IN 1991 HIKERS TOILING ACROSS A GLACIER IN THE ALPS BETWEEN AUSTRIA AND ITALY made a startling discovery: a man’s body stuck in the ice. They alerted the police, who soon turned the corpse over to archaeologists. The scientists determined that the middle-aged man had frozen to death about 5,300 years ago. Ötzi the Ice Man (his name comes from the Ötztal Valley where he perished) quickly became an international celebrity. The scientists who examined Ötzi believe that he was a shepherd leading flocks of sheep and goats to mountain pastures when he died. Grains of wheat on his clothing suggested that he lived in a farming community. Copper dust in his hair hinted that Ötzi may also have been a metalworker, perhaps looking for ores during his journey. An arrowhead lodged in his back indicated a violent death, but the circumstances remain mysterious.

Ötzi’s gear was state-of-the-art for his time. His possessions showed deep knowledge of the natural world. He wore leather boots insulated with dense grasses chosen for protection against the cold. The pouch around his waist contained stone tools and fire-lighting equipment. The wood selected for his bow offered strength and flexibility. In his light wooden backpack, Ötzi carried containers to hold burning embers and dried meat and seeds to eat on the trail. The arrows in his quiver featured a natural adhesive that tightly bound bone and wooden points to the shafts. The most noteworthy find among Ötzi’s possessions was his axe. Its handle was made of wood, but its head was copper, a remarkable innovation at a time when most tools were made of stone. Ötzi was ready for almost anything—except the person who shot him in the back.

Ötzi lived at a transitional moment, at the end of what archaeologists call the Neolithic Age, or “New Stone Age,” a long period of revolutionary change lasting from about 10,000 to about 3000 B.C.E. in which many thousands of years of human interaction with nature led to food production through agriculture and the domestication of animals. This chapter begins with this most fundamental encounter of all—that between humans and the natural world.

The achievement of food production let humans develop new, settled forms of communities—and then civilization itself. The growth of civilization also depended on constant interaction among communities that lived far apart. Once people were settled in a region, they began trading for commodities that were not available in
their homelands. As trade routes extended over long distances and interactions among diverse peoples proliferated, ideas and technology spread. This chapter focuses on two questions: How did the encounters between early human societies create the world’s first civilizations? And, what was the relationship between these civilizations and what would become the “West“?

### DEFINING CIVILIZATION, DEFINING WESTERN CIVILIZATION

- What is the link between the food-producing revolution of the Neolithic era and the emergence of civilization?
Anthropologists use the term culture to describe all the different ways that humans collectively adjust to their environment, organize their experiences, and transmit their knowledge to future generations. Culture serves as a web of interconnected meanings that enable individuals to understand themselves and their place in the world. Archaeologists define civilization as an urban culture with differentiated levels of wealth, occupation, and power. One archaeologist notes that the “complete checklist of civilization” contains “cities, warfare, writing, social hierarchies, [and] advanced arts and crafts.” With cities, human populations achieved the critical mass necessary to develop specialized occupations and a level of economic production high enough to sustain complex religious and cultural practices—and to wage war. To record these economic, cultural, and military interactions, writing developed. Social organization grew more complex. The labor of most people supported a small group of political, military, and religious leaders. This urban elite controlled not only government and warfare, but also the distribution of food and wealth. They augmented their authority by building monuments to the gods and participating in religious rituals that linked divinity with kingship and military prowess. Thus, in early civilizations four kinds of power—military, economic, political, and religious—converged.

As Map 1.1 shows, a number of civilizations developed independently of each other across the globe. This chapter focuses on the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations because many of the characteristics of “Western civilization” originated in these areas. The history of “Western civilization” thus begins not in Europe, the core territory of the West today, but in what we usually call the Middle East and what ancient historians...
call the “Near East.” By 2500 B.C.E., when, as we will see, city-states in Mesopotamia formed a flourishing civilization and Egypt’s Old Kingdom was well-developed, Europeans still lived only in scattered agricultural communities. Without the critical mass of people and possessions that accompanied city life, early Europeans did not develop the specialized religious, economic, and political classes that characterize a civilization.

Making Civilization Possible: The Food-Producing Revolution

For more than the first 175,000 years of their existence, modern humans, known as *Homo sapiens sapiens* (“most intelligent people”), did not produce food. Between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens sapiens* first appeared in Africa and began to spread to other continents. Scientists refer to this stage of human history as the Paleolithic Age, or Old Stone Age, because people made tools by cracking rocks and using their sharp edges to cut and chop. These early peoples scavenged for wild food and followed migrating herds of animals. They also created beautiful works of art by carving bone and painting on cave walls. By 45,000 years ago, these humans had reached most of Earth’s habitable regions.

The end of the last Ice Age about 15,000 years ago ushered in an era of momentous change: the food-producing revolution. As the Earth’s climate became warmer, cereal grasses spread over large areas. Hunter-gatherers learned to collect these wild grains and grind them up for food. When people learned that the seeds of wild grasses could be transplanted and grown in new areas, the cultivation of plants was underway.

People also began domesticating pigs, sheep, goats, and cattle, which eventually replaced wild game as the main sources of meat. The first signs of goat domestication occurred about 8900 B.C.E.

Terms such as the “Near East,” the “Middle East,” and the “Far East”—China, Japan, and Korea—betray their Western European origins. For someone in India, say, or Russia or Australia, neither Mesopotamia nor Egypt is located to the “east.”

The First Food-Producing Communities

The world’s first food-producing communities emerged in southwest Asia. People began cultivating food in three separate areas, shown on Map 1.2. Archaeologists have named the first area the Levantine Corridor (also known as the Fertile Crescent)—a 25-mile-wide strip of land that runs from the Jordan River valley of modern Israel and Palestine to the Euphrates River valley in today’s Iraq.† The second region was the hilly land north of Mesopotamia at the base of the Zagros Mountains. The third was Anatolia, or what is now Turkey.

The small settlement of Abu Hureyra near the center of the Levantine Corridor illustrates how agriculture developed. Humans first settled here around 9500 B.C.E. They fed themselves primarily by hunting gazelles and gathering wild cereals. But sometime between 8000 and 7700 B.C.E., they began to plant and harvest grains. Eventually they discovered that crop rotation—planting different crops in a field each year—resulted in a much higher yield. By 7000 B.C.E. Abu Hureyra had grown into a farming community, covering nearly 30 acres that sustained a population of about 400.

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The term Levant refers to the eastern Mediterranean coastal region. “Levant” comes from the French: “the rising [sun]”—in other words, the territory to the east, where the sun rises.

in the Zagros Mountains in Southwest Asia. Pigs, which adapt well to human settlements because they eat garbage, were first domesticated around 7000 B.C.E. By around 6500 B.C.E., domestication had become widespread.

Farming and herding were hard work, but the payoff was enormous. Even simple agricultural methods could produce about 50 times more food than hunting and gathering. Thanks to the increased food supply, more newborns survived past infancy. Populations expanded, and so did human settlements. With the mastery of food production, human societies developed the mechanisms not only to feed themselves, but also to produce a surplus, which allowed for economic specialization and fostered the growth of social, political, and religious hierarchies.

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A few generations later, the inhabitants of Abu Hureyra began herding sheep and goats to supplement their meat supply. These domesticated animals became the community’s primary source of meat when the gazelle herds were depleted about 6500 B.C.E.

Families in Abu Hureyra lived in small, rectangular dwellings containing several rooms. Archaeological evidence shows that many women in the community developed arthritis in their knees, probably from crouching for hours on end to grind grains. Thus, we assume that while men hunted and harvested, women prepared food. The division of labor along gender lines indicates a growing complexity of social relations within the community.

Similar patterns of agricultural development characterized the early histories of other regions in southwest Asia. By 6000 B.C.E., for example, the Anatolian town of Çatal Hüyük (meaning “Fork Mound”) consisted of 32 acres of tightly packed rectangular mud houses that the townspeople rebuilt more than a dozen times as their population expanded. By 6700 B.C.E. about 6,000 people lived in houses built so closely together that residents could only enter their homes by walking along the rooftops and climbing down a ladder set in the smoke hole. Such a set-up, while physically uncomfortable, also strengthened Çatal Hüyük’s security from outside attack.

Archaeologists have uncovered about 40 rooms that served as religious shrines. The paintings and engravings on the walls of these rooms focus on the two main concerns of ancient societies: fertility and death. In these scenes, vultures scavenge on human corpses while women give birth to bulls (associated with virility). These shrines also contain statues of goddesses whose exaggerated breasts and buttocks indicate the importance of fertility rites in the villagers’ religious rituals.

Only a wealthy community could allow some people to work as artists or priests rather than as farmers, and Çatal Hüyük was wealthy by the standards of its era. Much of its wealth rested on trade in obsidian. This volcanic stone was the most important commodity in the Neolithic Age because it could be used to make sharp-edged tools such as arrowheads, spear points, and sickles for harvesting crops. Çatal Hüyük controlled the obsidian trade from Anatolia to the Levantine
Corridor. With increasing wealth came widening social differences. While most of the burial sites at Çatal Hüyük showed little variation, a few corpses were buried with jewelry and other riches, a practice that indicates the beginning of distinctions between wealthy and poor members of the society.

The long-distance obsidian trade that underlay Çatal Hüyük’s wealth also sped up the development of other food-producing communities in the Levantine Corridor, the Zagros Mountains, and Anatolia. These trade networks of the Neolithic Age laid the foundation for the commercial and cultural encounters that fostered the world’s first civilization.

**Transformations in Europe**

In all of these developments, Europe remained far behind. The colder and wetter European climate meant heavier soils that were harder to cultivate than those in the Near East. The food-producing revolution that began in southwest Asia around 8000 B.C.E. did not spread to Europe for another thousand years, when farmers, probably from Anatolia, ventured to northern Greece and the Balkans. Settled agricultural communities had become the norm in southwest Asia by 6000 B.C.E., but not until about 2500 B.C.E. did most of Europe’s hunting and gathering cultures give way to small, widely dispersed farming communities. (See Map 1.3.)

**MAP 1.3**

Neolithic Cultures in Europe

During the Neolithic period, new cultures developed as most of the peoples of Europe changed their way of life from hunting and gathering to food production. Trade and warfare constructed networks of village communities, but two key components of civilization—writing and cities—did not emerge in these centuries.
As farmers and herders spread across Europe, people adapted to different climates and terrain. A variety of cultures evolved from these differences but most shared the same basic characteristics: Early Europeans farmed a range of crops and herded domesticated animals. They lived in villages, clusters of permanent family farmsteads. Jewelry and other luxury goods left in women’s graves might indicate that these village societies granted high status to women, perhaps because these communities traced ancestry through mothers.

Two important technological shifts ushered in significant economic or social change in these early European groups. The first was metallurgy, the art of using fire to shape metals. Knowledge of metallurgy spread slowly across Europe from the Balkans, where people started to mine copper about 4500 B.C.E. Jewelry made from copper and gold became coveted luxury goods. As trade in metals flourished, long-distance trading networks evolved. These networks provided the basis for the meeting and blending of different groups of peoples and different cultural assumptions and ideas.

The introduction of the plow was the second significant technological development for early Europe. The plow, invented in Mesopotamia in the late fifth or early fourth millennium B.C.E., became widely used in Europe around 2600 B.C.E. The use of plows meant that fewer people were needed to cultivate Europe’s heavy soils. With more people available to clear forest lands, farming communities expanded and multiplied, as did opportunities for individual initiative and the accumulation of wealth.

As a result of these developments—and as had occurred much earlier in the Near East—the social structure within European villages became more stratified, with growing divisions between the rich and the poor. From the evidence of weaponry buried in graves, we know that the warrior emerged as a dominant figure in these early

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**STONEHENGE**

This megalithic monument in southern England consists of two circles of standing stones with large blocks capping the circles. It was built without the aid of wheeled vehicles or metal tools, and the stones were dragged from many miles away.
European societies. With the growing emphasis on military power, women's status may have declined.

These early Europeans constructed enduring monuments that offer tantalizing glimpses of their cultural practices and religious beliefs. Around 4000 B.C.E. Europeans began building communal tombs with huge stones called megaliths. Megaliths were constructed from Scandinavia to Spain and on islands in the western Mediterranean. The best-known megalith construction is Stonehenge in England. People began to build Stonehenge about 3000 B.C.E. as a ring of pits. The first stone circle of “bluestones,” hauled all the way from the Welsh hills, was constructed about 2300 B.C.E. Only an advanced level of engineering expertise, combined with a high degree of organization of labor, made such construction possible.

The purpose of these magnificent constructions remains controversial. Some archaeologists argue that Stonehenge was used to measure the movement of stars, the sun, and the planets. Others view it as principally a place for religious ceremonies. Recent excavations suggest a third possibility: Stonehenge may have been a complex devoted to healing ceremonies. All three theories could be correct, for ancient peoples commonly associated healing and astronomical observation with religious belief and practice.

If we recall the “complete checklist” needed for a civilization—“cities, warfare, writing, social hierarchies, [and] advanced arts and crafts”—we can see that by 1600 B.C.E., Europeans had checked off all of these requirements except cities and writing—both crucial for building human civilizations. The rest of this chapter, then, will focus not on Europe, but on the dramatic developments in southwest Asia and Egypt from the sixth millennium B.C.E. on.

**MESOPOTAMIA: KINGDOMS, EMPIRES, AND CONQUESTS**

- What changes and continuities characterized Mesopotamian civilization between the emergence of Sumer’s city-states and the rise of Hammurabi’s Babylonian empire?

Long before the early Europeans living in Britain began to build Stonehenge, the first civilization and the world’s first empires emerged on the Mesopotamian floodplain. Standing at the junction of the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe, southwest Asia became the meeting place of peoples, technologies, and ideas.

**The Sumerian Kingdoms**

About 5300 B.C.E. the villages in Sumer in southern Mesopotamia began a dynamic civilization that would flourish for thousands of years. The key to Sumerian civilization was water. Without a regular water supply, villages and cities could not have survived in Sumer. The name *Mesopotamia*, an ancient Greek word, means “the land between the rivers.” Nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Sumerian civilization developed as its peoples learned to control the rivers that both enabled and imperiled human settlement.

The Tigris and Euphrates are unpredictable water sources, prone to sudden, powerful, and destructive flooding. Sumerian villagers first built their own levees for flood protection and dug their own small channels to divert floodwaters from the two great rivers to irrigate their dry lands. Then they discovered that by combining the labor force of several villages, they could build and maintain levee systems and irrigation channels on a large scale. Villages merged into cities that became the foundation of Sumerian civilization, as centralized administrations developed to manage the dams, levees, and irrigation canals; to direct the labor needed to maintain and expand the water works; and to distribute the resources that the system produced.

By 2500 B.C.E., about 13 major city-states—perhaps as many as 35 in all—managed the Mesopotamian floodplain in an organized fashion. (See Map 1.4.) In Sumer’s city-states, the urban center directly controlled the surrounding countryside. Uruk, “the first city in human history,” covered about two square miles and had a population of approximately 50,000 people,
including both city-dwellers and the peasants living in small villages in a radius of about ten miles around the city.

Sumer’s cities served as economic centers where craft specialists such as potters, toolmakers, and weavers gathered to swap information and trade goods. Long-distance trade, made easier by the introduction of wheeled carts, enabled merchants to bring timber, ores, building stone, and luxury items unavailable in southern Mesopotamia from Anatolia, the Levantine Corridor, Afghanistan, and Iran.

Within each city-state, an elite group of residents regulated economic life. Uruk and the other Sumerian city-states were redistributive economies. In this type of economic system, the central authority (such as the king) controlled the agricultural resources and “redistributed” them to his people (in an unequal fashion!). Archaeologists excavating Uruk have found millions of bevel-rimmed bowls, all the same size and shape—and, as the archaeologist Robert Wenke notes, “surely one of the ugliest ceramic types ever made outside a kindergarten.” One theory is that the bowls were ration bowls—containers in which workers received their daily ration of grain. What is certain is that the bowls were mass-produced,
and that only a powerful central authority could organize such mass production.

In the earliest era of Sumerian history, temple priests constituted this central authority. Sumerians believed that their city belonged to a god or goddess: The god owned all the lands and water, and the god’s priests, who lived with him (or her) in the temple, administered these resources on the god’s behalf. In practice, this meant that the priests collected exorbitant taxes in the forms of goods (grains, livestock, and manufactured products such as textiles) and services (laboring on city building and irrigation projects), and in return provided food rations for the workers from these collections.

As Sumer’s city-states expanded, a new form of authority emerged. The ruins of monumental palaces as well as temples testify to the appearance of powerful royal households that joined the temple priesthood in managing the resources of the city-state. Historians theorize that as city-states expanded, competition for land increased. Such competition led to warfare, and during warfare, military leaders amassed power and eventually, became kings.

The king’s power rested on his military might. Yet to retain the people’s loyalty and obedience, a king also needed religious legitimacy. Kingship, then, quickly became a key part of Sumerian religious traditions. Sumerians believed that “kingship descended from heaven,” that the king ruled on the god’s behalf. According to a Sumerian proverb, “Man is the shadow of god, but the king is god’s reflection.” To challenge the king was to challenge the gods—never a healthy choice. The royal household and the temple priesthood thus worked together to exploit the labor of their subjects and amass power and wealth. Religious and political life were thoroughly intertwined.

Although the Sumerian city-states did not unite politically—and, in fact, frequently fought each other—a number of factors created a single Sumerian culture. First, the kings maintained diplomatic relations with one another and with rulers throughout southwest Asia and Egypt, primarily to protect their trading networks. These trade networks also helped tie the Sumerian cities together and fostered a common Sumerian culture. Second, the city-states shared the same pantheon of gods. The surviving documents reveal that Sumerians in the different city-states sang the same hymns, used the same incantations to protect themselves from evil spirits, and offered their children the same proverbial nuggets of advice and warning. They did so, however, in two different languages—Sumerian, unrelated to any other known language, and Akkadian, a member of the Semitic language family that includes Hebrew and Arabic.
The Akkadian Empire of Sargon the Great

The political independence of the Sumerian city-states ended around 2340 B.C.E. when they were conquered by a warrior who took the name Sargon (“true king”) and built a capital city at Agade (or Akkad), the ruins of which may rest under the modern city of Baghdad. With the reign of Sargon (ca. 2340–ca. 2305 B.C.E.), the history of Mesopotamia took a sharp turn. Sargon created the first empire in history. The term empire identifies a kingdom or state that controls foreign territories, either on the same continent or overseas. Except for relatively brief periods of fragmentation, imperial rule became the standard form of political statehood in southwest Asia for millennia. Because an empire, by definition, brings together different peoples, it serves as a cauldron of cultural encounters. As we will see, such encounters often transformed not only the conquered peoples, but the conquerors themselves.

Map 1.4 shows that the empire Sargon built embraced a string of territories running far west up the Euphrates River toward the Mediterranean. Sargon was probably the first ruler in history to create a standing army, one that was larger than any yet seen in the Near East. This formidable fighting force certainly helps explain how he conquered so many peoples. To meld these peoples into an empire, however, required not only military power but also innovative organizational skills. The formerly independent Sumerian city rulers became Sargon’s governors, required to send a portion of all taxes collected to Akkad. Akkadian became the new administrative language, and a standard measurement and dating system was imposed to make record-keeping more efficient.

Raising the revenues to meet the costs of running this enormous empire was vital. Akkadian monarchs generated revenues in several ways. They, of course, taxed their people. Hence, the Mesopotamian proverb: “There are lords and there are kings, but the real person to fear is the tax collector.”6 They also leased out their vast farmlands and required conquered people to pay regular tribute. In addition, Akkadian kings depended on the revenue generated by commerce. They placed heavy taxes on raw materials imported from foreign lands. In fact, most Akkadian kings made long-distance trade the central objective of their foreign policy. They sent military expeditions as far as Anatolia and Iran to obtain timber, metals, and luxury goods. Akkadian troops protected international trade routes and managed the maritime trade in the Persian Gulf, where merchants brought goods by ship from India and southern Arabia.

Akkadian troops also waged war. Warfare during this era changed with the use of two new military technologies. The composite bow boosted the killing power of archers. Multiple layers of wood from different types of trees as well as bone and sinew added to the tensile strength of the bow and so increased the distance an arrow could fly and the speed at which it did so. The second important military innovation was an early form of the chariot, a heavy four-wheeled cart that carried a driver and a spearman. Mounted on fixed wheels (and so incapable of swift turns) and pulled by donkeys (the faster horse did not come into use until the second millennium), the early chariot must have been a slow, clumsy instrument. Yet it proved effective in breaking up enemy infantry formations.

The cities of Mesopotamia prospered under Akkadian rule. Even so, Akkadian rulers could not hold their empire together for reasons that historians do not completely understand. One older explanation is that marauding tribes from the Zagros Mountains infiltrated the kingdom and caused tremendous damage. More recent research suggests that civil war tore apart the empire. Regardless of the cause, Akkadian kings lost control of their lands, and a period of anarchy began about 2250 B.C.E. “Who was king? Who was not king?” lamented a writer during this time of troubles. After approximately a century of chaos, the kingdom finally collapsed. Sargon, however, lived on in the memories and folk tales of the peoples of southwest Asia as the model of the mighty king.
The Ur III Dynasty and the Rise of Assyria

With the fall of Akkad, the cities of Sumer regained their independence, but they were soon—and forcibly—reunited under Ur-Nammu (r. ca. 2112–ca. 2095 B.C.E.), king of the Sumerian city of Ur, located far to the south of Akkad. Ur-Nammu established a powerful dynasty that lasted for five generations.

The Ur III dynasty (as it is called) developed an administrative bureaucracy even more elaborate than that of Sargon. Like all bureaucracies, it generated vast amounts of documents—we have more documentary sources for the Ur III era than for any other in ancient southwest Asia. Local elites, who served as the king’s governors, administered the empire’s 20 provinces. To assure their loyalty, they were often bound to the king by ties of marriage. As governors, these locals controlled the temple estates, maintained the canal system, and acted as the highest judge in the province. Significantly, they did not control the military. Ur III’s kings set up a separate military administration and made sure that the generals assigned to each province came from somewhere else. In this way, the king could be sure that the general owed his allegiance to the royal household, not to the local elite. Ur's kings also strengthened their power by assuming the status of gods. Royal officials encouraged the people to give their children names such as “Shulgi is my god” to remind them of the king’s divine authority.

Despite their sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus and their claims to divinity, the kings of Ur proved unable to stave off political fragmentation indefinitely. Rebellions increased in size and tempo. About 2000 B.C.E., semi-nomadic peoples known as Amorites began invading Mesopotamia from the steppes to the west and north. The
Amorites seized fortified towns, taking food and supplies and causing widespread destruction. Their invasions destabilized the economy. Peasants fled from the fields, and with no food or revenues, inflation and famine overcame the empire. Ur collapsed, and Mesopotamia shattered again into a scattering of squabbling cities.

**Assyria and Babylonia**

For a long period, the political unity Sargon forged in Mesopotamia remained elusive, as states and peoples fought each other for control. This period of political fragmentation allowed for an important development: a partial “privatization” of the Mesopotamian economy, as individuals began to trade on their own behalf. Not connected in any way to the temple or the palace and, therefore, outside the redistributive economy, many of these free people grew prosperous. Merchants traveling by land and sea brought textiles, metals, and luxury items such as gold and silver jewelry and gems from lands bordering the Mediterranean and along the Persian Gulf and Red Sea.

Assyrian merchants, for example, developed an elaborate trade network linking the city-state of Assur with Anatolia. (See Map 1.4.) In Assur, they loaded up donkey caravans with tin and textiles for an arduous 50-day journey to the southern Anatolian city of Kanesh. (The surviving documentation is so detailed that we know that each donkey carried 150 pounds of tin or 30 textiles weighing about five pounds each.) Once they arrived in Kanesh, the merchants sold the donkeys, exchanged their merchandise for silver and gold, and headed back to Assur. Meanwhile, Assyrian merchants stationed in Kanesh sold the tin and textiles throughout Anatolia. The enterprise was risky—a storm, bandits, or a sick donkey could imperil it—but the profits were huge: 50–100 percent annually. Building on this economic prosperity, Assur (or Assyria) flourished as a powerful city-state until one of the most powerful empire-builders in the history of ancient southwest Asia reduced its power.

By 1780 B.C.E., the kingdom of Babylon had become a mighty empire under Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 B.C.E.). Hammurabi never entirely conquered Assyria, but he dominated Mesopotamian affairs. Like Ur-Nammu and Sargon, Hammurabi developed a centralized administration to direct irrigation and building projects and to foster commerce throughout his realm. Both his law code (discussed later in this chapter) and his surviving letters to his royal agents reveal that no detail of economic life was too small for Hammurabi’s notice. In one letter, for example, he ordered his agent to give “a fallow field that is of good quality and lies near the water, to Sin-imgruranni, the seal-cutter.” Hammurabi did not, however, reverse the partial “privatization” of the economy that had developed during the era of political fragmentation. Babylonian society contained a prospering private sector of merchants, craftspeople, farmers, and sailors. Hammurabi liked to think of himself as a benevolent ruler, a kind of protective father. He declared, “I held the people of the lands of Sumer and Akkad safely on my lap.”

Nevertheless, Hammurabi and his successors imposed heavy taxes on their subjects. These financial demands provoked resentment, and when Hammurabi died, many Babylonian provinces successfully revolted. The loss of revenue weakened the Babylonian imperial government. By 1650, Hammurabi’s empire had shrunk to northern Babylon, the territory Hammurabi had inherited when he first became king. Hammurabi’s successors remained in control of northern Babylon for another five generations, but by 1400 B.C.E., a new people, the Kassites, ruled the kingdom.

**Cultural Continuities: The Transmission of Mesopotamian Cultures**

Although the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires punctuated the political history of Mesopotamia between the emergence of Sumerian civilization in 3300 B.C.E. and the collapse of Babylon in 1500 B.C.E., Mesopotamian culture exhibited remarkable continuity. Over these millennia,
Sumerian religious values, architectural styles, literary forms, and other cultural concepts were absorbed, transformed, and passed on by the various peoples they encountered in both commerce and conquest.

**THE MESOPOTAMIAN WORLD VIEW: RELIGION**

Religion—powerfully influenced by Mesopotamia’s volatile climate—played a central role in the Sumerian and, hence, the wider Mesopotamian world view. The Sumerians did not tend to think of their gods as loving or forgiving. Sumerian civilization arose on a floodplain subject to extreme and unpredictable climate conditions, with results ranging from devastating drought to torrential floods. Sumerians knew firsthand the famine and destruction that could result from sudden rainstorms, violent winds, or a flash flood. They envisioned each of these natural forces as an unpredictable god who, like a human king or queen, was often unfair and had to be pleased and appeased:

> The sin I have committed I know not;  
The forbidden thing I have done I do not know.  
Some god has turned his rage against me;  
Some goddess has aimed her ire.  
I cry for help but no one takes my hand.9

Sumer’s religion was *polytheistic*. Sumerians believed that many gods controlled their destinies. In the Sumerian pantheon, the all-powerful king Anu, the father of the gods, ruled the sky. Enlil was master of the wind and guided humans in the proper use of force. Enki governed the Earth and rivers and guided human creativity and inventions. Inanna was the goddess of love, sex, fertility, and warfare. These gods continued to dominate Mesopotamian culture long after Sumer’s cities lost their political independence. After Hammurabi conquered most of Mesopotamia, Babylon’s city-god Marduk joined the pantheon as a major deity.

Because the priests conducted the sacrifices that appeased the often-angry gods, the priesthood dominated Mesopotamian culture as did the temples in which they served and the gods to whom they sacrificed. In the center of every Sumerian city stood the temple complex, comprising temples to various gods, buildings to house the priests and priestesses, storage facilities for the sacrificial gifts, and looming over it all, the *ziggurat*. As the photograph of the ziggurat of Ur reveals, ziggurats were enormous square or rectangular temples with a striking stair-step design. Ur’s ziggurat, built around 2100 B.C.E. by Ur-Nammu, had a 50-foot high base, on which three stairways, each of 100 steps, led to the main gateways. The top of Ur’s ziggurat did not survive, but in Ur-Nammu’s time, a central staircase would have led upward to a temple.

Ur-Nammu built Ur’s ziggurat to house the chief god of the city. The Sumerians believed that one god or goddess protected each city, and that the city should serve as an earthly model of the god’s divine home. Towering over the city, the deity’s ziggurat reminded all the inhabitants of the omnipresent gods who controlled not only their commerce, but their very destiny.
Struggling to survive within an often hostile environment, Mesopotamians sought to understand and control their world through the practice of divination. To “divine”—to discern or to “read”—the future, a local wise woman or a priest looked for the messages imprinted in the natural world, such as in the entrails of a dead animal or in an unusual natural event. Once a person knew what the future was to hold, he or she could then work to change it. If the omens were bad, for example, a man could seek to appease the god by offering a sacrifice.

Divination and religious sacrifice seem to have little to do with science—and in Western culture in the twenty-first century, “religion” and “science” are often viewed as opposing or at least separate realms. Yet the Mesopotamian practice of divination helped shape a “proto-scientific” attitude toward the world. Much of divination consisted of “if . . . then . . .” equations:

If a horse attempts to mount a cow, then there will be a decline in the land.
If a man’s chest-hair curls upward, he will become a slave.
If the gallbladder [of the sacrificial sheep] is stripped of the hepatic duct, the army of the king will suffer thirst during a military campaign.10

Such statements seem silly, not scientific. Yet they rest on one of the fundamentals of modern science: close observation of the natural world. Only by observing and recording the normal processes of the natural world could Mesopotamians hope to recognize the omens embedded in the abnormal. Moreover, in the practice of divination, observation of individual events led to the formulation of a hypothesis of a general pattern—what we call deduction, a crucial part of scientific analysis. In their effort to discern rational patterns in the natural world to improve the circumstances of their own lives, Mesopotamians were moving toward the beginnings of a scientific mentality—a crucial aspect of Western civilization.

This proto-scientific understanding is even more evident in the technological, astronomical, and mathematical legacy of ancient Mesopotamia. Sumerians devised the potter’s wheel, the wagon, and the chariot. They developed detailed knowledge about the movement of the stars, planets, and the moon, especially as these movements pertained to agricultural cycles, and they made impressive innovations in mathematics. Many Sumerian tablets show multiplication tables, square and cube roots, exponents, and other practical information such as how to calculate compound interest on loans. The Sumerians divided the circle into 360 degrees and developed a counting system based on 60 in multiples of ten—a system we still use to tell time.

The Development of Writing Perhaps the Sumerians’ most important cultural innovation was writing. The Sumerians devised a unique script to record their language. Historians call the symbols that Sumerians pressed onto clay tablets with sharp objects cuneiform, or wedge-shaped, writing. The earliest known documents written in this language come from Uruk about 3200 B.C.E. Writing originated because of the demands of record-keeping. By around 4000 B.C.E., officials in Uruk were using small clay tokens of different shapes to represent and record quantities of produce and numbers of livestock. They placed these tokens in clay envelopes, and impressed marks on the outer surface of the envelopes to indicate the contents. By 3100 B.C.E., people stopped using tokens and simply impressed the shapes directly on a flat piece of clay or tablet with a pointed stick or reed.

As commodities and trading became more complex, the number of symbols multiplied. Learning the hundreds of signs required intensive study. The scribes, the people who mastered these signs, became important figures in the royal and religious courts as their work enabled kings and priests to regulate the economic life of their cities. Sumerian cuneiform writing spread, and other peoples of Mesopotamia and southwest Asia began adapting it to record information in their own languages.
Writing made a literary tradition possible. Sumerians told exciting stories about their gods and heroes. Passed on and adapted through the ages, these stories helped shape ideas about divine action and human response throughout Mesopotamian history.

One of the most popular of these stories concerned the legendary king Gilgamesh of Uruk. Part god and part man, Gilgamesh harasses his subjects. He demands sex from the young women and burdens the young men with construction tasks. The people of Uruk beg the gods to distract this bothersome hero. The gods send the beastly Enkidu to fight Gilgamesh, but after a prolonged wrestling match that ends in a draw, the two become close friends and set off on a series of adventures. The two heroes battle monsters and even outwit the gods. Finally the gods decide that enough is enough and arrange for Enkidu’s death. Mourning for his stalwart friend, Gilgamesh sets out to find the secret to living forever. In the end, immortality eludes his grasp. A mere mortal, Gilgamesh becomes a wiser king, and his subjects benefit from his new wisdom. He realizes that while he must die, his fame may live on, and so he seeks to leave behind him a magnificent city that will live forever in human memory.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* as we know it was recorded in Akkadian, but it is clear that the stories date from long before the rise of the Akkadian Empire. Recited and read by Mesopotamian peoples for millennia, the Gilgamesh story’s influence extended beyond the borders even of the empires of Sargon or Hammurabi. Its themes, plots, and characters reappear in revised form in the literatures of such diverse peoples as the ancient Hebrews (recorded in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) and the early Greeks. These peoples, however, reworked the stories in accordance with their own cultural values. As a Sumerian tale, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* demonstrates a Mesopotamian world view in its emphasis on the capriciousness of the gods, the hostility of nature, and the unpredictability of human existence. It offers no hope of heaven, only resignation to life’s unpredictability and the chance of finding some sort of reward during one’s short time on earth.

Mesopotamian culture also made a lasting imprint on future societies through another important innovation: the code of law, preserved in written form. Archeologists have so far uncovered three Sumerian law codes, the earliest dating to around 2350 B.C.E. The most famous lawgiver of the ancient world was the Babylonian empire-builder Hammurabi. The *Law Code of Hammurabi*—282 civil, commercial, and criminal laws—is the world’s oldest complete surviving compendium of laws. We do not know to what extent these laws were actually implemented. Many scholars argue that the code was a kind of public relations exercise, an effort by Hammurabi both to present a social ideal and to persuade his people (and the gods) to view him as the “King of Justice.” (See *Justice in History* in this chapter.)

What is clear is that Hammurabi’s laws unveil the social values and everyday concerns of
Mesopotamian kings placed a high priority on ruling their subjects justly. Shamash, the sun god and protector of justice, named two of his children Truth and Fairness. In the preface to his law code, Hammurabi explained the relationship between his rule and divine justice:

At that time, Anu and Enlil [two of the greatest gods], for the well-being of the people, called me by name, Hammurabi, the pious, god-fearing prince, and appointed me to make justice appear in the land [and] to destroy the evil and wicked, so that the strong might not oppress the weak, [and] to rise like Shamash over the black-headed people [the people of Mesopotamia].

Mesopotamian courts handled cases involving property, inheritance, boundaries, sale, and theft. A special panel of royal judges and officials handled cases involving the death penalty, such as treason, murder, sorcery, theft of temple goods, or adultery. Mesopotamians kept records of trials and legal decisions on clay tablets so that others might learn from them and avoid additional lawsuits.

A lawsuit began when a person brought a dispute before a court. The court consisted of three to six judges chosen from among the town’s leading men, such as merchants, scribes, and officials in the town assembly. The judges could speak with authority about the community’s principles of justice.

Litigants spoke on their own behalf and presented testimony through witnesses, written documents, or statements made by leading officials. Witnesses took strict oaths to tell the truth in a temple before the statue of a god. Once the parties presented all the evidence, the judges made their decision and pronounced the verdict and punishment.

Sometimes the judges asked the defendants to clear themselves by letting the god in whose
name the oath was taken make the judgment. The accused person would then undergo an ordeal or test in which he or she had to jump into a river and swim a certain distance underwater. Those who survived were considered innocent. Drowning constituted proof of guilt and a just punishment rendered by the gods.

The following account of one such ordeal comes from the city of Mari, about 1770 B.C.E. A queen was accused of casting spells on her husband. The maid forced to undergo the ordeal on her behalf drowned, and we do not know whether the queen received further punishment:

Concerning Amat-Sakkanim . . . whom the river god overwhelmed. . . .: “We made her undertake her plunge, saying to her, ‘Swear that your mistress did not perform any act of sorcery against Yarkab-Addad her lord; that she did not reveal any palace secret nor did another person open the missive of her mistress; that your mistress did not commit a transgression against her lord.’ In connection with these oaths they had her take her plunge; the river god overwhelmed her, and she did not come up alive.”

This account illustrates the Mesopotamian belief that sometimes only the gods could make decisions about right and wrong. By contrast, the following trial excerpts come from a homicide case in which humans, not gods, made the final judgment. About 1850 B.C.E., three men murdered a temple official named Lu-Inanna. For unknown reasons, they told the victim’s wife, Nin-dada, what they had done. King Ur-Ninurta of the city of Isin sent the case to be tried in the city of Nippur, the site of an important court. When the case came to trial, nine accusers asked that the three murderers be executed. They also requested that Nin-dada be put to death because she had not reported the murder to the authorities. The accusers said:

They who have killed a man are not worthy of life. Those three males and that woman should be killed.

In her defense, two of Nin-dada’s supporters pointed out that she had not been involved in the murder and therefore should be released:

Granted that the husband of Nin-dada, the daughter of Lu-Ninurta, has been killed, but what had the woman done that she should be killed?

The court agreed, on the grounds that Nin-dada was justified in keeping silent because her husband had not provided for her properly:

A woman whose husband did not support her . . . why should she not remain silent about him? Is it she who killed her husband? The punishment of those who actually killed him should suffice.

In accordance with the decision of the court, the defendants were executed.

This approach to justice—using witnesses, evaluating evidence, and rendering a verdict in a court protected by the king—demonstrated the Mesopotamians’ desire for fairness. This court decision became an important precedent that later judges frequently cited.

For Discussion

1. How would a city benefit by letting a panel of royal officials make judgments about life-and-death issues? How would the king benefit?
2. How do these trials demonstrate the interaction of Mesopotamian religious, social, and political beliefs?

Taking It Further

Babylonia’s rulers. For example, many of the laws focus on the irrigation system that made Babylonian agriculture possible. One such law reads: “If a man has opened his channel for irrigation and has been negligent and allowed the water to wash away a neighbor’s field, he shall pay grain equivalent to the crops of his neighbors—or be sold as a slave.”

Hammurabi’s law code buttressed Babylon’s social hierarchy by drawing legal distinctions between classes of people. The crimes of aristocrats (called free men) were treated more leniently than were the offenses of common people, while slaves were given no rights at all. If an aristocrat killed a commoner, he or she had to pay a fine, whereas if a commoner killed an aristocrat, he or she was executed. But the code of Hammurabi also emphasized the responsibility of public officials and carefully regulated commercial transactions. If a home was robbed, and city officers failed to find the burglar, then the householder had the right to expect reimbursement for his losses from the city government. If a moneylender suddenly raised interest rates beyond those already agreed on, then he forfeited the entire loan.

Almost one-quarter of Hammurabi’s statutes concern family matters. The laws’ focus on questions of dowry and inheritance reflect the Mesopotamian view of marriage as first and foremost a business matter. The Sumerian word for love literally translates “to measure the earth”—to mark land boundaries and designate who gets what. Hammurabi’s laws also highlight the patriarchal structure of Mesopotamian family life. In a patriarchal society, the husband/father possesses supreme authority in the family. Hence, Hammurabi’s code declared that if a wife had a lover, both she and her lover would be drowned, while a husband was permitted extramarital sex. If a wife neglected her duties at home or failed to produce children, her husband had the right to divorce her. Yet Mesopotamian women, at least those in the “free” class, were not devoid of all rights. If a husband divorced his wife without sufficient cause, then he had to give her back her entire dowry. Unlike in many later societies, a married woman was an independent legal entity: She could appear in court and she could engage in commercial contracts. Some Babylonian women ran businesses, such as small shops and inns.

Many of Hammurabi’s laws seem harsh: If a house caved in because of faulty workmanship and the householder died, then the builder was put to death. If a freeman hit another freeman’s pregnant daughter and caused her to miscarry, he had to pay ten silver shekels for the unborn child, but if his blow killed the daughter, then his own daughter was executed. Yet through these laws Hammurabi’s Code introduced one of the fundamentals of Western jurisprudence: the idea that the punishment must suit the crime (at least in crimes involving social equals). The principle of “an eye for an eye” (rather than a life for an eye) helped shape legal thought in southwest Asia for a millennium. It later influenced the laws of the Hebrews and, thus through the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), still molds ideas about justice.
EGYPT: THE EMPIRE OF THE NILE

What distinctive features characterized Egyptian civilization throughout its long history?

As the civilizations of Mesopotamia rose and fell, another civilization emerged far to the south: Egypt. A long and narrow strip of land in the northeast corner of Africa, Egypt depended for its survival on the Nile, the world's longest river, which flows north into the Mediterranean Sea from one of its points of origin in eastern Africa 4,000 miles away. The northernmost part of Egypt, where the Nile enters the Mediterranean, is a broad and fertile delta. The river flooded annually from mid-July to mid-October, leaving behind rich deposits of silt ideal for planting crops. Unlike in Southwest Asia, the annual floods in Egypt came with clockwork regularity. For the Egyptians, nature was not unpredictable and random in its destruction, but a benevolent force, generous in sharing its riches.

Egypt was also fortunate in another of its physical features: it rested securely between two desert regions that effectively barricaded it from foreign conquest. Whereas Mesopotamia stood at the intersection of three continents, vulnerable to invading armies, Egyptian civilization emerged in a far more easily defended position. Egyptian history, then, is remarkable for its political stability. This stability, combined with the predictability and generosity of the Nile, may explain the confidence and optimism that marked Egyptian culture.

Historians organize the long span of ancient Egyptian history into four main periods: Predynastic and Early Dynastic (10,000–2680 B.C.E.), the Old Kingdom (ca. 2680–2200 B.C.E.), the Middle Kingdom (2040–1720 B.C.E.), and the New Kingdom (1550–1150 B.C.E.). Times of political disruption between the kingdoms are called intermediate periods. Despite these periods of disruption, the Egyptians maintained a remarkably stable civilization for thousands of years.

Egypt's Rise to Empire

Like the peoples of Mesopotamia, the Egyptians were originally hunter-gatherers who slowly turned to growing crops and domesticating animals. Small villages, in which people could coordinate their labor most easily, appeared along the banks of the Nile between 5000 and 4000 B.C.E. By 3500 B.C.E., Egyptians could survive comfortably through agriculture and herding. Small towns multiplied along the Nile, and market centers connected by roads emerged as hubs where artisans and merchants exchanged their wares.

Toward the end of the Predynastic period, between 3500 and 3000 B.C.E., trade along the Nile River resulted in a shared culture and way of life. Towns grew into small kingdoms whose rulers constantly warred with one another, attempting to grab more land and extend their power. The big consumed the small, and by 3000 B.C.E., the towns had been absorbed into just two kingdoms: Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north. These two then united, forming what historians term the Old Kingdom. (See Map 1.5.)

The Kings and the Gods in the Old Kingdom

In the new capital city of Memphis, the Egyptian kings became the focal points of religious, social, and political life. While in Mesopotamia, kings were regarded as the gods' representatives on earth, as sort of semi-divine intermediaries, Egyptian kings were acknowledged as divine, gods on earth who ruled Egypt on behalf of the other gods. In the Old Kingdom, Egyptians called their king "the good god." (The label pharaoh was not used until the New Kingdom.) Egyptian religious tales emphasized the divinity of the king. In one such story, the god Osiris, ruler of Egypt, was killed and chopped into bits by his evil brother, Seth. Osiris' son, Horus, avenged his father by defeating Seth and reclaiming the Egyptian throne. All Egyptian kings, then, embodied Horus during their reign.

The story of the conflict between Osiris and Seth not only emphasized the divinity of the king, it also stressed the central theme of the
The Beginnings of Civilization, 10,000–1150 B.C.E.

Egyptian worldview: the struggle between the forces of chaos and of order. Seth embodied the forces of evil and disorder. In defeating Seth, Horus overcame chaos and restored what the Egyptians called *ma’at* to the world. The word *ma’at* has no English equivalent; in various contexts, it can mean truth, wisdom, justice, or stability. *Ma’at* was the way the gods had made the world—everything in its proper place, everything the way the gods wanted it to be.

The king’s essential task was to maintain *ma’at*, to keep things in order and harmony. The king’s presence meant that cosmic order reigned and that the kingdom was protected against forces of disorder and destruction.

Like the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians believed in many gods, but in Egypt the gods were not prone to punish men and women without reason. Because the Nile River flooded regularly and predictably, each year leaving behind rich soil deposits, the natural world seemed far less harsh and erratic to the Egyptians. They thus regarded their gods as largely helpful. Ordinary Egyptians tended to pray to minor household gods, such as Tauret, portrayed as a pregnant hippopotamus who protected women during childbirth. Official religion, however, centered on the major state gods, worshiped and housed in monumental temples across the kingdom. The sun god Re was one of the most important Egyptian deities. Re journeyed across the sky every day in a boat, rested at night, and returned in the morning to resume his eternal journey. By endlessly repeating the cycle of rising and setting, the sun symbolized the harmonious order of the universe that Re established. Evil, however, in the form of Apopis, a serpent god whose coils could trap Re’s boat like a reed in the Nile, constantly threatened this order. Re’s cosmic journey could continue only if *ma’at* was maintained.

The Pyramids One spectacular feature of Egyptian religion in the Old Kingdom was the construction of pyramids. These elaborate monuments reflected Egyptian emphasis on the afterlife. The earliest pyramids, erected around 2680 B.C.E., were elaborate temples in which priests worshiped statues of the king surrounded by the enormous mud-brick monument. The pyramid contained compartments where the king could dwell in the afterlife in the same luxury he enjoyed during his life on Earth. King Djoser (2668–2649 B.C.E.) built the first pyramid complex, and the world’s first monumental stone building, at Saqqara near Memphis. Known today as the Step Pyramid (pictured on p. 34), this structure rests above Djoser’s burial place.
and rises high into the air in six steps, which represent a ladder to Heaven.

In the centuries after Djoser’s reign, kings continued building pyramids for themselves and smaller ones for their queens, with each tomb becoming more architecturally sophisticated. The walls grew taller and steeper and contained hidden burial chambers and treasure rooms. The Great Pyramid at Giza, built around 2600 B.C.E. by King Khufu (or Cheops), was the largest human-made structure in the ancient world. It consists of more than two million stones that weigh an average of two and a half tons each. Covering 13 acres, it reaches over 480 feet into the sky.

Building the pyramid complexes was a long and costly task. In addition to the architects, painters, sculptors, carpenters, and other specialists employed on the site throughout the year, stone masons supervised the quarrying and transport of the colossal building blocks. Peasants, who were organized into work gangs and paid and fed by the king, provided the heavy labor when the Nile flooded their fields every year. As many as 70,000 workers out of a total population estimated at 1.5 million sweated on the pyramids every day. Entire cities sprang up around pyramid building sites to house the workmen, artisans, and farmers. The construction of elaborate pyramids stopped after 2400 B.C.E., probably because of the expense, but smaller burial structures continued to be built for centuries.
CHAPTER 1  The Beginnings of Civilization, 10,000–1150 B.C.E.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER IN THE OLD KINGDOM  The king and the royal family stood at the top of the Old Kingdom’s social and political hierarchy. As a god on earth, the king possessed absolute authority. All of Egypt—all the land, every resource, every person—technically belonged to the king. Yet royal Egyptians were not free to act in any way they might choose. Maintaining ma’at meant following carefully regulated rituals at almost all times. The rules that governed royalty differed from those for commoners. Kings, for example, had many wives and frequently married their daughters and sisters, whereas ordinary Egyptians were monogamous (a man took only one wife) and married outside the family.

Below the royal family stood the nobility, made up of priests, court officials, and provincial governors. Men in these ranks carried out the king’s orders. Egypt, like the Mesopotamian empires, was a redistributive economy. The kings’ officials collected Egypt’s produce and redistributed it throughout the kingdom. The job of keeping records of the kings’ possessions and supervising food production fell to the scribes, who were trained in hieroglyphic writing. Hieroglyphs (literally “sacred carvings”) represented both sounds (as in our alphabet) and objects (as in a pictorial system). Learning the hundreds of signs for literary or administrative purposes took years of schooling. It was worth the effort, however, for knowledge of hieroglyphs gave scribes great power. For 3,000 years, these royal bureaucrats kept the machinery of Egyptian government running despite the rise and fall of dynasties.

Ordinary Egyptians fell into three categories: skilled artisans, peasants, and slaves. Craftsmen and skilled workers such as millers and stone masons stood below the nobility on the social ladder. Employed in large workshops owned by the king or nobility, the craftsmen served the privileged classes above them. Below them were the peasants, who not only farmed, but also labored on public works such as temples, roads, and irrigation projects. As in medieval Europe, these peasants were tied to the land: They could not leave the estates that they farmed for the king or nobility, and if the land was sold, they passed on to the new owner as well. Slaves occupied the bottom of the social ladder. They toiled on monumental building projects as well as within the temples and royal palaces. Slavery, however, was not dominant in the Egyptian economy. Free Egyptians did most of the work.

Free Egyptian women—whether from the nobility or the skilled artisans—possessed clear rights. They could buy and sell property, make contracts, sue in court, and own their own businesses. In a marriage, the husband and wife were regarded as equals. Women dominated certain occupations, such as spinning and weaving, and even worked as doctors.

WHERE IS MA’AT? THE COLLAPSE OF THE OLD KINGDOM  Around 2200 B.C.E. the Old Kingdom collapsed, perhaps because terrible droughts lowered the level of the Nile. Famine followed. The king could no longer maintain ma’at, and the political order collapsed. For 200 years, anarchy and civil war raged in Egypt during what historians call the First Intermediate Period.

The chaos and disorder of the First Intermediate Period resulted in a significant religious and cultural shift. The optimism that had characterized Egyptian culture gave way to uncertainty and even pessimism as Egyptians wondered how to restore ma’at in a world so out of balance:

Whom can I trust today?
Hearts are greedy,
And every man steals his neighbor’s goods.14

In their quest to make sense out of the chaos, Egyptian writers began to emphasize rewards in the afterlife as recompense for righteous action here on earth. In the Old Kingdom, Egyptians had sought to act justly in accordance with ma’at because they were confident that right action would be rewarded
in the here and now. In the new climate of turmoil and hunger, however, they found comfort in the idea that although the good suffered in their earthly life, they would be rewarded in the life to come. During this period, the Egyptians developed the concept of a final judgment—the earliest known instance of such an idea in human history. After death, a person’s heart would be weighed in the balance against ma’at. Those who tipped the scales—those who failed the test—would be consumed by the Devourer, a god with a crocodile’s head. But those who passed would live like gods in the afterlife. (See Different Voices in this chapter.)

**The Middle Kingdom** The First Intermediate Period ended when the governors of Thebes, a city in Upper Egypt, set out to reunify the kingdom. In 2040 B.C.E., Mentuhotep II (r. 2060–2010 B.C.E.) established a vigorous new monarchy, initiating the Middle Kingdom. (See Map 1.5.) He and his successors restored ma’at to Egypt: They rebuilt the power of the monarchy, reestablished centralized control, and repaired Egypt’s commercial and diplomatic links to southwest Asia. Prosperity and stability returned.

Yet the Middle Kingdom was not a reincarnation of the Old Kingdom. The chaos of the First Intermediate Period modified political ideas and social relations. The king was no longer an omnipotent god. Capable of making mistakes and even of being afraid, the Middle Kingdom monarch appeared in texts as a lonely figure, seeking to serve as a good shepherd to his people. With this new concept of kingship came a slightly altered social order, with the nobility possessing more power and autonomy than in the Old Kingdom.

New developments also marked religion. With the return of ma’at—with life on earth more prosperous and stable—Egyptians began to see the final judgment as more of a problem that needed to be solved than as a source of comfort. How could one enjoy life and yet be assured of living like a god for eternity, rather than being consumed by the Devourer? To be sure that they passed the final judgment, Egyptians had themselves buried with special scarabs. A scarab is a small figure of a dung beetle, but these funeral scarabs featured human heads and carried magic incantations or charms. This powerful magic prevented the heart from testifying against the individual when it was weighed in the final judgment. In other words, it was a kind of false weight, a finger on the scales, a way to deceive the gods and ensure passage to the afterlife.

**Encounters with Other Civilizations** While Egypt’s position between two deserts guaranteed its military security, it did not isolate Egypt from the rest of the ancient world. During both the Old and Middle Kingdoms, Egyptian kings forged an economic network that included trading cities in the Levant, Minoan Crete (see Chapter 2), the southern Red Sea area called Punt, and Mesopotamia. To protect the trade routes along which raw materials and luxury goods were imported, rulers did not hesitate to use force. They also, however, used diplomacy to stimulate trade.

Egyptian interactions with Nubia (modern Sudan) were particularly important. Rich in gold and other natural resources, Nubia also benefited from its location at the nexus of trade routes from central and eastern Africa. Agents of Egyptian rulers, called Keepers of the Gateway of the South, tried to protect this trade by keeping the peace with the warlike Nubian tribes. Slowly, Egyptian monarchs made their presence more permanent. King Mentuhotep II, whose reign marked the start of the Middle Kingdom, not only reunified Egypt but also gained control of Lower Nubia. This expansion of Egyptian control ensured the free flow of Nubian resources northward. Around 1900 B.C.E., King Amenemhet built ten forts at strategic locations where trade routes from the interior of Africa reached the Nile River. These forts reinforced Egyptian access to Nubian gold, ivory, and other natural resources.
DIFFERENT VOICES EXPLAINING EVIL IN ANCIENT TIMES

The gap that separates twenty-first-century Western readers from the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt is huge, and yet some of their questions sound familiar: Why do the good and the just suffer? Where do we turn for hope when life seems hopeless? The two documents below offer different responses to evil times. The first is an excerpt from a lengthy poem inscribed on four tablets during the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia. The Akkadian era was generally prosperous, but as this document shows, daily survival remained difficult for many. The second document comes from the tumultuous intermediate period following the collapse of Egypt’s Old Kingdom. The writer may have been king of one of the fragmented states that emerged as the Old Kingdom disintegrated. In The Instructions for Merikare, he shares with his son the lessons he has learned in a world gone mad.

I. From Mesopotamia: I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom

Attracted by Egypt’s stability and prosperity, peoples from different lands settled in the Nile Valley. They took Egyptian names and assimilated into Egyptian culture. The government settled these immigrants, as well as war captives, throughout the kingdom where they could mix quickly with the local inhabitants. This willingness to accept newcomers into their kingdom lent Egyptian civilization even more vibrancy.

Immigrants from Canaan (modern-day Lebanon, Israel, and parts of Jordan and Syria) played a significant role in Egyptian history toward the end of the Middle Kingdom. Around 1720 B.C.E., centralized state control began to deteriorate (for reasons that remain unclear), and Canaanites began to seize political control over the regions in which they had settled. A century of political decentralization and chaos—the
Where have humans learned the way of a god? He who was alive yesterday is dead today…. As for me, exhausted, a windstorm is driving me on! Debilitating Disease is let loose upon me; An Evil Wind has blown [from the] horizon, Headache has sprung up from the surface of the underworld…. Feebleness has overcome my whole body, An attack of illness has fallen upon my flesh.

II. From Egypt: The Instruction for Merikare
Be just that you may prosper upon the earth; soothe the weeper, do not oppress the widow; Do not deprive a man of his father's goods nor interfere with high officials in their functions. Beware of punishing unfairly, and cause no injury—that will not help you!… The Conclave of the gods that judges suffering Man— you know They are not lenient On that day of judging the poor wretch, in that hour of weighing out his life. and it is painful when the guilty is a wise man. Do not fill your heart with length of years, for They see lifetimes in an hour. A man lives on after his final mooring, and his deeds are heaped beside him. Existence over There is certainly forever, and one who takes it lightly is a fool; But one who reaches there free of wrong doing— he shall live on like a god, wide-striding like the Lords of all eternity.


For Discussion
1. What picture of Akkadian religious practice can we draw from the first document?
2. In this excerpt from I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom, the anonymous author files a sort of cosmic complaint. What grievance does he present?
3. In the second excerpt, what advice does the king offer to his son Merikare? What does he want his son to understand?
4. How does The Instruction for Merikare demonstrate the new religious concepts that the Egyptians developed in response to the disappearance of political stability and economic prosperity during the First Intermediate Period?
5. Each of these documents reveals timeless existential concerns, but how do they point to the specific historical contexts in which they were written?

Second Intermediate Period—ensued, with even larger groups of Canaanite immigrants settling in Egypt's Delta region:

Foreigners have become people [i.e. Egyptians] everywhere…. See now, the land is deprived of kingship by a few men who ignore custom.15

By approximately 1650 B.C.E., one of these Canaanite groups had established control over the entire northern delta region and forced the Egyptian rulers there to pay them tribute. The era of Hyksos rule had begun. Although Hyksos meant “rulers of foreign lands” in Egyptian, the Hyksos dynasty (ca. 1650–1540 B.C.E.) quickly assimilated Egyptian culture. They used Egyptian
names and symbols, worshiped Egyptian gods, and employed native Egyptians to staff their bureaucracies and keep their state records—in Egyptian hieroglyphs.

But the Hyksos, and the Canaanite immigrant community from which they emerged, not only absorbed Egyptian ways, they also transformed them. Canaanite immigrants brought with them into Egypt a vital skill: the ability to make bronze. An alloy of copper and tin, bronze is much harder and lasts much longer than either copper or tin alone. From about 3500 B.C.E. when people living in northern Syria and Iraq began making bronze, the technology spread slowly throughout southwest Asia. Archaeologists talk about the “Early Bronze Age” (roughly 3500–2000 B.C.E.), the “Middle Bronze Age” (ca. 2000–1550 B.C.E.), and the “Late Bronze Age” (ca. 1500–1100 B.C.E.). It was in the Middle Bronze Age, then, that Canaanite immigrants introduced bronze to Egypt. Bronze meant new possibilities in agricultural, craft production—and war.

In particular, bronze made possible the horse-drawn light chariot. This advanced military technology was already revolutionizing warfare throughout southwest Asia, Anatolia, and Greece when the Hyksos brought it to Egypt. Unlike earlier chariots, the Bronze Age model featured only two wheels fixed to an axle for easier maneuvering. Bronze spokes made the wheels more durable. Two men wearing bronze chain-mail armor rode into battle on each chariot, one driving the horses, the other shooting bronze-tipped arrows at the enemy. Troops of trained charioteers and bowmen easily outmaneuvered the traditional massed infantry forces and inflicted terrible casualties on them from a distance.

Chariot warfare reshaped the economic policies and foreign relations of Egypt, its rivals, and its allies. Imperial systems of governing and revenue collection became more sophisticated and centralized as rulers sought to meet the expenses of training and supplying armies of charioteers by expanding their economic resources. As a result, empires flourished as never before. Archaeologists thus see the period after approximately 1500 B.C.E. as a new era, the “Late Bronze Age,” a period of unprecedented imperial stability and international exchange. In Chapter 2, we will examine the international structures of this period in detail. In the section below, we continue the story of Egypt as it reemerged as a great power.

The New Kingdom: The Egyptian Empire in the Late Bronze Age

Egypt's New Kingdom began about 1550 B.C.E., when King Ahmose I (r. ca. 1550–ca. 1525 B.C.E.) expelled the Hyksos from Egypt. During the New Kingdom, Egypt’s kings first took the title pharaoh, which means “great house”—or master of all Egyptians. As Map 1.5 shows, Ahmose's new dynasty not only reasserted the monarch’s authority and rebuilt the power of the central state, it also pushed Egypt’s territorial boundaries into Asia as far as the Euphrates River.

Building an Empire: Military Conquest and Territorial Expansion A large standing army made the New Kingdom conquests possible. Trained in the new chariot warfare and equipped with the composite bow (long known in Mesopotamia, but introduced into Egypt during the New Kingdom), Egypt’s army was a mighty fighting force. One man in every ten in every village was forced into military service. Egyptian officers supplemented these troops with both mercenaries hired abroad and soldiers recruited in conquered regions of Palestine and Syria.

Egyptian attitudes toward non-Egyptians also encouraged the imperial expansion of the New Kingdom. Egyptians divided the world into two groups: themselves (whom they referred to as “The People”) and everyone else. Egyptians believed that forces of chaos resided in foreign lands where the pharaoh had not yet imposed his will. Thus, it was the pharaoh’s responsibility to crush all foreign peoples and bring order to the world.

In their drive to establish order in the world, Egyptian rulers in the New Kingdom clashed with kingdoms in Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Under the dynamic leadership of Thutmose I (r. 1504–1492 B.C.E.), the armies of
Egypt conquered southern Palestine. A coalition of Syrian cities slowed further advance, but by the end of the reign of the great conqueror, Thutmose III (r. 1458–1425 B.C.E.), Egypt had extended its control over the entire western coast (see Map 1.5). Thutmose III led his armies into Canaan 17 times and strengthened the empire’s hold on it and Syria. Canaan proved an economic asset, both because of its own natural resources and because it was a vital trading center with ties to Mesopotamia and beyond.

The New Kingdom also regained control over Nubia about 1500 B.C.E. To strengthen their grip on the area, pharaohs encouraged Egyptians to establish communities along the Nile River there. These Egyptian colonies exploited the fertile river lands in Nubia for the benefit of the pharaoh.

**KEEPING AN EMPIRE: ADMINISTRATIVE AND DIPLOMATIC INNOVATION** The Egyptians amassed a vast empire with military might. They maintained it with administrative skill and diplomatic innovation. In the New Kingdom, the pharaoh’s bureaucracy divided Egypt into two major administrative regions: Upper Egypt in the south, governed from the city of Thebes, and Lower Egypt in the north, ruled from the city of Memphis. Regional administrators raised taxes and drafted men to fight in the army and work on the pharaoh’s building projects. The chief minister of state, the vizier, superintended the administration of the entire kingdom. Every year he decided when to open the canal locks on the Nile to irrigate farmers’ fields. He supervised the Egyptian treasury and the warehouses into which produce was paid as taxes.

New Kingdom pharaohs also relied on diplomacy to control their vast realm. They corresponded frequently with their provincial governors, the leaders of their vassal states, and the rulers of other great states. These letters testify that the Egyptian monarchs used trade privileges and political benefits as much as military coercion to control restless subordinates and interact with neighboring realms.

**CONTINUITY IN THE NEW KINGDOM** During the New Kingdom, many of the characteristics of life under the Old and Middle Kingdom continued unchanged. The basic social hierarchy remained intact, with village-based peasants laboring on the land owned by the royal family, priests of the major temples, and nobility. Both the pharaoh’s government and the major temples continued to administer the redistributive economy by collecting taxes in the form of produce and paying the peasants who labored on their building projects and estates from their storehouses. The temple of the god Amun at Karnak, for example, controlled over 100,000 workers.

In the New Kingdom, as in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, monumental architecture remained a focal point of political and religious life. Amenhotep III (r. 1388–1350) constructed both an enormous palace for himself and a gigantic burial temple, with a large open solar court as its sanctuary and two 64-foot high statues of the pharaoh flanking the entryway. Ramesses II (r. 1279–1212 B.C.E.) ornamented his long reign by building the Great Temple at Abu Simbel in Nubia. Four 65-foot high statues of the pharaoh guard the entrance to the temple. The sanctuary penetrates over 200 feet into the mountainside, where four gigantic statues of the four gods sit. Twice a year (on February 21 and October 21), the rising sun shines directly through the entrance and falls right on three of the statues; the fourth, the god of the underworld, remains in the shadows.

Women maintained their position in Egyptian society in the New Kingdom. They had complete equality with men in matters of property, business, and inheritance. Some women held priesthoods. The most powerful, the “God’s Wife of Amun,” was often a member of the royal family. This priestess had administrative responsibilities as well as the obligation to perform religious rituals.

**CHANGE IN THE NEW KINGDOM** While there was much continuity between the New Kingdom and its predecessors, at two points in its history the New Kingdom took a new direction. In the
first, Egypt came under the rule of a remarkable woman; in the second, of a religious visionary.

In 1479 B.C.E. the pharaoh Thutmose II (ca. 1491–1479 B.C.E.) died. His son—by a subordinate wife—and successor, Thutmose III, was a child, so Thutmose II’s chief wife and half-sister, Hatshepsut, became regent for the child-king. While Hatshepsut at first kept the titles often associated with the pharaoh’s wife, such as “God’s Wife,” within two years she claimed the title of pharaoh. Evidence indicates that women had ruled Egypt on four earlier occasions, but these women may have been only regents and so not recognized as kings. In contrast, Hatshepsut clearly claimed to be, and was acclaimed as, pharaoh.

Because pharaohs had always been men, all of the images of kingly power were male, and the elaborate royal rituals presumed a male ruler. Hatshepsut adapted her image to these expectations. For example, in most inscriptions she is referred to by masculine titles and pronouns, and most of her statues depict her as a man, complete with a ceremonial beard. On some statues, however, Hatshepsut does appear as a woman, and in some inscriptions she is called “Daughter [rather than Son] of Re.”

Hatshepsut ruled for over 20 years. Like most male pharaohs, she waged war when necessary, including a major campaign in Nubia, but most of her reign was peaceful. When she died about 1458 B.C.E., Thutmose III took the throne. Late in his 30-year reign, he ordered that Hatshepsut’s name be chiseled off monuments throughout Egypt and all her statues be destroyed. Why he did so is a mystery. Because Thutmose waited so long to try to erase the evidence of Hatshepsut’s rule, it seems unlikely that he was angry at her for becoming king. A more convincing explanation is that

HATSHEPSUT: IMAGE AND REALITY

Although she was a woman, tradition required that Hatshepsut be depicted as a man, as in this statue where she wears the pharaoh’s customary beard. In 2007, archaeologists discovered Hatshepsut’s mummy. Research revealed that the queen was between ages 45 and 60 when she died, that she had cancer, and that she was quite obese.

Egypt: The Empire of the Nile

Thutmose was attempting to fulfill his basic duty as Egypt’s king: to maintain ma’at. Hatshepsut’s reign may have seemed too disorderly, too much of a change from the proper way of doing things. And so, to inform the gods that Egypt had returned to “proper” male kingship, Thutmose III ordered Hatshepsut erased from history.

Thutmose may have regarded the memory of Hatshepsut’s reign as a danger to ma’at. It was, however, a stable era, in contrast to the second point at which the New Kingdom took a short, sharp change in direction. During the reign of Amenhotep IV (r. 1351–1334 B.C.E.), Egypt experienced a religious revolution. His father, Amenhotep III (r. 1388–1351 B.C.E.), had emphasized worship of Aten, the solar disc associated with the sun god Re, during his years on the throne. Building on this emphasis, Amenhotep IV, changed his own name to Akhenaten (“one useful to Aten”) and declared that Aten was not just the supreme god, but the only god.

Akhenaten attacked the worship of other gods, dismissed priests, closed temples, and appropriated their wealth and lands for himself. He forbade the celebration of ancient public festivals to the other gods and even the mention of their names, which his agents chiseled from monuments and buildings. Full of religious enthusiasm, Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti, abandoned the capital of Thebes and built a new city where no temple had ever stood. Because the modern name for this site is Tell el-Amarna, historians refer to this period of religious ferment as the Amarna Period.

Because Akhenaten forbade the worship of other gods, some historians have argued that the Egyptians in the Amarna Period were the first people in history to develop monotheism, the idea of a single, all-powerful god. Yet this ignores the importance of pharaoh worship in Akhenaten’s new religion. Akhenaten insisted that he and Nefertiti be worshiped as gods. Rather than inventing monotheism, then, Akhenaten may have been trying to restore the Old Kingdom conception of the king as a divine being.

Whatever Akhenaten’s intentions or personal beliefs, his religious revolution proved

MUMMY OF RAMSES II

Both a science and an art, mummification preserved the body of King Ramesses II (r. 1279–1213 B.C.E.) for more than 3,000 years. Using a metal hook, embalmers extracted the brains through the nostrils. Sometimes they filled the skull with linen cloth and resin. Through an incision below the ribs, they removed all the organs except for the heart, which represented a person’s life and would be examined by the gods on Judgment Day. The embalmers then dried the corpse by packing it with natrum, a natural compound of sodium carbonate and bicarbonate. After adding hairpieces and artificial eyes, the embalmers applied a layer of resin over the face and body, followed by a coat of paint—red for men and yellow for women.

Source: The Art Archive / Egyptian Museum Cairo/Dagli Orti
short-lived. Because ordinary Egyptians were unwilling to abandon the many traditional gods who played an important role in their daily lives, the priests whose power Akhenaten had undermined succeeded in arousing opposition to the reforms. After Akhenaten's death, the royal court returned to Memphis. The new pharaoh, Tutankhamun (r. 1334–1325 B.C.E.), rebuilt the temples destroyed by Akhenaten’s agents and returned the revenue that Akhenaten had appropriated from the priests. Egypt turned back to its traditional religious beliefs and practices, and ma'at was restored.

In the twelfth century B.C.E., however, Egypt slipped into a long decline. Drought, poor harvests, and inflation ruined the Egyptian economy, while weak rulers struggled to hold the kingdom together. But as we will see in Chapter 2, domestic developments alone do not explain the collapse of the New Kingdom. Around 1150 B.C.E., the interconnected societies of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean coast, as well as Egypt, experienced economic hardship and political fragmentation. The prosperity and stability of the Late Bronze Age abruptly disappeared. In the next chapter we will look closely at the factors that shaped this period of prosperity, the developments that brought it to an end, and the kingdoms that emerged in its aftermath.
**CONCLUSION**

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**Civilization and the West**

During the millennia covered in this chapter, early Europeans such as Ötzi the Ice Man learned to control and capitalize on nature in many ways—cultivating crops, domesticating animals, and smelting copper. Linked by trade networks, their villages were growing larger and their societies more stratified and specialized. Even so, most of Europe did not make the leap into civilization during the third and second millennia B.C.E., and “the West” did not yet exist. The idea of “Western civilization” as both a geographic and cultural designation emerged much later, with the Greeks (see Chapter 3) who used the term *Europe* to designate the West—and who, like us, were often unclear about the West’s actual boundaries.

Yet in areas that we often regard as outside the boundaries of the West, in Iraq and in Egypt, Western civilization had its beginnings. From the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations, the West inherited such crucial components as systems of writing and numeracy, and the core of its legal traditions. These civilizations also left a treasury of religious stories and ideas that, adapted and revised by a small, relatively powerless people called the Hebrews, became the foundational ethic of Western civilization. That development, within the context of the collapse of the International Bronze Age, is one of the main themes of Chapter 2.

**KEY TERMS**

- Neolithic Age
- culture
- civilization
- *Homo sapiens sapiens*
- Levantine Corridor
- Fertile Crescent
- megaliths
- redistributive economies
- empire
- composite bow
- polytheism
- ziggurat
- divination
- deduction
- cuneiform
- Law Code of Hammurabi
- patriarchy
- *ma’at*
- Old Kingdom
- hieroglyph
- Middle Kingdom
- bronze
- New Kingdom
- pharaoh
- vizier
- Amarna Period
- monotheism

**CHAPTER QUESTIONS**

1. What is the link between the food-producing revolution of the Neolithic era and the emergence of civilizations? (page 11)
2. What changes and continuities characterized Mesopotamian civilization between the emergence of Sumer’s city-states and the rise of Hammurabi’s Babylonian empire? (page 17)
3. What distinctive features characterized Egyptian civilization throughout its long history? (page 29)

**TAKING IT FURTHER**

1. Each of the cultures studied in this chapter developed a distinctive architectural form: the megalith, the ziggurat, and the pyramid. What do they tell us about the societies that built them?
2. Sargon was the first empire builder in history. How did he do it? Why did he do it?
3. How and why did Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural and religious patterns differ? Which is the more striking, the differences between them or the parallels?