The Ancient World

KEY TOPICS

The First Humans
- The earliest human cultures.
- Art of nature and the dead.
- Megaliths.

Mesopotamia
- Sumerian writing and a war of the gods.
- Sacred mountains.
- Near Eastern empires, from Babylon to Persia.

Ancient Egypt
- Pyramids and temples.
- Akhenaten’s brief revolution.
- Art of the afterlife.

Asia and America
- Indus Valley cities.
- The mystic Vedas and Hindu epics.
- Bronze Age China.
- Ancient America

2.1 Funerary mask of King Tutankhamen, c. 1340 B.C.
Gold inlaid with enamel and semiprecious stones, height 21 in (54 cm), Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
The coffin of King Tutankhamen contained his mummified body beneath this splendid gold mask.
The belief that the human soul lived on after death was one of the first and most important religious ideas of humans in the ancient world. Ancient tombs in Egypt, China, and the Aegean are essential sources for our knowledge of ancient civilizations.
In 1922 a British archaeologist and his Egyptian assistants were the first to look on King Tutankhamen (Fig. 2.1) in nearly 3,500 years. In the 1970s, millions more would file through the exhibition of King Tutankhamen’s tomb. What was the fascination of this god-king, dead at age nineteen, buried in such glittering splendor in Egypt’s fertile valley? Perhaps, King Tutankhamen could reveal the secrets of the ancient world: its stories of creation and the gods, its rulers worshiped as gods, its monuments to divine power and the mystery of death. In the eyes of King Tutankhamen, so ancient yet so familiar, perhaps we see the elemental beginnings of human civilization; from his lips, perhaps we hear the tales of the first adventures of the human spirit.

The First Humans

Characterize the likely purpose or function of Stone Age art.

The first modern humans appeared some 200,000 years ago in Africa, eventually migrating to Asia and Europe and beyond. The earliest humans sustained themselves in small clans by hunting and gathering food; eventually, they developed a culture that shares much with later human civilizations. They built monumental structures—mystic circles of stone and swelling mounds of soil—to commune with the powers of heaven and the dark earth. They buried their dead with provisions to console their spirits in the next life. Around their fires, they must have chanted stories of cosmic battles and heroic deeds.

Early humans made their most rapid cultural progress during the Upper Paleolithic period, or Late Stone Age (see chart page 26). In this span, barely a tenth of their history, humans learned to make tools, sew clothing, build dwellings, bake clay, and—most spectacularly—draw and paint. In the caves of southwest Europe, artists painted and engraved images of great animals of power—mammoths, bison, lions, and rhinoceros—with uncanny realism. At Lascaux [LAH-skoh] in France, oxen and horses seem to thunder across the cave wall (Fig. 2.2).

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The First Humans

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The first modern humans appeared some 200,000 years ago in Africa, eventually migrating to Asia and Europe and beyond. The earliest humans sustained themselves in small clans by hunting and gathering food; eventually,
By the Neolithic period, or New Stone Age (see chart), humans had begun to shape the physical environment itself, creating megalithic (large stone) structures. One of the earliest, begun about 10,500 B.C., has been found at Göbekli Tepe [guh-BEK-lee TEPP ee], in modern-day Turkey. Here early Neolithic builders constructed successive sacred rings, containing gigantic T-shaped pillars carved with animal figures. The most famous megalithic shrine, Stonehenge in England (Fig. 2.3), was built much later. Its circular outer ring is composed of standing megaliths in post-and-lintel form. The stones’ astronomical alignment indicates that Stonehenge’s builders worshiped cosmic forces; on-site burials, recently discovered, suggest a belief in its healing powers.

The Neolithic saw perhaps the most important shift in humans’ way of life, from food-gathering to food-growing economies. Human domestication of crops and animals—today called the Neolithic revolution—enabled the first large-scale human settlement, first in Asia and eventually across the globe.

**Mesopotamia**

Identify similar religious themes and artistic features in ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

The largest cities—and the first centers of human civilization—arose in the ancient Near East (southwest Asia from present-day Turkey to Iran and Arabia). At this region’s heart were the easily irrigated plains of Mesopotamia (literally “between the rivers,” located in present-day Iraq)—a region justifiably called the cradle of human civilization (Fig. 2.4). In Mesopotamia [mez-oh-po-TAY mee-uh], cities arose along the Tigris and Euphrates [yoo-FRAY teez] rivers that nurtured achievements in the arts, writing, and law. Mesopotamia’s rich cities were also the prize for a succession of empires that dominated the ancient Near East and northern Africa during ancient times.

**The Sumerians**

By 3500 B.C., Mesopotamia’s fields and pastures supported a dozen cities inhabited by the Sumerians [soo-MER ee uns], the first people to use writing and construct monumental buildings. Sumerian writing (called cuneiform) originally consisted of pictures pressed into clay tablets, probably used to record contracts and tabulate goods. Sumerian cuneiform eventually evolved into a word-based and then a sound-based system—a rapid and important progress for human civilization. The final stage would be alphabetic writing, fully achieved in Mycenaean Greece (see page 41).

Sumer’s riches supported a substantial ruling class and
the leisure time necessary for fine arts. In a Sumerian tomb at Ur, archaeologists have found the sound box of a spectacular lyre, decorated with a bull’s head (Fig. 2.5). The head itself is gold-covered wood, with a beard of lapis lazuli, a prized blue stone. The lyre was probably used in a funerary rite that included the ritual sacrifice of the musician who played it.

The Sumerian religion, as with most ancient belief, is known through surviving fragments of myth (see Key Concept, page 29). The Sumerian creation myth, called the Enuma elish [ay-NOO-mah AY-leesh], reflects the violence of the ancient world. The mother goddess Tiamat does battle with the rowdy seventh generation of gods, led by the fearsome Marduk. After Marduk slays Tiamat, he cleaves her body in half to create the mountains of Mesopotamia. The rivers Tigris and Euphrates arise from the flow of Tiamat’s blood. The creation of humanity is equally gruesome. Marduk shapes the first man from the blood of a sacrificed deity, to serve the gods as a slave.

2.4 The Ancient World.
Large-scale urban civilization originated in Mesopotamia and spread westward across the Mediterranean and eastward into India and China.

In their sacred buildings, the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia honored the divine forces that controlled the rain and harvests. The first monumental religious structures were Sumerian stepped pyramids called ziggurats. Often made of mud-brick, the ziggurat was actually a gigantic altar. In mounting its steps, worshipers rose beyond the ordinary human world into the realm of the gods. The great ziggurat at Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 b.c.) was dedicated to the moon-god and was probably topped by a temple for sacrifices (Fig. 2.6).

Empires of the Near East
The myths and art of the ancient Near East reflected the succession of conquerors and empires that governed the region. Typically, rulers were regarded as gods, sons of...
2.5 Soundbox of a lyre from a royal tomb at Ur, Iraq, c. 2550–2400 B.C. Wood with gold, lapis lazuli, and shell inlay. Height 17 ins (43 cm). University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
The decorative panel shows mythic animals bearing food and wine to a banquet. An ass plays a version of the bull’s head lyre, while at bottom a scorpion man gives a dinner oration to musical accompaniment.

2.4 Reconstruction drawing of the ziggurat of Ur-Nammu at Ur, Iraq, c. 2100 B.C. Rising from the Mesopotamian plain, the ziggurat lifted the altars of Sumerian worshipers toward the sacred region of the gods. Comparable “sacred mountains” can be seen in the pyramids of Egyptian and Mesoamerican civilizations.

By this notion of sacred kingship, the gods’ power and blessings flowed directly through the king’s person. For example, in the world’s oldest heroic story, the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2000 B.C.), the Sumerian hero-king Gilgamesh learns that immortality belongs only to the gods. He returns home to rule his kingdom with benevolence. Old Babylon’s most significant king was Hammurabi [hah-moo-RAH-bee] (ruled 1792–1750 B.C.), who instituted a legal code dictating the orderly resolution of disputes and uniform punishments for crime. A stone pillar carved with Hammurabi’s Code depicts him at the throne of Shamash, god of the sun and justice, receiving his blessing.

The Old Babylonian empire was followed by that of the Assyrians, skilled and ruthless warriors whose conquests extended to lower Egypt. One Assyrian ruler decorated his palace at Nimrud (in modern-day Iraq) with scenes of lion hunts and luxuriant gardens. When Babylonian rule was revived in the seventh century B.C., Nebuchadnezzar II [neh-buh-kahd-NEZZ-er] (ruled 604–562 B.C.) rebuilt the capital. It included the imposing Ishtar Gate, made...
KEY CONCEPT

Myth

Ancient humans celebrated their most important beliefs in myths, stories that explained in symbolic terms the nature of the cosmos and humans’ place in the world. Myths arose from the earliest humans’ evident belief in a higher reality, a sacred dimension beyond or beneath human experience. Myths described the beings of this hidden world, the gods themselves and the extraordinary humans who communed with the divine. A culture’s mythic lore passed orally from one generation to the next, evolving with each telling to reflect changes in the people’s life and world. This lore included myths proper as well as folk tales, legends, fables, and folk wisdom, all elaborated in a bizarre symbolic logic akin to that of dreams. Eventually cultures recorded their myths in written epics and sacred scriptures, the forms in which we inherit these stories today.

Myths served as the science and philosophy of ancient peoples, explaining cosmic mysteries in the graphic terms of human experience—virtue and trickery, birth and death, and sex and war. For example, myths described the world’s creation in vivid scenes that often seem bizarre to the modern mind. In the Maya Popol Vuh, the gods create humans first from mud, then from wood. But the heaven’s rulers are so disappointed with the result that they obliterate the world in a dark, resinous downpour. Finally the gods shape a suitable race of humans from ground maize: “of yellow corn and of white corn they made their flesh; of corn-meal dough they made the arms and the legs of man,” reads the ancient text. The gods then command humanity to honor them with prayer, blood sacrifice, and artful gifts.

The Maya creation story reflects themes common to mythic thinking: the world’s destruction by fire or flood, humans’ obligation to sacrifice to the gods, and humanity’s penchant for violating divine commands. In myths and their related rituals, humans celebrated the cosmic order and communed with the divine forces that controlled their lives. Myths explained catastrophic events and individual misfortune as part of the fabric of divine purpose.

Anthropologist Bronislav Malinowski saw myths as social charters in narrative form, the equivalent of today’s political constitutions and social histories. Myths were “not merely a story told but a reality lived,” he claimed. This lived reality is evident in some of the oldest human artifacts, such as the woman or goddess from Willendorf (Fig. 2.7). The sculpted female body, especially in pregnancy and birth, offered symbolic connection to the earth’s fertility and the renewal of life. Even where women were oppressed in the ancient world, goddesses such as the Babylonian Inanna-Ištar and the Egyptian Isis inspired cultic reverence.

2.7  Woman from Willendorf, Austria, c. 30,000–25,000 B.C. Limestone, height 4 1/2 ins (11.5 cm). Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The swelling forms of the figure’s breasts, belly, and thighs are symbolic of the female’s (and therefore of the earth’s) fertility. Small figures like this one could well have been used as charms in easing the pains of childbirth.

Modern thinkers have studied myth as the vehicle of spiritual and psychological truth. Religious scholar Mircea Eliade argued that myths revealed a “sacred history,” a mysterious and sublime truth that cannot be explained by rational or scientific language. Pioneer psychologist C. G. Jung claimed that myths expressed universal mental images, or archetypes, images that also appear in dreams, literature, and art. Even today, mythic truth—the stories and lore of a sacred dimension beyond our experience—lies at the core of religious and spiritual belief.
of turquoise bricks, and a great ziggurat described as having seven levels, each painted a different color.

The last and greatest Near Eastern empire was that of the Persians, established by the conqueror Cyrus II (ruled 559–530 B.C.). His successor Darius built a palace at Persepolis that boasted towering columns and a grand staircase, decorated with a procession of figures bearing taxes and tribute from Mesopotamia’s rich cities. It was an unmistakable statement of Persian domination. In the fourth century B.C., however, Persepolis itself fell to the Greek general Alexander the Great, who left its ruins to stand in the desert as a reminder of the vanity of power (Fig. 2.8).

Ancient Egypt

In contrast to the upheaval and diversity of the Near East, the people of Egypt created a remarkably stable and homogeneous civilization that endured some 3,000 years. Geographically, Egypt was unified by the Nile River and enriched by its annual floods. Politically and religiously, it was united under the rule of the pharaohs, god-kings who erected stupendous monuments along the banks of the Nile. The vitality of Egypt’s religion fostered an achievement in the arts that still inspires awe today.

Egypt: Religion and Society

The Greek historian Herodotus said the Egyptians were the most religious people he knew, and their religious faith inspired much of Egypt’s greatest art. Like most ancient peoples, the Egyptians believed in many gods, a form of religion known as polytheism. Some gods (often portrayed as animals) had only local powers. Other deities played roles in mythic dramas of national significance. The myth of Isis and Osiris, for example, reenacts the political struggle between lower and upper Egypt. The god Seth (representing upper Egypt) murders and dismembers his brother Osiris. But Osiris’ wife Isis gathers his scattered limbs and resurrects him in the
underworld. Henceforth, Osiris rules the realm of life after death. Seth, meanwhile, is defeated by the falcon-god Horus, in whose name Egypt’s pharaohs ruled the realm of the living.

The early Egyptians believed that life continued unchanged after death, an expectation that gave rise to the great pyramids of the Old Kingdom (see chart), monumental tombs built to contain the bodies of the pharaohs. The Great Pyramids at Giza (Fig. 2.9) are gigantic constructions of limestone block. They were part of a vast funerary complex that included lesser buildings and processional causeways lined with statues (Fig. 2.10). The largest pyramid covered 13 acres (5.2 ha) at its base, and was built of more than two million huge stone blocks. Shafts and rooms in the interior accommodated the

<table>
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<td>Early Dynastic (Archaic)</td>
<td>Egypt united; first hieroglyphic writing</td>
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<td>2700–2190 B.C.</td>
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2.9 Pyramids of Mycerinus, Chephren, and Cheops at Giza, Egypt, c. 2525–2460 B.C.
In addition to their religious and political significance, the pyramids were massive state-sponsored employment projects.

2.10 Mycerinus (or Menkaure) and Queen Khamererneby, Giza, c. 2515 B.C. Graywacke, height 54 1/2 ins (139 cm).
Harvard University—Museum of Fine Arts Expedition.
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
This sculptural pair stood on the processional causeway leading to Mycerinus’ pyramid. The figures’ bodily proportions were calculated on a grid determined by a strict rule, or “canon,” of proportion, like Greek statues of the Greek classical era.
pharaoh’s mummified body and the huge treasure of objects required for his happy existence after death.

Attention to the spirits of the dead remained a central theme of Egyptian religion and art. Though they never duplicated the pyramids’ scale, rock-cut tombs were carved into the rocky cliffs along the Nile in the so-called Valley of the Kings during the Middle Kingdom period. These tombs were hidden to protect them (unsuccessfully) from grave robbers.

The Arts of Egypt

Even in the wall painting, informal sculpture, and other arts that made their lives colorful and pleasant, the Egyptians were conservative and restrained. The one exception was during the brief reign of Akhenaten [ahk-NAH-tun] (ruled 1379–1362 b.c.), who introduced new religious ideas and fostered a distinctive artistic style of great intimacy. Shortly after he came to power, Akhenaten broke with the dominant cult of Amon-Re and its powerful priesthood at the temple complex in Thebes, where Akhenaten established a new royal residence, or court. He fostered the worship of the little-known god Aten, the sun-disc, whose life-giving powers he praised in a famous hymn:

Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland,
When you shine as Aten of daytime;
As you dispel the dark,
As you cast your rays.

The Great Hymn to Aten was inscribed on a tomb at Amarna, the site about 200 miles (320 km) up the Nile from Thebes where Akhenaten established a new court. Distanced from the temples of Karnak and Luxor, the court at Amarna fostered a style of unprecedented intimacy. Images depict the royal family—Akhenaten, his queen Nefertiti, and their children—lounging beneath the life-giving rays of the sun-disc. The pharaoh kisses one child, while Nefertiti bounces another on her knee.

Akhenaten’s religious and artistic innovations were short-lived. His successor Tutankhamen [too-tahnk-AM-uh-mon] (1361–1352 b.c.)—whose tomb was such a rich and famous discovery in the twentieth century—restored the cult of Amon-Re and destroyed most of the buildings dedicated to Aten. A late blossoming of Egyptian art under Ramesses II (ruled 1292–1225 b.c.) saw yet more monuments to power and richly decorated tombs.

It was not uncommon for Egyptian queens to attain considerable status and power within the royal court. Early in the New Kingdom, Queen Hatshepsut ruled all of Egypt for two decades (1479–1458 b.c.), and memorialized herself with a huge colonnaded temple near the Valley of the Kings. The famous site of Abu Simbel, carved into the side of a cliff, bears witness to another prominent queen: there, equal in size to the colossal statue of Ramesses II, was the figure of his favored queen Nefertari. Tradition holds that Nefertari assisted Ramesses on diplomatic missions that helped expand the Egyptian empire.

Queen Nefertari’s tomb in the Valley of the Queens...
In the third millennium B.C., the rise of agriculture and urbanization supported rapid development in every center of human settlement, from Asia to the Americas. As in the ancient Near East, early civilizations in Asia arose in great river valleys. In the Western Hemisphere, human advancement followed a path similar to Old World civilizations.

**The Indus Valley**

In the rich Indus Valley of southern Asia (today’s Pakistan and India), the ancient world’s largest civilization thrived for a thousand years. The *Indus Valley* (or Harappan) civilization (2600–1750 B.C.) supported a network of comfortable cities that traded across a broad swath of the Indian subcontinent. Modern excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have revealed the remains of unfortified cities laid out on an orderly grid plan (Fig. 2.12). With public baths, sanitary sewers, and large assembly halls, the Indus Valley cities offered comforts that some city-dwellers might wish for today.

The remains of Indus Valley civilization reveal a thriving cultural life but, surprisingly, nothing of the elaborate temple cultures found at other ancient centers. Scenes
on sculpted seals indicate that Indus residents venerated sacred trees and horned animals such as their humped cattle. Other Harappan sculpture was probably made for personal enjoyment. Two remarkable male torsos, one a dancing figure, capture the interacting planes and rounded shapes of the human form (Fig. 2.13). In their mastery of dynamic tension, these small figures are a landmark in human artmaking.

About 1750 B.C., the spacious Harappan cities suffered a decline that scholars long attributed to foreign invasion but which is now blamed on climate change. About the same time, a warlike, horse-riding people who called themselves *Aryans* migrated into southern Asia. From Aryan language and lore arose the *Vedas* [VAY-duhz], India’s founding religious scriptures and one of humanity’s most ancient surviving religious traditions. The oldest Vedic texts are hymns to the sky-gods and prayers to accompany fire-sacrifice, the principal Vedic ritual. About 800 B.C., Vedic sages composed philosophical commentaries, known as the *Upanishads*, that speculated on the unity of the individual soul and the universe. The Vedic tradition blossomed again between 400 and 200 B.C. with the composition of the popular epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. This rich body of scripture and poetry became the basis for India’s dominant faith, Hinduism, which took shape in the sixth century B.C. Hinduism sanctioned a rigid class or caste system, through which virtuous souls might ascend in a cycle of death and rebirth. Hinduism’s beliefs were the foundation of other Asian faiths, including Buddhism (see page 90).
**Bronze Age China**

Of all the ancient civilizations discussed here, only China can trace its unbroken development from the present day to its Bronze Age beginnings. Agriculture in ancient China dates to around 5000 B.C., town life to around 4000 B.C. Chinese civilization appeared in the valleys of the three great rivers of its central region.

Bronze Age China divides its history between two great dynasties. The Shang [shahng] Dynasty (c. 1500–1045 B.C.) was a warrior culture whose rulers built walled cities and gigantic tombs in the Yellow River Valley. Their principal artistic media were carved jade (a hard green stone) and cast bronze. Shang bronzes (Fig. 2.14) included

![Ritual wine vessel or hu, Shang Dynasty, c. 1300–1100 B.C. Bronze, height 16 ins (40.6 cm). Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 55-52](image)

The ambiguous, mask-like design on this vessel, the taotie, can be interpreted as a face with the flaring nostrils of an ox, or as two dragons with serpent tails facing each other in profile.

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**KEY CONCEPT**

**Civilizations and Progress**

When modern genetic science determined that humans are genetically nearly identical, it threw new light on an old question of human history: why have different civilizations progressed at different rates? Why, as one scholar has asked, did Europeans colonize the peoples of America, starting around 1520, rather than vice versa?

Old and sometimes ugly answers to this question referred to religious or racial superiority. Modern anthropologists and archaeologists claim the answers are rooted in the material conditions of human civilization. It was no accident, for example, that humans first achieved large-scale agriculture and animal domestication in the ancient Near East. This region had a stock of wild plants, animals, and metal ores that were easily adapted to human use (ancestors of the almond and the hog, for example), as well as a friendly climate and a diverse geography.

Settled urban life also produced a surplus of goods that motivated the invention of writing, necessitated complex political organizations, and supported the first large-scale agriculture—all cultural bonuses added to environmental advantage. The region’s good fortune in the availability of crucial metal ores stimulated the technologies of metalworking. These components of human progress spread easily across Eurasia (the land mass stretching from Japan to Spain) because of another natural blessing—a geography that eased migration along those moderate latitudes.

By comparison, human settlement in other continents faced considerable barriers. Africa’s and America’s elongated north–south orientation, their equatorial forests (and in the case of the Americas, a mountainous central isthmus) prevented the easy interchange of goods and technology. The stock of domesticable plants and animals was less robust, and populations remained smaller. Without a surplus of wealth, written accounting systems were less important. Many cultures outside Eurasia never bothered to invent complex writing systems at all.

By the year 1000 B.C., the fate of human civilizations across the globe had already been deeply molded by geography and culture. Although they were all probably descended from the same small tribe of ancestors, the human societies of Eurasia, Africa, and America were destined to progress at different rates for thousands more years. When Renaissance Spain collided with Incan society in Peru, it was not the Incas’ gold, but rather Pizarro’s gunpowder, that decided the battle.

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**CRITICAL QUESTION**

What factors best explain the relative advantage of civilizations in the modern world? To what extent might that advantage be rooted in the geographical factors of human civilization’s beginnings?
ritual vessels and great bells decorated with fantastic animals, including a complex design called the *taotie*, which may be an animal mask or two dueling dragons.

The Shang fell to the conquering Zhou (1045–221 B.C.), a feudal kingdom whose king reigned as the Son of Heaven. Like the Shang, the Zhou [tchoh] practiced a form of ancestor worship and excelled at the manufacture of ritual bronze objects. As evidence of his extraordinary love of music, one Zhou ruler was buried with a carillon of sixty-five bronze bells, among hundreds of other musical instruments. The later Zhou period was marked by warring factions, until the Warring States period (402–221 B.C.) finally splintered the dynasty.

**Ancient America**

Modern humans migrated into the Americas, or New World, some 20,000 years ago or possibly even earlier, probably along a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. The exact course of human immigration and occupation is still poorly understood, but by 7000 B.C., New World peoples were domesticating crops such as maize, squash, and cotton. The first settled urban centers appeared in Mesoamerica (today’s Mexico and Central America) and along the Andes mountain range in South America. Distinctive and often highly advanced civilizations rose and fell in these two regions, supporting urban capitals and populations that may have equaled Old World cities in size and achievement.

In Mesoamerica, a civilization called the Olmec arose on the eastern coast of Mexico around 1500 B.C. Some scholars call the Olmecs the Americas’ “mother culture” because their cosmology, calendar-making, and pyramid construction influenced so many others. In a distinctive artistic style, the Olmecs carved stone images of the jaguar and the feathered serpent, both important to Mesoamerican religious belief. The Olmecs also sculpted huge helmeted heads, some 8 feet (2.4 m) tall, probably images of chieftains whom they regarded as gods (Fig. 2.15).

Later Mesoamerican cultural centers would bear the imprint of Olmec style and thought. In the high mountain valleys of today’s Mexico, a mysterious culture built the region’s most sacred city, Teotihuacán, where Mesoamericans believed the gods themselves had been born (see page 119). The most impressive Mesoamerican city was the Aztec imperial capital of Tenochtitlán, a spectacular floating city of pyramid altars and lush gardens. The Spaniard chronicler Bernal Díaz would write that Cortés’ soldiers “who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome” had never seen “so large a marketplace and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged.”

In the Andes, recent discoveries show that human settlements as early as 5000 B.C. had mastered the cultivation of crops, irrigation, and large-scale construction. The Andes’ first great cultural flowering came with the Chavin, contemporaries of the Olmecs, centered in the coastal regions of today’s Peru. The Chavin culture created ceremonial complexes of pyramidal altars and erected huge carved monoliths. Their iconography, typical of Andean civilization, included sacred animals like the caiman, serpent, and cat. The Andes’ greatest ancient city was Tiahuanaco (also Tiwanaku), located on the high plateau near Lake Titicaca. At its height around 400 B.C., this city’s population may have reached 40,000 and its imperial power extended north along the Andean coast. Tiahuanaco’s highly stratified society anticipated the rule of the Inca a thousand years later, when the Andean region was unified in a brief but remarkable empire.

In North America, human settlement was more diffuse and took a smaller scale, with important centers in the

2.15 Colossal head, from San Lorenzo, La Venta, Mexico. Middle Formative period, c. 900 B.C. Basalt, height 7 ft 5 ins (226 cm). La Venta Park, Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico.

The Olmec carved colossal heads like this one.
desert Southwest and the Mississippi River basin. Few North American peoples practiced large-scale agriculture or built the monumental urban centers of their sister civilizations to the south. One fascinating monumental construction was a great serpent mound in the Ohio River Valley. Small-scale art focused on decorated pottery; stone carving was rare.

Compared to their little-known beginnings, the ending of the New World civilizations is all too familiar. In the sixteenth century, European conquerors subjugated Aztec and Inca empires and laid waste to their glittering cities. Native populations were devastated by European diseases, suffering death rates as high as ninety-five percent. In spite of resistance, the survivors fell to European’s colonial rule, often losing all but a faint memory of their continent’s glorious achievement.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

**The First Humans**  Arising in Africa and migrating across the world, modern humans made a rapid cultural advance in the Late Stone Age (about 10,000 B.C.). Humans expressed a reverence for nature and remembered the dead in their first artistic achievements, including the cave art of southwest France and small figurines of powerfully symbolic female figures. Megalithic complexes such as Stonehenge in England—the first monumental human buildings—indicate early humans’ profound religious connection to the universe.

**Mesopotamia**  Spawned by the Neolithic revolution, the first great cities appeared in the Bronze-Age Near East, on the fertile river plains of Mesopotamia. Here the Sumerians developed the first forms of writing and recorded their mythic thought in the Enûma elish. Myths were also celebrated in rituals on huge temple-altars (ziggurats). Ruled by god-kings like the legendary Gilgamesh, a succession of great empires dominated the ancient Near East. They included Babylonia, with its law-giving king Hammurabi, and Persia, remembered for its great palace at the capital Persepolis.

**Ancient Egypt**  The geography of Egypt—protected by desert and unified by the Nile River—fostered a stable civilization ruled by pharaoh-kings. Egypt’s complex myths and rituals centered on the afterlife. To contain the mummified dead, the Egyptians built huge pyramids and elaborately decorated tombs. To honor the gods, they constructed vast temple complexes at Karnak and elsewhere. Egyptian arts reached a high point under the unorthodox pharaoh Akhenaten and in the gracefully decorated tomb of Nefertari.

**Asia and America**  In the Indus Valley of southern Asia, a highly developed civilization built the ancient world’s largest and most advanced cities. This so-called Harappan civilization was supplanted by Aryan settlers, whose great legacy was the Vedic tradition of mystical prayers and hymns. In China, the Bronze Age dynasties of the Shang and Zhou left masterpieces of jade and bronze, the foundation of China’s immensely rich artistic tradition. In the ancient Americas, a succession of civilizations rose and fell at centers in today’s Mexico and the Andes highlands.