The foundations of Western Civilization in the Ancient World

1,000,000–2200 B.C.E.

**Politics & Government**

- ca. 3100–2700 B.C.E.: Egyptian Early Dynastic Period; unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
- ca. 2800–2340 B.C.E.: Sumerian city-states’ Early Dynastic period
- 2700–2200 B.C.E.: Egyptian Old Kingdom
- ca. 2370 B.C.E.: Sargon established Akkadian Empire

**Society & Economy**

- ca. 1,000,000–10,000 B.C.E.: Paleolithic Age
- ca. 8,000 B.C.E.: Earliest Neolithic settlements
- ca. 3500 B.C.E.: Earliest Sumerian settlements
- ca. 3000 B.C.E.: First urban settlements in Egypt and Mesopotamia; Bronze Age begins in Mesopotamia and Egypt
- ca. 2900–1150 B.C.E.: Bronze Age Minoan society on Crete; Helladic society on Greek mainland

**Religion & Culture**

- ca. 30,000–5000 B.C.E.: Paleolithic art
- ca. 6000 B.C.E.: Invention of writing
- ca. 3000 B.C.E.: Temples to gods in Mesopotamia; development of ziggurat temple architecture
- 2700–2200 B.C.E.: Building of pyramids for Egyptian god-kings, development of hieroglyphic writing in Egypt

2200–1600 B.C.E.

- 2200–2052 B.C.E.: Egyptian First Intermediate Period
- 2052–1786 B.C.E.: Egyptian Middle Kingdom
- 1792–1750 B.C.E.: Reign of Hammurabi; height of Old Babylonian Kingdom; publication of Code of Hammurabi
- 1786–1575 B.C.E.: Egyptian Second Intermediate Period
- ca. 1700 B.C.E.: Hyksos’ Invasion of Egypt

**Timeline Chart**

- Head of Sargon the Great
- Stele of Hammurabi
- Venus of Willendorf
- Chauvet cave painting panel with horses
- Sumerian clay tablet
500–336 B.C.E.  

**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**
- 490 B.C.E.: Battle of Marathon
- 485–465 B.C.E.: Reign of Xerxes in Persia
- 480–479 B.C.E.: Xerxes invades Greece
- 478–477 B.C.E.: Delian League founded
- ca. 460–445 B.C.E.: First Peloponnesian War
- 450–449 B.C.E.: Laws of the Twelve Tables, Rome
- 431–404 B.C.E.: Great Peloponnesian War
- 404–403 B.C.E.: Thirty Tyrants rule at Athens
- 400–387 B.C.E.: Spartan war against Persia
- 398–386 B.C.E.: Reign of Agesilaus at Sparta
- 395–387 B.C.E.: Corinthian War
- 392 B.C.E.: Romans defeat Etruscans
- 378 B.C.E.: Second Athenian Confederation
- 371 B.C.E.: Thebans end Spartan hegemony
- 362 B.C.E.: Battle of Mantinea; end of Theban hegemony
- 338 B.C.E.: Philip of Macedon conquers Greece

336–323 B.C.E.  

**SOCIETY & ECONOMY**
- ca. 500–350 B.C.E.: Spartan population shrinks
- ca. 500–350 B.C.E.: Rapid growth in overseas trade
- 477–431 B.C.E.: Vast growth in Athenian wealth
- 431–400 B.C.E.: Peloponnesian War casualties cause decline in size of lower class in Athens, with relative increase in importance of upper and middle classes

323–301 B.C.E.  

**RELIGION & CULTURE**
- 342–271 B.C.E.: Life of Epicurus
- 335–263 B.C.E.: Life of Zeno the Stoic
- 287 B.C.E.: Laws passed by Plebeian Assembly made binding on all Romans; end of Struggle of the Orders
- 264–261 B.C.E.: First Punic War
- 218–202 B.C.E.: Second Punic War
- 215–168 B.C.E.: Rome establishes rule over Hellenistic world
- 154–133 B.C.E.: Roman wars in Spain
- 133 B.C.E.: Tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus
- 123–122 B.C.E.: Tribunate of Gaius Gracchus
- 82 B.C.E.: Sulla assumes dictatorship
- 60 B.C.E.: First Triumvirate
- 46–44 B.C.E.: Caesar's dictatorship
- 43 B.C.E.: Second Triumvirate

**GROWTH OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE**
- ca. 300 B.C.E.: Growth of international trade
- 150 B.C.E.: and development of large cities in Hellenistic/Roman world

**DECLINE OF FAMILY FARM IN ITALY**
- ca. 218–135 B.C.E.: Decline of family farm in Italy; growth of tenant farming and cattle ranching

**GROWTH OF SLavery AS BASIS OF ECONOMY IN ROMAN REPUBLIC**
- ca. 150 B.C.E.: Growth of slavery as basis of economy in Roman Republic

**Society & Economy**

**Politics & Government**

**Religion & Culture**

**Timeline**

**Part One**

**The Foundations of Western Civilization in the Ancient World**
### 31 B.C.E.–400 C.E.

<table>
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<th>Event</th>
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<td>Octavian and Agrippa defeat Anthony at Actium</td>
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<td>27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.</td>
<td>Reign of Augustus</td>
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<td>330 C.E.</td>
<td>Constantinople new capital of Roman Empire</td>
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<td>351–363 C.E.</td>
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<td>376 C.E.</td>
<td>Visigoths enter Roman Empire</td>
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<td>9 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Ara Pacis dedicated at Rome</td>
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<td>ca. 4 B.C.E.</td>
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<td>ca. 70–100 C.E.</td>
<td>Gospels written</td>
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<td>ca. 150 C.E.</td>
<td>Ptolemy of Alexandria establishes canonical geocentric model of the universe</td>
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<td>ca. 250–260 C.E.</td>
<td>Severe persecutions by Decius and Valerian</td>
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<td>303 C.E.</td>
<td>Persecution of Christians by Diocletian</td>
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<td>311 C.E.</td>
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<td>344–420 C.E.</td>
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<td>395 C.E.</td>
<td>Christianity becomes official religion of Roman Empire</td>
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**Image Descriptions:**
- **Roman amphitheatre**
- **Ara Pacis**
- **Columns of Hellenistic gymnasium**
- **Roman fleet of Octavian**
- **Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome**
- **Ara Pacis**

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**Note:** The table provides a chronological overview of significant events in the Roman Empire from 31 B.C.E. to 400 C.E., including political, religious, and cultural developments.
The Birth of Civilization

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Early Humans and Their Culture During the Paleolithic period, human communities revolved around hunting and gathering. The domestication of animals and plants for food began around 10,000 B.C.E. and marked the beginning of the Neolithic period. Civilization emerged first in Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age (3100–1200 B.C.E.).

Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E. Civilization in southern Mesopotamia was founded by the Sumerians. Semitic Akkadians from northern Babylonia established the first empire in history. Egypt’s pharaohs united the lands along the Nile.

Ancient Middle Eastern Empires Between 1400 and 1200 B.C.E., the Hittites were the dominant power in the Middle East. Under pressure from outside invaders, the Hittite kingdom collapsed around 1200 B.C.E. The Assyrian military supported a large Middle Eastern empire that lasted from about 1000–600 B.C.E. After its fall, a short-lived Neo-Babylonian empire rose to take its place.

The Persian Empire The Persian Empire arose in the region now called Iran. Under Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, the Persians built a powerful empire. The Persians responded to the challenge of controlling a vast and diverse population by developing sophisticated governmental and administrative institutions. By the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., Zoroastrianism had become the chief religion of the Persians. The Persians adapted the art and culture of conquered peoples to fit their own needs and values.

Palestine Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all owe many of their beliefs and practices to the Israelites. Under Moses the Israelites conquered Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C.E. and their kingdom reached its peak in the tenth century B.C.E. during the reigns of David and Solomon before splintering. The coastal Phoenicians developed the predecessor of the alphabet we use today.

General Outlook of Middle Eastern Cultures Most people of the ancient Middle East believed that humans were inseparable from nature and the gods were powerful and capricious. The Hebrew God reflected a different perspective on humanity’s relationship with nature and with divine power.

Toward the Greeks and Western Thought By the sixth century B.C.E., some Greeks started thinking about the world in ways that became the hallmark of Western civilization. Western philosophy, science, history, medicine, law, and democracy all have roots in the civilization of the ancient Greeks.
CHAPTER QUESTIONS

HOW DID life in the Neolithic Age differ from the Paleolithic?

WHY DID the first cities develop?

WHAT WERE the great empires of the ancient Middle East?

HOW WAS Hebrew monotheism different from Mesopotamian and Egyptian polytheism?

WHAT WERE the Persian rulers’ attitudes toward the cultures they ruled?

WHAT SOCIAL and political contrasts existed between ancient Middle Eastern and Greek civilizations?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

• Early Humans and Their Culture
• Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.
• Ancient Middle Eastern Empires
• The Persian Empire
• Palestine
• General Outlook of Middle Eastern Cultures
• Toward the Greeks and Western Thought
For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings lived by hunting and gathering what nature spontaneously provided. Only about 10,000 years ago did they begin to cultivate plants, domesticate animals, and settle in permanent communities. About 5,000 years ago, the Sumerians, who lived near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (a region Greek geographers called “Mesopotamia,” i.e., “between-rivers”), and the Egyptians, who dwell in the Nile Valley, pioneered civilization. By the fourteenth century B.C.E., powerful empires had arisen and were struggling for dominance of the civilized world, but one of the region’s smaller states probably had a greater influence on the course of Western civilization. The modern West’s major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are rooted in the traditions of ancient Israel.

EARLY HUMANS AND THEIR CULTURE

Scientists estimate that Earth may be 6 billion years old and its human inhabitants have been developing for 3 to 5 million years. Some 1 to 2 million years ago, erect tool-using beings spread from their probable place of origin in Africa to Europe and Asia. Our own species, *Homo sapiens*, is about 200,000 years old, and fully modern humans have existed for about 90,000 years.

Humans are distinguished by a unique capacity to construct cultures. A culture may be defined as a way of life invented by a group and passed on by teaching. It includes both material things (tools, clothing, and shelter) and ideas, institutions, and beliefs. Because cultural behaviors are guided by learning rather than instinct, they can be altered at will to enable human beings to adapt rapidly to different environments and changing conditions.

THE PALEOLITHIC AGE

Anthropologists identify prehistoric human cultures by the styles of their most durable and plentiful artifacts—stone tools. The earliest period in cultural development—the Paleolithic (Greek for “old stone”) Age—began with the first use of stone tools about a million years ago and continued until about 10,000 B.C.E. Throughout this immensely long era, people were nomadic hunters and gatherers who depended for their food on what nature spontaneously offered. An uncertain food supply and the inability of human beings to understand or control the mysterious forces that threatened their existence persuaded them that they occupied a world governed by superhuman powers. Cave art, ritual burial practices, and other evidences of religious or magical beliefs appeared during the Paleolithic era, and they bear witness to a suspicion as old as humanity itself that there is more to the world than meets the eye.

Human society in the Paleolithic Age was probably based on a division of labor by sex. Males ranged far afield on the hunt. Females, whose mobility was limited by the burdens of childbearing and nursing, gathered edibles of various kinds in the vicinity of a base camp. The knowledge that people acquired as hunters and gatherers eventually equipped them to develop agriculture and herding, and these food-producing technologies drastically changed the human lifestyle.

1This book substitutes B.C.E. (“before the common era”) and C.E. (“common era”) for B.C. and A.D., and it uses the term “Middle East” in preference to “Near East.”
The Neolithic Age

About 10,000 years ago, people living in some parts of the Middle East made advances in the production of stone tools that marked the start of the Neolithic (i.e., “new stone”) Age. But more significant than their tool-making technology was their shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture. They began to domesticate the wild species of sheep, goats, wheat, and barley that were native to the foothills of the region’s mountains. Once domesticated, these species were transplanted to areas where they did not naturally occur.

Hunters and gatherers maintain their food supply by harvesting a district and then moving on, but farmers settle down next to the fields they cultivate. They establish villages, construct relatively permanent dwellings, and produce pottery in which to cook and store the grains they raise. The earliest Neolithic settlements featured small circular huts clustered around a central storehouse. Later Neolithic people built larger rectangular homes with private storage facilities and enclosures for livestock. The similarity in size and equipment of buildings suggests that a Neolithic village’s residents differed little in wealth and social status. Although they engaged in some trade, their communities were largely self-sufficient.

The most exceptional of the known Neolithic settlements are Jericho (near the Dead Sea) and Çatal Hüyük (about 150 miles south of the capital of modern Turkey). Jericho was occupied as early as 12,000 B.C.E., and by 8000 B.C.E., it had a massive stone wall enclosing an area exceeding eight acres. (No other Neolithic site is known to have been fortified.) Çatal Hüyük was a somewhat later and larger community. It had a population well over 6,000. Its mud-brick dwellings were packed tightly together. There were no streets, and Çatal Hüyük’s residents traveled across its buildings’ roofs and used ladders to access their homes. Many interiors were elaborately decorated with sculptures and paintings that are assumed to have ritual significance.

Wherever agriculture and animal husbandry appeared, the relationship between human beings and nature changed forever. People began to try to control nature, not just respond to what it offered. This was a vital prerequisite for the development of civilization, but it was not without cost. Farmers had to work harder and longer than hunters and gatherers. They faced health threats from accumulating wastes. They had to figure out how to live together permanently in one place and cope with unprecedented population growth. The earliest Neolithic communities appeared in the Middle East about 8000 B.C.E., in China about 4000 B.C.E., and in India about 3600 B.C.E.

In 1991 a tourist discovered a frozen body in the Ötztal Tyrolean Alps on the Italian-Austrian border. The body turned out to be the oldest mummiﬁed human being yet discovered and sheds new light on the Neolithic period. Dated to 3300 B.C.E., it was the remains of a man between 25 and 35 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall, weighing 110 pounds. He has been called Ötzi, the Ice Man from the place of his discovery. He had not led a peaceful life, for his nose was broken, several of his ribs were fractured, and an arrowhead in his shoulder suggests he bled to death in the ice and snow. Ötzi wore a fur robe of mountain animal skin, with a woven grass cape underneath and leather shoes stuffed with grass. He was heavily armed for his time, carrying a ﬂint dagger and bow with arrows also tipped in ﬂint. The blade of his axe was copper, indicating that metallurgy was already under way. His discovery vividly shows the beginning of the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age.
The Bronze Age and the Birth of Civilization

As Neolithic villages and herding cultures were spreading over much of the world, another major shift in human life styles began on the plains near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and in the valley of the Nile River. Villages grew to become towns and cities that dominated large areas. These new urban centers usually had some monumental buildings whose construction required the sustained effort of hundreds or thousands of people over many years. There is evidence of social stratification—of the emergence of classes distinguished by wealth, lineage, and religious and political authority. Writing was invented, probably to deal with the challenge of managing complex urban economies. Sophisticated works of art were created, and the first metal implements—made from bronze, an alloy of copper and tin—appeared. Although stone tools continued to be used, the increasing importance of metal ended the Stone Ages in the Middle East and inaugurated the Bronze Age (3100–1200 B.C.E.). The characteristics of Bronze Age cultures (i.e., urbanism; long-distance trade; writing systems; and accelerating technological, industrial, and social development) are regarded by historians as the hallmarks of civilization.

Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

During the fourth millennium, populations of unprecedented density began to develop along Mesopotamia’s Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and Egypt’s Nile River. By about 3000 B.C.E., when the invention of writing began to produce the kinds of records that make the writing of history possible, urban life had spread throughout these regions and centralized states had begun to develop. Because city dwellers do not grow their own food, they need to establish some system to promote, collect, and disburse surpluses produced by rural farmers and herders. The arid climates of Mesopotamia and Egypt meant that farmers could meet the demands of urban populations for their products only with the help of extensive irrigation systems. Irrigation technology was more elaborate in Mesopotamia than in Egypt. In Egypt the Nile flooded at the right moment for cultivation, and irrigation simply involved channeling water to the fields. In Mesopotamia, however, the floods came at the wrong season. Dikes were needed to protect fields where crops were already growing and to store water for future use. The lifelines of Mesopotamian towns and villages were rivers, streams, and canals, and control of the water these channels supplied was a contentious issue that could lead to war. Mesopotamia was a flat plain. The terrain provided little protection from floods and allowed swollen rivers to carve
new channels and change their courses. Cities were sometimes severely damaged or forced to relocate. At one time archaeologists assumed that the need to construct and manage irrigation systems caused the development of cities and centralized states, but they now know that large-scale irrigation appeared long after urban civilization was established. (See Map 1–1.)

Mesopotamian Civilization

Civilization seems to have made its first appearance in Babylonia, an arid portion of Mesopotamia that stretches from modern Baghdad to the Persian Gulf. The first cities appeared in Sumer, the southern half of Babylonia, during the fourth millennium B.C.E. The earliest urban center may have been Uruk, a city that established outposts of its culture as far afield as Syria and southern Anatolia. During the Early Dynastic Period (i.e., 2800–2370 B.C.E.), Uruk was joined by a number of other city-states scattered along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. Competition for water and land led to wars among them.

BASED ON this map, what might explain why independent city-states were spread out in Mesopotamia while Egypt remained united in a single state?
Leagues and alliances were formed, and the weaker cities became subject to kingdoms built by the stronger. Legend seats history’s first monarchs in the city of Kish.

The Sumerian language is not related to any known language, and most of the Sumerians’ neighbors spoke Semitic tongues (i.e., languages belonging to the same family as Hebrew and Arabic). Many of the Semitic peoples were influenced by Sumerian civilization and adapted the Sumerian writing system for their own use. Among these were the Akkadians, a people whose first king, Sargon, established his seat at Akkade (near Baghdad). Sargon built history’s first empire by conquering all the Sumerian city-states and extending his authority into southwestern Iran and northern Syria. Memory of the dynasty’s splendor led later Mesopotamians to think of the reign of Naram-Sin, his grandson, as the high point of their history.

External attack and internal weakness eventually combined to destroy the Akkadian state, but about 2125 B.C.E., the kings of the Third Dynasty of the ancient Sumerian city of Ur restored unity to a part of the old empire. Under the leadership of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Sumerian civilization had its final flowering. Great monuments were built, epic poems were composed to celebrate the deeds of ancient heroes, and thousands of surviving documents witness to the existence of a highly centralized administrative system. Ur survived, however, for little more than a century. An extended period of agricultural failure may have produced a famine that undercut its ability to defend itself. The Elamites invaded Sumer from the east, and the Amorites invaded from the north. They brought an end to Sumerian rule and eventually absorbed the Sumerian peoples. The Sumerian language survived but only as a learned tongue studied by priests and scholars—much like Latin in the modern West.

New Amorite dynasties seated themselves at Isin and Larsa, but they were soon brought under the control of a powerful dynasty that founded the famous city of Babylon. Babylon extended its control over most of Mesopotamia and reached its peak during the reign of Hammurabi (r. ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.), a ruler who is best remembered for the collection of laws issued during his reign. Earlier kings had compiled lists of laws, but the so-called Code of Hammurabi is the earliest major collection to survive. It provides intimate insights into the values and institutions of an early civilization.

Amorite society consisted of nobles, commoners, and slaves, and each of these classes was treated differently by the law. Crimes against highly ranked individuals were punished more severely than those against inferior persons, but even the poor and humble had some protection under the law. The principle of justice was retribution: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Professionally trained judges decided cases on the basis of evidence and the testimony of witnesses. When that was unavailable, accused persons might be compelled to prove their innocence by taking sacred oaths or undergoing physical ordeals.
Government  Monarchy was already established in Mesopotamia by the time that historical records began to accumulate. But different kinds of monarchies appeared in different times and places. Early Sumerian art depicts kings leading armies, executing captives, and making offerings to gods. In the northern district of Assyria, kings were the chief priests, but in the south, in Babylonia, kings and priests held separate offices. Kings often appointed their sons and daughters to priesthoods. Enheduanna, daughter of the Akkadian emperor Sargon, was one of these. Some of the hymns she composed have survived—making her history’s first identifiable author.

Royal and priestly households were supported by income from large estates. Some of their land was worked by low-ranking laborers in exchange for food rations, and some was leased to citizen entrepreneurs who paid rent or farmed for a share of the crop. The palace and temple establishments also maintained large herds of animals to support, among other things, the manufacture of textiles on a large scale. Wool cloth was exported to pay for metals, for Mesopotamia lacked ore deposits. Not all the land was controlled by kings and priests. Some belonged to private individuals and was bought and sold freely.

Writing and Mathematics  The challenge of administrating a Sumerian city prompted the invention of the world’s first system of writing. Modern scholars have named it cuneiform (from Latin cuneus, “wedge”) after the wedge-shaped marks that the Sumerian scribe made by pressing a reed stylus into the common writing material, a clay tablet. Writing began with a few simple signs intended to remind readers of something they already knew. Gradually the system evolved to the point where it was possible to record language and use writing to communicate whatever could be thought. Sumerian scribes had to learn several thousand characters, some of which stood for words and some for sounds.
others for sounds. Because it took considerable time and training to learn how to write, the skill was restricted to a tiny elite whose services were much in demand.

Before 3000 B.C.E., no one seems to have conceived of numbers in the abstract—that is, apart from their use in counting specific things. Different numerals were employed for different kinds of things, and the same sign might mean, for example, either 10 or 18 depending on what was being counted. However, once numbers began to be thought of as entities in themselves, development was rapid. Sumerian mathematicians employed a sexagesimal system (i.e., based on the number 60) that survives today in our conventional 60-minute hour and 360-degree circle. Mathematics enabled the Mesopotamians to make progress in the study of astronomy that led to the development of accurate calendars.

Religion

The Mesopotamians produced a large body of sacred literature, some of which influenced the composition of the Hebrew Bible. They were polytheists. That is, they worshiped many gods and goddesses, most of whom represented phenomena of nature (e.g., the powers behind storms, earthquakes, and fecundity). They assumed the gods, although immortal and much greater in power than themselves, had the same needs as they did. They believed the gods had created humanity to fulfill those needs—to do the work of raising food and housekeeping that the gods would otherwise have had to do for themselves. A temple was literally a god’s home. The image of the deity that it housed was provided with meals, draped in clothing, offered entertainment, and honored with ritual and ceremony. It was equipped with a garden for the god’s pleasure and a bed for his or her nightly repose. Deities had universal authority, but each major god and goddess also laid claim to a specific city. The greater temples in the Sumerian cities were erected on the tops of huge terraced mounds of mud-brick called ziggurats. Poets sometimes described these structures as mountains linking earth with heaven, but their precise purpose and symbolism remain uncertain.

The gods were grouped into families, and heaven was assumed to be organized much like a human community. Each deity had his or her own area of responsibility. It might involve the processes of nature or human skills and crafts. The great gods who dominated heaven, like the kings who governed human affairs, were too remote to be approached by common people. Ordinary men and women took their concerns to minor deities whom they hoped would intercede for them with higher ranking members of heaven’s court. Intercession was needed, for the Mesopotamians had a keen sense of the fragility of human life. Religion provided them with their primary tools for coping with crises and uncertainties. (See "Encountering the Past: Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia.")

The Mesopotamians did not hold out any hope for a better life after death. Death doomed spirits to a glum existence in a dusty, dark netherworld where they suffered hunger and thirst unless their living relatives continued to supply them with offerings. There was no reward in death for those who had led virtuous lives and no punishment for the wicked. Everyone was equally miserable. Because the desperate spirits of the dead might escape confinement to haunt the living, families took the precaution of burying their dead with offerings and holding ceremonies from time to time to placate departed kin. At the funerals of some of the early rulers, large numbers of their servants were sacrificed to provide them with retinues in the underworld.
Hundreds of thousands of cuneiform texts, dating from the early third millennium to the third century B.C.E., provide us with a detailed picture of life in ancient Mesopotamia. Evidence from the reign of Hammurabi is particularly abundant. In addition to his famous law code, there are numerous administrative documents and royal and private letters. The amount of space given to various topics in Hammurabi’s code suggests the issues that were of chief concern to his subjects.

One of the earliest and most trusted divination methods involved the examination of the entrails of the animals offered at religious sacrifices. Deformities of organs were believed to be warnings from the gods. Clay models were made of these organs, and together with a report of the events they were believed to have predicted, these models were preserved in a kind of reference library for temple diviners.

Animal sacrifice was expensive and used most commonly by the state. Ordinary Mesopotamians relied on more economical methods to obtain the information they needed to plan for their futures. The seers who served them examined patterns made by the smoke of burning incense or oil poured onto water. Chance remarks of strangers, facial features, dreams, and birth defects were all considered significant. The movements of the heavenly bodies were believed to be extremely portentous for events on earth. Mesopotamian faith in astrology had the positive effect of gathering data that led to advances in astronomy. Any divergence from what were considered normal forms or patterns was considered a portent of disaster and called for prayers and magic to ward off suspected dangers.

HOW DID the Mesopotamians try to predict the future, and what did they do with the information they obtained?

Ancient Mesopotamians used astrology to predict the future. This calendar from the city of Uruk dates from the first millennium B.C.E. and is based on careful observation of the heavens.

their property from them. The largest collection of laws is devoted to family issues (e.g., marriage, inheritance, and adoption). Parents arranged marriages for their children. Grooms made payments for their brides and a bride’s family provided her with a dowry. A marriage was expected to be monogamous unless it failed to produce offspring. A man whose wife proved to be barren could take a second wife to provide the children needed to care for them in their old age. Husbands were permitted extramarital affairs with concubines, slaves, and prostitutes, but wives were not granted comparable license. A married woman’s place was assumed to be in the home, but she could own property and run her own business so long as she did not neglect her duty to her husband and family. A woman could initiate divorce, and she could reclaim her dowry so long as her husband could not convict her of any wrongdoing. Single women sometimes supported themselves as tavern owners, moneylenders, midwives, nurses, priestesses, or temple servants.

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<th>Government</th>
<th>Mesopotamia</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
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<td>Different kinds of monarchies appeared in different times and places. Sumerian kings led armies; northern Assyrian kings were the chief priests; and, in the south, Babylonian kings and priests held separate offices.</td>
<td>Nomarchs, regional governors whose districts were called nomen, handled important local issues such as water management. However, old kingdom pharaohs held much of the power and resources.</td>
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| Language and Literature | Sumerians developed the world’s first system of writing, cuneiform. Sumerian scribes had to learn several thousand characters; some stood for words, others for sounds. | Writing first appears in Egypt about 3000 B.C.E. The impetus most likely derived from Mesopotamian cuneiform. This writing system, hieroglyphs, was highly sophisticated, involving hundreds of picture signs. |

| Religion | The Mesopotamians were polytheists, worshipping many gods and goddesses, most of whom represented phenomena of nature (storms, earthquakes, etc.). The gods were grouped into families, heaven being organized like a community. | Egyptians had three different myths to explain the origin of the world, and each featured a different creator-god. Gods were represented in both human and animal form. Egyptians placed great trust in magic, oracles, and amulets to ward off evil. |

| Society | Parents usually arranged marriages. A marriage started out monogamous, but husbands could take a second wife. Women could own their own property and do business on their own. | Women’s prime roles were connected with the management of the household. They could not hold office, go to scribal schools, or become artisans. Royal women often wielded considerable influence. In art, royal and nonroyal women are usually shown smaller than the male figures. |

| Slavery | The two main forms of slavery were chattel and debt slavery. Chattel slaves were bought and had no legal rights. Debt slaves, more common than chattel slaves, could not be sold, but they could redeem their freedom by paying off the loan. | Slaves did not become numerous in Egypt until the Middle Kingdom (about 2000 B.C.E.). Black Africans and Asians were captured in war and brought back as slaves. Slaves could be freed, but manumission was rare. |
Slavery: Chattel Slaves and Debt Slaves  There were two kinds of slavery in ancient Mesopotamia: chattel slavery and debt slavery. Chattel slaves were pieces of property. They had no legal rights, for they were usually foreigners—prisoners of war or aliens bought from slave merchants. They were expensive luxuries and used primarily as domestic servants. Debt slavery was more common. Individuals could pledge themselves or members of their families as security for loans. Because interest rates were high, debtors ran the risk of defaulting on their loans. If that happened, they were enslaved to work off what they owed. However, they could not be sold, and they regained their freedom when they repaid their loan. As slaves, they could have businesses and property of their own and marry free persons.

Egyptian Civilization
While Mesopotamian civilization evolved along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, another great civilization developed in Egypt. It depended on the Nile, a river that flows from its source in central Africa some 4,000 miles north to the Mediterranean. The Nile divided Egypt into two geographically distinct districts: Upper Egypt (i.e., Egypt upstream), a narrow valley extending 650 miles from Aswan to the border of Lower Egypt (i.e., downstream Egypt), the Nile’s 100-mile deep, triangularly shaped delta. Without the Nile, agriculture would have been impossible in Egypt’s arid environment. Seasonal rains in central Africa caused the river to flood annually, saturating Egypt’s fields and depositing a fresh layer of fertile silt just in time for the autumn planting season. As the waters retreated, farmers sowed their crops, and relatively simple irrigation techniques enabled them to maintain Egypt at a level of prosperity unmatched in the ancient world.

Egypt was a long, narrow country, but none of its people lived far from the Nile. The river tied them together, and by 3100 B.C.E., Upper and Lower Egypt were united under one government. While the Mesopotamian city-states warred among themselves and struggled with invaders, Egypt enjoyed remarkable stability and security. The cliffs and deserts that lined Egypt’s borders protected it from invasion. The valley sheltered its people from the violent storms that swept the Mesopotamian plain, and the Nile’s annual flooding was predictable and minimally destructive. The peace and order that characterized life in Egypt produced an optimistic outlook that contrasts markedly with the pessimistic tone of much Mesopotamian literature.

Ancient Greek historians grouped Egypt’s rulers into thirty-one dynasties beginning with Menes, the king who united Upper and Lower Egypt, and ending with the death of Cleopatra (30 B.C.E.), the last member of a dynasty founded by one of Alexander the Great’s Greek generals. Egypt was then absorbed into the Roman Empire and ruled by a Roman provincial governor. This 3,000-year-long era breaks down into three major periods of stability and creativity (the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms) separated by relatively brief episodes of confusion (the Intermediate Periods).

The Old Kingdom (2700–2200 B.C.E.)  Egypt’s first two dynasties (3100–2700 B.C.E., the Early Dynastic Period) unified the country and paved the way for the brilliant cultural achievements of the four dynasties that ruled the era called the Old Kingdom. The Old Kingdom produced many of the institutions, customs, and artistic styles that became the distinguishing features of ancient Egyptian civilization.
The land and people of Egypt were the property of an absolute ruler who came to be called a **pharaoh** (i.e., master of “the great house”). The pharaoh was one of the gods on whom the safety and prosperity of Egypt depended. By building temples and honoring fellow gods with rituals and offerings the pharaoh maintained **maat**, the equilibrium of the universe. Pharaoh’s word was law, and an elaborate bureaucracy of officials helped him (or her—a few women held the office) administer Egypt. Pharaoh’s central government controlled granaries, land surveys, tax collections, and disbursements from the royal treasury. Egypt also had **nomarchs**, regional governors whose districts were called **nomes**. They handled important local issues such as water management.

The power and resources of the Old Kingdom pharaohs are clearly revealed by their most imposing and famous monuments, the pyramids. Djoser, a pharaoh of the Third Dynasty, inaugurated the construction of pyramids in Egypt. The architect who designed his tomb erected the world’s first major masonry building—a solid six-layered “stepped” pyramid surrounded by an elaborate funeral complex. Snefru, founder of the Fourth Dynasty, built the first smooth-sided pyramid, and his son Khufu (Cheops, in Greek sources) commissioned the largest pyramid ever constructed. It rose on the desert plateau of Giza opposite the Old Kingdom’s capital, Memphis, a city on the border between Upper and Lower Egypt. Khufu’s appropriately named “Great Pyramid” covers 13.1 acres, originally soared to a height of 481 feet, and is composed of approximately 2.3 million blocks of stone (averaging 2.5 tons each). It is as remarkable for its precise engineering as its size. Khufu’s successors built additional pyramids at Giza, and the pharaoh Khafre added the famous Sphinx, a huge version of the enigmatic **Book of the Dead**. The Egyptians believed in the possibility of life after death through the god Osiris. Aspects of each person’s life had to be tested by forty-two assessor-gods before the person could be presented to Osiris. In the scene from a papyrus manuscript of the Book of the Dead, the deceased and his wife (on the left) watch the scales of justice weighing his heart (on the left side of the scales) against the feather of truth. The jackal-headed god Anubis also watches the scales, and the ibis-headed god Thoth keeps the record.

**pharaoh** The god-kings of ancient Egypt.

**nomes** Egyptian districts ruled by regional governors who were called nomarchs.

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half-lion, half-human creature that was a common subject for Egyptian sculptors. The pyramids and their temples were originally provided with lavish offerings to support the pharaoh in the afterlife, but they were stripped of their contents by ancient grave robbers. The only major artifacts the thieves missed were two full-sized wooden boats buried near the Giza pyramids. These were intended to convey the pharaoh on his journeys in the next world.

**The First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (2200–1630 B.C.E.)**

The Old Kingdom came apart when mounting political and economic difficulties gave the nomarchs and other royal officials opportunities to break free from the pharaoh’s control. Central government faded, and confusion reigned throughout the First Intermediate Period (2200–2025 B.C.E.). Finally, Amunemhet I, a vizier (i.e., chief minister) to a dynasty of petty pharaohs seated in the Upper-Egyptian city of Thebes, reunited Egypt and inaugurated the era of the Middle Kingdom.

The First Intermediate Period may have done some lasting damage to the traditions that supported the pharaoh’s authority, for the rulers of the Middle Kingdom were regarded as less remote and godlike than their predecessors. The nomarchs who served them had more autonomy, and to secure an uncontested succession to the throne pharaohs found it wise to establish their heirs as co-regents during their lifetimes. The literature of the era stressed the pharaoh’s role as the shepherd of his people and the defender of the weak.

Egypt began to emerge from its isolation during the Middle Kingdom and to pay more attention to foreign affairs. The pharaohs pushed up the Nile into Nubia and built fortresses to guard the trade routes that brought African goods to Egypt. Syria and Palestine became areas of concern, and the government fortified the delta’s borders to staunch the flow of migrants from the east.

**The Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom (1630–1075 B.C.E.)**

For unknown reasons the crown passed rapidly from hand to hand during the thirteenth dynasty, and the weaker pharaohs were challenged by rivals from the western delta. In the eastern delta, Asiatic migration continued until the region passed into the hands of people the Egyptians called Hyksos (i.e., “foreign chiefs”). Archaeological remains suggest these newcomers were probably Amorites. They occupied the delta and dominated the valley for about a century until Ahmose, first king of the eighteenth dynasty, drove them out and founded the New Kingdom.

The pharaohs of the New Kingdom had imperialistic aspirations. Their armies reached the Euphrates in the east and drove deep into Africa—extending Egyptian influence 1,300 miles south from Memphis. The Egyptian empire provided the pharaohs with unprecedented wealth and subjected them to numerous foreign influences. The result was the establishment in Thebes of a cosmopolitan court of extraordinary splendor and sophistication and the launching of a spate of monumental building projects throughout Egypt. The pharaohs of this era, hoping perhaps to safeguard the vast treasures they accumulated for the afterlife, ceased to erect pyramids that advertised the sites of their
graves and chose to be buried in cavelike tombs cut into the walls of the desolate “Valley of the Kings” near Thebes. Despite elaborate precautions, however, they failed to secure their final resting places. Only one pharaonic tomb (that of a young eighteenth dynasty ruler named Tutankhamun) escaped looting by ancient grave robbers. He was a fairly minor king who died prematurely and was buried in haste. His grave was doubtless less lavishly equipped than those of the more prominent pharaohs, but its treasures are truly awe inspiring.

Tutankhamun was succeeded by a line of soldier-pharaohs who erected some of Egypt’s most imposing monuments. They fought the Hittites, a powerful empire based in Asia Minor, for control of Syria and Palestine and fended off attacks on the delta from the Libyans and from the Sea Peoples who sailed the Mediterranean. An increasingly volatile international situation slowly eroded their position until, by 1075, Egypt was no longer an imperial power. Weakened by internal divisions, it succumbed to a succession of foreign conquerors—Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and ultimately Roman.

**Language and Literature** The Egyptians developed a writing system about 3000 B.C.E. They may have been inspired by Mesopotamia’s example, but they invented their own techniques. The ancient Greeks called formal Egyptian writing *hieroglyphs* (i.e., “sacred carving”), for it was used to engrave holy texts on monuments. A cursive script that could be written much more rapidly and easily was used for ordinary everyday purposes. Egyptians wrote with pen and ink on sheets of paperlike material made from papyrus reeds. Texts were usually written on horizontal lines and read from right to left, but hieroglyphs were sometimes inscribed in horizontal columns. The hieroglyphic system was difficult to master, for its symbols could stand for syllables, words, or categories of speech.

The Egyptians produced a large and varied body of literature encompassing religious myths, entertaining stories, collections of proverbs, how-to advice for aspiring bureaucrats, love poems, personal letters, medical texts, astronomical observations, calendars, autobiographies, judicial records, and administrative documents. Curiously missing are any traces of epic poetry or of dramas, although the latter, at least, are known to have been performed as parts of cult rituals.

**Religion: Gods, Temples, and the Afterlife** The Egyptians were apparently untroubled by a lack of consistency in their religious beliefs. They had three different myths to explain the origin of the world, and each featured a different creator-god. Some gods had overlapping functions, and some were known by a variety of names. Gods were represented in both human and animal form and as hybrids—human bodies with animal heads. As in Mesopotamia, gods were believed literally to inhabit their temples, some of which were of staggering size. The sacred complex at Karnak (near Thebes) was under construction for over 2,000 years. The gods were served by armies of priests and priestesses, who were sustained by lavish temple endowments. Ordinary people did not worship in the great temples but on occasions when the images of the gods were brought out from their sanctuaries and exposed to public view.

The fact that Egypt’s religion was extremely ancient and deeply rooted in the traditions of its people did not deter a pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty from attempting to overhaul it. Amenhotep IV swept aside all the gods and declared exclusive allegiance to the Aten, a god symbolized by the disk of the sun. The old temples were closed, and the pharaoh and his queen, Nefertiti, were proclaimed sole mediators between the new god and the Egyptian people. To honor the Aten, Amenhotep changed his name to Akhenaten (i.e., “the effective spirit of the Aten”)
and built a new capital called Akhetaten (i.e., “the horizon of the Aten”) near Amarna north of Thebes. Akhenaten’s religious reforms failed to take hold, and after his death the court returned to Thebes. Akhetaten was dismantled. The Aten cult was suppressed, and the worship of the former Theban sun-god, Amun, and Egypt’s other deities was restored. The Aten was the only Egyptian god to be represented by an abstract symbol, not a human or animal image, and the art of the Amarna period also departed from the conventions of traditional Egyptian painting and sculpture. It was characterized by a unique expressionistic distortion of forms.

Most Egyptians worshiped at small local shrines, and many householders had private collections of sacred objects. Egyptians placed great trust in magic, oracles, and amulets to ward off evil and misfortune. Originally they assumed that only the pharaoh survived death to join the immortal gods, but gradually the belief spread that everyone who made the necessary preparations could enjoy this privilege. The spells needed to pass the various tests and fend off the

**HISTORY’S VOICES**

**A Hymn of Zoroaster about the Two Spirits of Good and Evil**

Zoroaster’s reform made Ahura Mazda (the “Wise Lord”) the supreme deity in the Iranian pantheon. The hymns, or Gathas, depict him as the greatest of the ahuras, the divinities associated with the good. This faith views the world through a moral dualism of good and evil, in which one has the freedom to choose the Truth or the Lie. The “Very Holy [Spirit]” chose Truth (“Righteousness”), and the “Evil [Spirit]” (Angra Mainyu, or Ahriman), chose the evil of “the Lie.” Humans similarly can choose good or evil.

**WHAT LESSON** or values does this passage teach?

(1) Then shall I speak, now give ear and hearken, both you who seek from near and you from far...
(2) Then shall I speak of the two primal Spirits of existence, of whom the Very Holy thus spoke to the Evil One: “Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor wills, neither our choices nor words nor acts, nor our inner selves nor our souls agree.” (3) Then shall I speak of the foremost [doctrine] of this existence, which Mazda the Lord. He with knowledge, declared to me. Those of you who do not act upon this manthra, even as I shall think and speak it, for them there shall be woe at the end of life. (4) Then shall I speak of the best things of this existence. I know Mazda who created it in accord with truth to be the Father of active Good Purpose. And his daughter is Devotion of good action. The all-seeing Lord is not to be deceived. (5) Then shall I speak of what the Most Holy One told me, the word to be listened to as best for men. Those who shall give for me hearkening and heed to Him, shall attain wholeness and immortality. Mazda is Lord through acts of the Good Spirit . . . (8) Him shall I seek to turn to us by praises of reverence, for truly I have now seen with my eyes [the House] of Good Purpose, and of good act and deed, having known through Truth Him who is Lord Mazda. Then let us lay up supplications to Him in the House of Song. (9) Him shall I seek to requite for us with good purpose, Him who left to our will [the choice between] holy and unholy. May Lord Mazda by His power make us active for prospering our cattle and men, through the fair affinity of good purpose with truth. (10) Him shall I seek to glorify for us with sacrifices of devotion, Him who is known in the soul as Lord Mazda; for He has promised by His truth and good purpose that there shall be wholeness and immortality within His kingdom (khshathra), strength and perpetuity within His house.

monsters of the underworld were contained in the Book of the Dead, a text often inscribed on tombs. The dead were assumed to want and need the same things as the living, and persons who could afford to do so loaded their tombs with provisions and equipment for life after death. It was the duty of their descendants to make periodic offerings at their tombs to replenish their supplies.

**Women in Egyptian Society** The Egyptian woman’s primary duty was the management of a household. She was not ordinarily admitted to scribal schools, artisan apprenticeships, or government offices, but she could own and manage property, sue for divorce, and claim the same legal protections as a man. Royal women were, of course, an exception. They often wielded considerable influence, and a few, such as Thutmose I’s daughter Hatshepsut, ruled Egypt either as regents for dependent males or in their own names. Women were common subjects for Egypt’s artists, who depicted them making and receiving offerings and enjoying the pleasures of dining and hunting with their husbands.

**Slaves** Slaves were not common in Egypt until the foreign campaigns of the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom began to produce Nubian and Asian prisoners of war. The imperialistic ventures of the New Kingdom vastly increased the number of captives taken in battle and sometimes led to the enslavement of entire peoples.

Slaves were assigned all kinds of tasks. Some worked in the fields alongside the native peasants. Some were domestic servants. Some were trained as artisans. A few even exercised authority as policemen or soldiers. They could be freed, but manumission was rare. There were, however, no racial or other features that set them apart from the free population.

**Ancient Middle Eastern Empires**

During the era of Egypt’s New Kingdom, the Middle East witnessed the rise and fall of many states. The most significant were the empires founded by the Hittites and the Assyrians, but it should be noted, if only in passing, that a horde of other peoples—the Hurrians, Mitanni, Kassites, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Chaldaeans, and Israelites—also jockeyed for position. (See Map 1–2.)

**The Hittites**

The Hittites, who migrated into the Middle East from Europe in the sixteenth century B.C.E., were Indo-Europeans. That is, they spoke a language that belongs to the same family as Greek, Latin, and Indian Sanskrit. This distinguished them from the older residents of the Middle East, most of whom spoke Semitic languages. The Hittites built a strong centralized kingdom with its seat at Hattusas, a site near modern Ankara. Between 1400 and 1200 B.C.E., the Hittites extended their territory until they became the dominant power in the Middle East. They destroyed their neighbors, the Mitannians, and contested control of Syria and Palestine with Egypt. An indecisive battle in 1285 B.C.E. culminated in a truce between these two superpowers. They enjoyed fairly amicable relations until about 1200 B.C.E., when they were both threatened by invaders whom the Egyptians called the Sea Peoples. Egypt retreated to the safety of its valley, but the Hittite kingdom collapsed.

The Hittites assimilated many aspects of Mesopotamian culture and adapted cuneiform to write their language. Their political institutions, however, were their own. Hittite kings did not claim to be divine or even to be agents of the gods. The king was advised by a council of nobles who limited his power, and an
heir’s succession to the throne required ratification by the army. One thing that may have contributed to Hittite success was the invention in Asia Minor (prior to the rise of the Hittite kingdom) of techniques for smelting iron and forging it into weapons. Iron was more plentiful and, therefore, more economical than bronze, and its spreading use marked the beginning, about 1100 B.C.E., of a new...
era: the Iron Age. Clay tablets that survive from the Hittite archives have helped historians reconstruct the history of the Middle East, but they also contain the earliest information about the Greeks, the Hittites’ western neighbors who were destined to play a major role in shaping Western civilization.

**The Assyrians**

The Assyrian homeland centered on Assur, a city on the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia. The Assyrians had ancient trading ties with Babylonia, and they spoke a Semitic language related to Babylonian. During the fourteenth century B.C.E., Assyria expanded to the north and west. However, the general confusion that descended on the Middle East when Sumer collapsed at the end of the second millennium loosed an invasion by the Arameans that ended the first Assyrian attempt at building an empire. The Arameans spread throughout the Middle East from their point of origin in northern Syria, and their language, Aramaic, was spoken by some of the people who influenced the development of Judaism and Christianity.

About 1000 B.C.E., the Assyrians began to expand again, and by 665 B.C.E., they controlled Mesopotamia, southern Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. They were famous for their innovative military technology and their willingness to commit atrocities to frighten their opponents into submission. The Assyrian empire was divided into provinces headed by military governors, and its subjects were kept in line by occupying armies. Pockets of potential resistance to Assyrian rule were sometimes broken up by evicting whole peoples from their homelands and resettling them in small groups scattered about the empire. Agricultural colonies were founded to bring unused land into production and provide supplies for the army. Great palaces were erected at Nineveh and Nimrud and ornamented with superb stone carvings in bas relief. They were designed to intimidate the vassal kings, who annually brought their tribute to the Assyrian capital.

The Assyrian empire may have become too large, given the communications available, to govern effectively, and squabbling among its leaders also set it up for disaster. The agents of its fall were the Medes, an Indo-European people settled in Iran, and the Babylonians (Chaldaeans). Overextended as it was, Assyria could not deal with both enemies at once, and the empire crumbled quickly. By 612 B.C.E., all the cities of the Assyrian homeland had been sacked.

**The Neo-Babylonians**

When the Medes failed to exploit the opportunity Assyria’s fall gave them, the way was cleared for Babylon’s king, Nebuchadnezzar, to build a Neo-Babylonian (or Chaldaean) empire. Babylon became the center of world trade, a city famous for its monuments and wonders. Nebuchadnezzar’s empire was brilliant but unstable. Its throne passed rapidly through a number of hands, and its last heir so alienated his subjects that they failed to resist when Persia invaded Babylonia in 539 B.C.E. The city capitulated and survived to enjoy renewed prosperity within a new and more successful Persian Empire.

**The Persian Empire**

The great Persian Empire arose in the region now called Iran. The ancestors of its rulers spoke a language from the Aryan branch of the family of Indo-European languages, related to Greek and Latin. The most important collections of tribes among them were the Medes and the Persians, peoples
so similar in language and customs that the Greeks used both names interchangeably. The Medes organized their tribes into a union and aggressively built a force that defeated the mighty Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.E. The Persians were subordinate to the Medes until Cyrus II (called the Great) became King of the Persians (r. 559–530 B.C.E.), when the Persians began to dominate. About 550 B.C.E., Cyrus united the Medes and Persians under his own rule.

**Cyrus the Great**

Cyrus quickly expanded his power, eventually extending it from the Aegean Sea to the Indus valley and modern Afghanistan. In the west, he decisively defeated King Croesus of Lydia in western Asia Minor, taking control of Croesus’s capital city of Sardis and other Greek cities. At the same time Cyrus captured Babylon from an unpopular king, and was thus viewed as a liberator, not a conqueror. The cylinder that describes his version of events claims that the Babylonian god Marduk had “got him into his city Babylon without fighting or battle.”

Unlike the harsh Babylonian and Assyrian conquerors who preceded him, Cyrus pursued a policy of toleration and restoration. He did not impose the
Persian religion but claimed to rule by the favor of the Babylonian god. Instead of deporting defeated peoples and destroying cities, he allowed exiles to return and rebuilt cities. For example, upon his conquest of the Babylonian Empire, which included Palestine, Cyrus permitted the Hebrews, taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E., to return to their native land of Judah. Persian rule, however, was not entirely gentle; it demanded tribute and military service from its subjects, sometimes with brutal enforcement.

**Darius the Great**

Cyrus’s son Cambyses succeeded to the throne in 529 B.C.E. Cambyses conquered Egypt, establishing it as a satrapy (province) that extended to Libya in the west and Ethiopia in the south. Civil war roiled much of the Persian Empire upon his death in 522 B.C.E. The following year Darius emerged as the new emperor. Found on a great rock hundreds of feet in the air near the mountains of Behistun, an inscription boasts of Darius’s victories and the greatness of his rule. Discovered almost two thousand years later, it was carved in three languages, Babylonian, Old Persian, and Elamite, all in cuneiform script, thereby helping scholars to decipher all three languages. Darius’s long and prosperous reign lasted until 486 B.C.E. and brought the Persian Empire to its greatest extent, with conquests in northern India, Scythian lands around the Black Sea, and Thrace and Macedonia on the fringes of the Greek mainland. In 499 B.C.E., the Ionian Greeks of western Asia Minor rebelled, launching wars between Greeks and Persians that would last for two decades.

**Government and Administration**

The Persian Empire was a hereditary monarchy that claimed divine sanction from the god **Ahura Mazda**. The ruler, known as *shahanshah*, “king of kings,” in theory owned all the land and peoples in the empire as absolute monarch, and demanded tribute and service for the use of his property. In practice he depended on the advice and administrative service of aristocratic courtiers, ministers,
and satraps (provincial governors), and was expected to rule justly, as Ahura Mazda’s chosen representative. Still, the king ruled as a semidivine autocrat with the power of life and death over his subjects. The Greeks would see him as the model of a despot or tyrant who regarded his people as slaves.

The empire was divided into twenty-nine satrapies, ruled by satraps with considerable autonomy over civil and military affairs. The king exercised a degree of control through appointed provincial secretaries and military commanders, as well as inspectors who, as the “eyes and ears of the king,” traveled throughout the empire. A system of excellent royal roads made these travels swifter and easier, as did a royal postal system that was a kind of “pony express” with men mounted on fast horses at stations along the way. The royal postal service traveled the 1500 miles from Sardis in Lydia to the Persian capital at Susa in less than two weeks; normally such a trip took three months. The Persians adopted Aramaic, the most common language of Middle Eastern commerce, as the imperial tongue, thereby simplifying civil and military administration.

Medes and Persians made up the core of the army and supplied the empire with its officers and imperial administrators. When needed, the army drafted large numbers of subject armies. A large Persian army, such as the one that invaded Greece in 480 B.C.E., included hundreds of thousands of non-Iranian soldiers organized by ethnic group, each dressed in its own uniforms, taking orders from Iranian officers.

**Religion**

Persia’s religion was different from that of its neighbors and subjects. It derived from the Indo-European traditions of the Vedic religion that Aryan peoples brought into India about 1500 B.C.E. Its practice included animal sacrifices and a reverence for fire and, although polytheistic, unusually emphasized its chief god Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord.”

Zarathustra, a Mede whom the Greeks called Zoroaster, changed the traditional Aryan worship sometime between 1000 B.C.E. and 600 B.C.E. This religious prophet and teacher made Ahura Mazda the only god, dismissing the others as demons not to be worshipped but fought. Polytheism and sacrifices were forbidden, and the old sacrificial fire was converted into a symbol of goodness and light. Zarathustra portrayed life as an unending struggle between two great forces, Ahura Mazda, the creator and only god, representing goodness and light, and Ahriman, a demon, representing darkness and evil. The good would be rewarded with glory, while the evil would be punished with suffering. (See “History’s Voices: A Hymn of Zoroaster about the Two Spirits of Good and Evil.”) By the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., Zoroastrianism had become the chief religion of the Persians. On the great inscribed monument at Behistun, Darius the Great praised the god of Zarathustra and his teachings: “On this account Ahura Mazda brought me help . . . because I was not wicked, nor was I a liar, nor was I a tyrant, neither I nor any of my line. I have ruled according to righteousness.”

**Art and Culture**

The Persians learned from and adapted much from the peoples they conquered. They adapted the Aramaic alphabet of the Semites to create a Persian alphabet and used the cuneiform symbols of Babylon to write the Old Persian language they spoke. They borrowed their calendar from Egypt. Persian art
and architecture also benefited from various talents and styles. Darius, for example, proudly described the varied sources of the construction of his palace at Susa:

The cedar timber—a mountain by name Lebanon—from there it was brought . . . the yaka-timber was brought from Gandara and from Carmania. The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria . . . the precious stone lapis-lazuli and carnelian . . . was brought from Sogdiana. The . . . turquoise from Chorasmia. . . . The silver and ebony . . . from Egypt . . . the ornamentation from Ionia . . . the ivory . . . from Ethiopia and from Sind and from Arachosia. . . . The stone-cutters who wrought the stone, those were Ionians and Sardians. The goldsmiths . . . were Modes and Egyptians. The men who wrought the wood, those were Sardians and Egyptians. The men who wrought the baked brick, those were Babylonians. The men who adorned the wall, those were Medes and Egyptians.1

The Royal Palace at Persepolis, built by Darius and his successor Xerxes (r. 485–465 B.C.E.), is probably the most magnificent of Persian architectural remains. On a high foundation supported on all sides by a stone wall 20 or 30 feet high, the complex contained a Hall of a Hundred Columns where the kings carried out their official duties. The columns, grand stairway with carvings, and gateway with winged bulls reveal the grandeur of the ancient Persian Empire.

**Palestine**

Many large states flourished in the ancient Middle East, but none had as much influence on Western civilization as a tiny group of people who settled in Palestine about 1200 B.C.E. Three of the world’s great religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) trace their origins (at least in part) to this region and to the history of its inhabitants, the Israelites.

**The Canaanites and the Phoenicians**

Palestine’s early settlers spoke Canaanite (a Semitic language), lived in walled cities, and earned their livings as farmers and seafarers. Their most influential cultural achievement was a highly simplified writing system. Instead of the hundreds of characters that were needed to write the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts, it used an alphabet of only twenty to thirty symbols. This made learning to read and write much easier, which promoted the spread of literacy.

The Israelite invaders who settled in Palestine about 1200 B.C.E. either forced the Canaanites of the interior region out or assimilated them. However, the Canaanites and Syrians who inhabited the northern coast hung on to their territory. They became the Phoenicians, a seafaring people who scattered trading colonies from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. The most famous of their colonial outposts was the city of Carthage (near modern Tunis in North Africa). Cultural influences accompanied the goods that flowed through the Phoenician trade network. The Phoenicians passed the alphabet to the Greeks, who handed it on to us.

1T. Cuyler Young, Jr., “Iran, ancient,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online.
The Israelites

Our knowledge of the Israelites derives primarily from their chief literary monument, the Bible. The Bible contains some historical narratives (as well as collections of laws, ritual instructions, wisdom, literature, poetry, and prophecy), but it was not meant to be read simply as objective history. Scholars have developed many strategies for extracting historical data from it, but their findings are tentative.

According to tradition, the Israelites or Hebrews (i.e., “wanderers”) were the descendants of Abraham, a Semitic nomad whose family came from the region of Ur. He and his successors (the patriarchs) led their tribe into Palestine in the early second millennium and eventually on to Egypt. They may have entered Egypt during the period when the Hyksos, fellow Semites, ruled the delta. In the thirteenth century B.C.E., a man named Moses led them out of Egypt. They resumed wandering in the Sinai desert, but eventually breached the frontiers of Canaan and settled in Palestine’s mountainous interior. Their scattered tribes made little progress until they united under the leadership of a king named David. He won control of most of Canaan and founded the city of Jerusalem. The Hebrew monarchy reached its peak in the tenth century B.C.E., during the reign of his son and heir Solomon. Following Solomon’s death, the kingdom split in two. The northern section, Israel, was the larger and more advanced, but the southern portion, Judah, retained control over Jerusalem, the site of the Israelites’ first temple.

In 722 B.C.E., Assyria conquered Israel, dispersed its people, and Israel’s ten lost tribes disappeared from history. Judah survived as an independent kingdom until 586 B.C.E., when it was conquered by the Neo-Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II. He destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and resettled many of the people of Judah (i.e., Jews) in foreign lands. This period, known as “the Exile” or “Babylonian Captivity,” did not last long. Babylon fell to Persia in 539 B.C.E.
539 B.C.E., and the new emperor permitted some Jews to return to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. In 70 C.E., the Romans once again destroyed Jerusalem and scattered its people, but in 1948 C.E., Jewish leaders regained control of Jerusalem and reestablished the state of Israel.

**The Jewish Religion**

The tiny nation of Israel would be of little interest to historians were it not for its religious significance. The ancient Jews believed they had been chosen by God for a unique religious mission. Their ancestor Abraham had made a covenant (i.e., a contract) with God. It committed God to preserving them, and them to the task of revealing God by remaining exclusively loyal to him and living according to his law. Their history was to be sacred history, a revelation of God’s will for humankind.

Hebrew **monotheism**—faith in a single God, an all-powerful creator who loves humankind but demands righteous conduct—may be as old as Moses and certainly dates back to the preaching of the great biblical prophets of the eighth century B.C.E. The Jews did not imagine God to be a force of nature or a superhuman being, but a reality so transcendent it cannot be pictured in any way. Transcendence did not, however, imply distance from God, for the Jews believed God was intimately involved in their history. Like the teachings of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) in Iran, they assumed there was a link between ethics and religion. God was not content with sacrifices and worship; God judged people according to how they treated one another. The Hebrew prophets, who spoke for God, assured their followers that God dealt mercifully with repentant sinners, and the prophets explained the misfortunes that befell the Jews as just punishments for their failure to honor the terms of Abraham’s covenant. Centuries of oppression ultimately convinced the Jews that God would have to intervene in history on their behalf if the promises to Abraham were to be fulfilled. They began to look for a special leader, a messiah (i.e., “annointed one”), whom God would empower to lead them to complete their mission in history. Christianity diverges from Judaism in maintaining that Jesus of Nazareth was that messiah.

**General Outlook of Middle Eastern Cultures**

There were differences among the various cultures of the Middle East, but taken together they all diverge from the outlook of the Greeks, the ancient people who exerted the greatest influence on the Western tradition.

**Humans and Nature**

The peoples of the Middle East did not envision an absolute gulf between animate beings and inanimate objects. They believed all things are imbued with life and spirit and that the universe is an arena for a war of supernatural wills. Because nature seemed chaotic from the human perspective, it seemed to follow that the gods who governed the world must be capricious. The Babylonian creation myth claimed that the gods had created people for the sole purpose of serving them. Human life was, therefore, precarious, for the deities were interested only in themselves and paid scant attention to the wishes of their human servants. Even disasters, like wars, which might be explained as the products of human decisions, were assumed to be acts of the gods.

The helplessness of humankind in the face of irrational divine powers is the point of the story of a great primeval flood that is found in various forms in
Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hebrew sources. In the Egyptian tale, the god Re, who created human beings, decides they are plotting against him, and Re sends the vicious goddess Sekhmet to destroy them. Humanity is saved only when Re has a last-minute, unexplained change of heart. In the Babylonian version of the story, it is the annoying noise made by an increasing human population that persuades the gods to destroy humanity. The species is saved when one man wins the favor of the god Enki, who helps him and his wife survive. In a world governed by such quixotic principles, human beings could not hope to understand and control events. At best, they might try to pit one mysterious force against another by means of magical spells.

**Humans and the Gods, Law, and Justice**

Because the gods could destroy humankind—and might do so at any time for no apparent reason—people tried to win the gods’ favor by offering prayer and sacrifice. There was, however, no guarantee of success, for gods were capricious beings who were not bound by reason or conscience.

In arenas that were more or less under human control, people attempted to establish more orderly and consistent principles to guide their lives. In the earliest civilized societies, rulers decreed laws to govern human relations, but effective laws are based on something more than a lawgiver’s power to coerce obedience. The challenge for governments was to find justifications that would impart authority to laws. The Egyptians simply assumed that because the king was a god, he had the right to establish whatever rules seemed best to him at the moment. The Mesopotamians believed the gods commissioned their kings and gave them divine authority to keep order in the human herd. The Hebrews had a more subtle understanding of law. Their god was capable of destructive rages, but he was open to rational discussion and imposed certain moral standards on himself. In the biblical version of the flood story, God is wrathful but not arbitrary. His creatures deserve destruction as punishment for their sins. When God decides to save Noah, he does so because Noah is a good man who merits God’s protection. The Hebrews believed God wanted human beings to live in just relationships with one another and that God was the leading advocate for human justice.

**Toward the Greeks and Western Thought**

Many, if not most, Greeks in the ancient world must have thought about life in much the same way as their neighbors in the Middle East. Their gods resembled the arbitrary Mesopotamian deities; they trusted in magic and incantations to manage life’s uncertainties; and they believed laws were to be obeyed simply because a power enforced them. The surprising thing is that some Greeks came to think differently about these things, and their strikingly original ideas charted a new path for the West.

In the sixth century B.C.E., thinkers who lived on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor began an intellectual revolution. Thales, the first Greek philosopher, urged his followers to try to explain natural events by referring them to other natural events and not to unknowable supernatural causes. His search for naturalistic explanations for phenomena launched Western science.

Rationalism of this kind characterized the approach major Greek thinkers took to exploring all kinds of issues. Xenophanes of Colophon, Thales’s contemporary, pointed out that people had no grounds for imagining gods in human form. He argued that if oxen could draw pictures, they would sketch gods who looked like oxen. Comments like this might promote skepticism, but they also produced
valuable insights. In the fifth century B.C.E., Thucydides of Athens wrote a history that made no reference to the gods and explained events as the result of human decisions and chance. Similarly, Hippocrates of Cos founded a school of medicine that diagnosed and treated disease without invoking the supernatural. The same lack of interest in divine causality characterized Greek attitudes toward law and justice.

**SUMMARY**

**Early Humans and Their Culture** During the Paleolithic period, humans lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering food. They used tools, fire, and language; they believed in the supernatural. Around 10,000 B.C.E., humans started domesticating animals and plants for food. This Neolithic Revolution, which took place at different times in different parts of the world, was based on different crops in different environments. Civilization emerged, first in Mesopotamia, approximately during the Bronze Age, 3100 to 1200 B.C.E.

**Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.** Around 3000 B.C.E., civilizations along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia, and the Nile River in Egypt, started to produce written records. Civilization in southern Mesopotamia was founded by Sumerians. Semitic Akkadians from northern Babylonia established the first empire in history; Sumerians returned to power in the Third Dynasty of Ur. Egypt’s pharaohs united lands along the Nile. Hieroglyphs and tombs have left us an extensive record of life in ancient Egypt.

**Ancient Middle Eastern Empires** Between about 1400 B.C.E. and 500 B.C.E., new peoples and empires emerged in the Middle East. The Kassites and Mitannians were warrior peoples who ruled over the inhabitants of Babylonia and northern Syria/Mesopotamia, respectively. The Hittites based an empire in what is now Turkey. The Assyrian military supported a large Middle Eastern empire that lasted for almost half a millennium. Nebuchadnezzar overthrew the Assyrians and established a short-lived Neo-Babylonian dynasty.

**The Persian Empire** In the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.E., the Persian Empire reached the height of its power and geographical expansion under Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great. By assimilating cultures and peoples, the empire successfully combined a measure of autonomy among its twenty-nine satrapies (provinces) with a centralized authority based on the king’s rule as a semidivine autocrat. Tolerance of other religions, use of the common language of Aramaic and existing writing systems, and an efficient communications system contributed to the Persians’ imperial power. The Persian Empire was also built on the use of non-Persian soldiers and the art, architecture, and raw materials of its conquered lands.

**Palestine** Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all owe many of their beliefs and practices to the Israelites who settled in Palestine before 1200 B.C.E. Israelis under Moses conquered Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C.E., and their kingdom reached its peak in the tenth century B.C.E. in the reigns of David and Solomon before splintering. Polytheistic Canaanites had lived in Syria-Palestine and through the coastal Phoenicians gave the Greeks the predecessor of the alphabet we use today.
General Outlook of Middle Eastern Cultures  Most people of the ancient Mideast believed humans were inseparable from nature, and the gods were powerful and capricious. The Hebrew God reflected a different perspective on humanity's relationship with nature and with divine power. All the ancient Middle Eastern attitudes toward religion, philosophy, science, and society in general differ markedly from what we will learn about the Greeks.

Toward the Greeks and Western Thought  By the sixth century B.C.E., some Greeks started thinking about the world in ways that became the hallmark of Western civilization: They began to seek naturalistic, rational explanations for material phenomena and human behavior. Philosophy and science, as we understand them, could only develop once the Greeks had discarded supernatural explanations and reliance on divine intervention as ways of understanding the world. By the fifth century B.C.E., Greek thinkers had inaugurated the study of medicine and history, and by the fourth century B.C.E., Greek law and democracy had begun to evolve into forms recognizable to us.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was life during the Paleolithic Age different from life during the Neolithic Age? What advances account for the difference? Were these advances so significant that they warrant referring to the Neolithic as a revolutionary era?

2. What differences do you see in the political and intellectual outlooks of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations? How do their religious views compare? What influence did geography have on their religious outlooks?

3. What was significant about Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great? During their reigns, how did the Persians treat the cultures and peoples of subject lands?

4. What role did religious faith play in the political history of the Jews? Why did Middle Eastern civilizations regard the concept of Hebrew monotheism as a radical idea?

5. How did Greek thinkers diverge from the intellectual traditions of the Middle East? What new kinds of questions did Greeks ask?

KEY TERMS

Ahura Mazda  (p. 24)  
Aramaic  (p. 25)  
Bronze Age civilization  (p. 8)  
culture  (p. 6)  
cuneiform  (p. 11)  
hieroglyphs  (p. 18)  
Homo sapiens  (p. 6)  
Lower Egypt  (p. 15)  
monotheism  (p. 28)  
Neolithic  (p. 7)  
nomes  (p. 16)  
Paleolithic  (p. 6)  
pharaoh  (p. 16)  
Phoenicians  (p. 26)  
polytheists  (p. 12)  
ten lost tribes  (p. 27)  
Upper Egypt  (p. 15)  

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