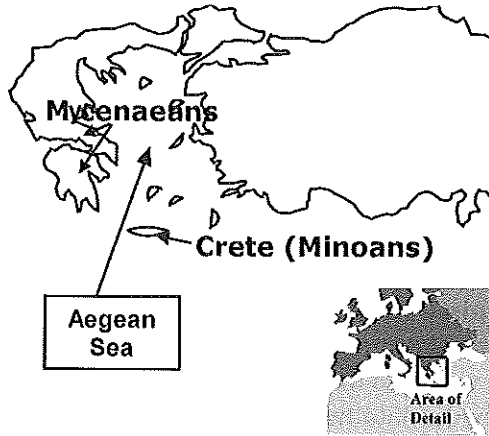
Part of the Chavin's influence appears to be based on its religion, which spread through most of the territory, and perhaps to Mesoamerica. Although the beliefs of the religion are unknown, a jaguar god with combined human and animal features was a very important symbol for the religion. Jaguars were inscribed on buildings, pottery, and textiles over a huge expanse of territory, including Mesoamerica. Other intricate stone carvings depicted snakes, hawks, eagles, and humans with feline characteristics.

EARLY CIVILIZATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1700-1100 B.C.E.

By the 2nd millennium B.C.E., agricultural communities had developed into civilizations in the Middle East, the Americas, and east Asia. All had developed trade routes that enriched their economies and put them into contact with other groups of people. However, the Middle East had developed a broader, more intense web of interactions among various groups of people than the other areas had. The era between 1700 and 1100 B.C.E. is often called the **Late Bronze**

Age, and it is characterized by an early version of **cosmopolitanism**, or the shared cultures and lifestyles that result when different groups are in regular contact. The cultural diffusion among groups included not just trade goods, but also ideas, values, and standards of living. The web of commerce and cultures included:

- **Egypt** – The New Kingdom of Egypt began in 1550 B.C.E. after the defeat of the Hyksos. Egypt was no longer the isolated civilization of its earlier days, and it developed extensive diplomatic and commercial ties with the states of western Asia, and it maintained a large army to promote its strength in the network.
- **Mesopotamia** – The area around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers continued to be subject to political fragmentation as cities and kingdoms waxed and waned in their military might. By 1500 B.C.E. Mesopotamia was divided into two political zones: Babylonia in the south and Assyria in the north. Although another group – the Kassites – came to power in Babylon, trade continued, and urban centers prospered.
- **Hittites** – This group originated in Anatolia (modern Turkey) and formed a large empire to the northwest of Mesopotamia. Anatolia's rich natural resources of copper, silver, and iron helped the Hittites to play a vital role in international commerce. They developed new techniques for iron working, providing them with military advantages that allowed them to conquer the area.
- **Nubians** – To the south of Egypt a great civilization rose along the Nile that connected Sub-Saharan Africa with north Africa. Nubia was richly endowed with gold, copper, and semiprecious stones, so it also played an important part in the international commercial web of the Late Bronze Age. For most of this era it was dominated by Egypt, although in the 1st millennium B.C.E. it gained power as Egypt weakened, and eventually came to control Egypt.
- **Mycenaeans** – By the late 3rd millennium B.C.E. an advanced civilization had begun to develop on the island of Crete, just south of the Aegean Sea. These people were named **Minoans** after their legendary King Minos, and excavations have unearthed a large palace complex, massive walls, and shaft graves (burial places at the base of deep, rectangular pits). They were followed by the **Mycenaeans**, an early group on the Greek mainland, who came to dominate the area by the Late Bronze Era. They were warlike and aggressive, and controlled trade across the Aegean Sea and with the other civilizations of the Middle East.



Early Aegean Cultural Hearth. This cultural hearth differed from earlier hearths in that it centered on the Aegean Sea, not on a river valley. The sea is calm and the islands numerous, allowing for easy transportation for Ancient Greeks to trade for goods that their natural environment did not provide.

Around 1200 B.C.E. many of the old cultural and economic centers of the Middle East and Mediterranean were destroyed. Many people were moving around (for reasons that are not completely clear), and one by one the civilizations began having problems. The Hittite kingdom fell to invaders, who made their way to the eastern end of the Mediterranean where they destroyed trading cities there. Egypt also experienced a major invasion by the “Sea Peoples” that they survived, but they lost many of their territories to the northeast. The Mycenaean centers also collapsed in the first half of the 12th century B.C.E., initiating an era known as the “Dark Age” of Greek history. The cosmopolitan world of the Late Bronze Age was gone by the 12th century, and the collapse of the network may well be an early illustration of a negative consequence of interdependence. The economic and cultural exchanges had contributed to their wealth and vitality, but once one fell, a piece of the network was gone, weakening other pieces that appear to have fallen away one by one, sounding a death knell for this earliest phase of civilization in the Middle East.

CONCEPTS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

Akkadian Empire

Amon-Re

amulets

The Analects

Aryans

Assyrians
Babylonians
Book of the Dead
Book of Songs
cataracts
Chavin
city-state
civilization
Confucianism
cosmopolitanism
cultural diffusion
cultural hearths
cuneiform
Dravidian
dynasty, dynastic cycles
Epic of Gilgamesh
Fertile Crescent
Hammurabi
Hammurabi's Code
Harappa
Hittites
Horus
Hyksos
Isis
labor systems
Late Bronze Age
law code
loess
ma'at
Mandate of Heaven
matrilineal
Menes
Mesopotamia
Minoans
Mohenjo-Daro
monsoon rains
Mycenaeans
Olmec
oracle bones
papyrus
patriarchy
pharaoh
pictographs

70 FOUNDATIONS

Rosetta Stone

Semitic

shaman

Shang Dynasty

shi

social mobility

Sumerians

systems failure

theocracy

tribute

vassals

Xia Dynasty

Zhao Dynasty

ziggurats