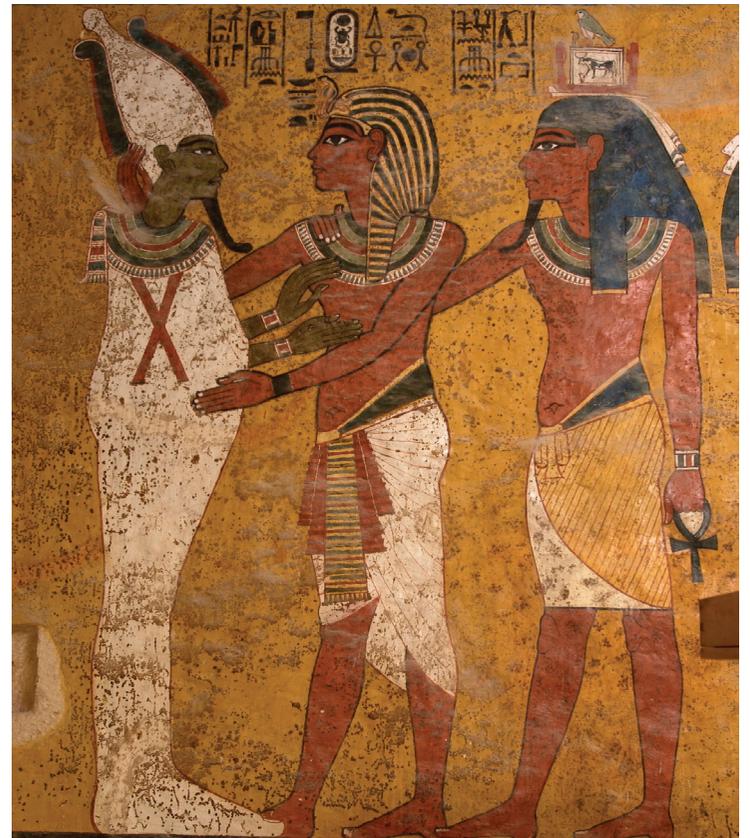


The Pharaoh Tutankahmun (r. 1336–1327 B.C.E.), with his “ka” (life force) in attendance, embraces Osiris, god of the Afterlife. This wall painting is from Tutankahmun’s tomb, which was discovered in the 1920s. “King Tut” died at the age of eighteen. © François Guenet/Art Resource, NY

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1

The Birth of Civilization

▼ Early Humans and Their Culture

The Paleolithic Age • The Neolithic Age • The Bronze Age and the Birth of Civilization

▼ Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

Mesopotamian Civilization • Egyptian Civilization

▼ Ancient Near Eastern Empires

The Hittites • The Assyrians • The Second Assyrian Empire • The Neo-Babylonians

▼ The Persian Empire

Cyrus the Great • Darius the Great • Government and Administration • Religion • Art and Culture

▼ Palestine

The Canaanites and the Phoenicians • The Israelites • The Jewish Religion

▼ General Outlook of Mideastern Cultures

Humans and Nature • Humans and the Gods, Law, and Justice

▼ Toward the Greeks and Western Thought

▼ In Perspective

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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 Near East?

What were the Persian rulers' attitudes toward the cultures they ruled?

How was Hebrew monotheism different from Mesopotamian and Egyptian polytheism?

Why was Greek rationalism such an important break with earlier intellectual traditions?

HISTORY, IN ITS two senses—as the events of the past that make up the human experience on earth and as the written record of those events—is a subject of both interest and importance. We naturally want to know how we came to be who we are, and how the world we live in came to be what it is. But beyond its intrinsic interest, history provides crucial insight into present human behavior. To understand who we are now, we need to know the record of the past and to try to understand the people and forces that shaped it.

For hundreds of thousands of years after the human species emerged, people lived by hunting, fishing, and collecting wild plants. Only some 10,000 years ago did they learn to cultivate plants, herd animals, and make airtight pottery for storage. These discoveries transformed them from gatherers to producers and allowed them to grow in number and to lead a settled life. About 5,000 years ago humans learned how to control the waters of great river valleys, making possible much richer harvests and supporting a further increase in population. The peoples of these river valley societies created the earliest civilizations. They invented writing, which, among other things, enabled them to keep inventories of food and other resources. They discovered the secret of smelting metal to make tools and weapons of bronze far superior to the stone implements of earlier times. They came together in towns and cities, where industry and commerce flourished. Complex religions took form, and social divisions increased. Kings—considered to be representatives of the gods or to be themselves divine—emerged as rulers, assisted by priests and defended by well-organized armies.

The first of these civilizations appeared among the Sumerians before 3500 B.C.E. in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley we call Mesopotamia. From the Sumerians to the Assyrians and Babylonians, a series of peoples ruled Mesopotamia, each shaping and passing along its distinctive culture, before the region fell under the control of great foreign empires. A second early civilization emerged in the Nile Valley around 3100 B.C.E. Egyptian civilization developed a remarkably continuous pattern, in part because Egypt was largely protected from invasion by the formidable deserts surrounding the valley. The essential character of Egyptian civilization changed little for nearly 3,000 years. Influences from other areas, however, especially Nubia to the south, Syria-Palestine to the northeast, and the Aegean to the north, may be seen during many periods of Egyptian history.

By the fourteenth century B.C.E., several powerful empires had arisen and were vying for dominance in regions that included Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor. Northern warrior peoples, such as the Hittites who dominated Asia Minor, conquered and ruled peoples in various areas. For two centuries, the Hittite and Egyptian Empires struggled with each other for control of Syria-Palestine. By about 1200 B.C.E., however, both these

empires had collapsed. Beginning about 850 B.C.E., the Assyrians arose in northern Mesopotamia and ultimately established a mighty new empire, even invading Egypt in the early seventh century B.C.E. The Assyrians were dominant until the late seventh century B.C.E., when they fell to a combination of enemies. Their vast empire was overtaken by the Babylonians, but these people, too, would soon become only a small, though important, part of the enormous empire of Persia.

Among all these great empires nestled a people called the Israelites, who maintained a small, independent kingdom in the region between Egypt and Syria for several centuries. This kingdom ultimately fell to the Assyrians and later remained subject to other conquerors. The Israelites possessed little worldly power or wealth, but they created a powerful religion, Judaism, the first certain and lasting worship of a single god in a world of polytheism. Judaism was the seedbed of two other religions that have played a mighty role in the history of the world: Christianity and Islam. The great empires have collapsed, their power forgotten for millennia until the tools of archaeologists uncovered their remains, but the religion of the Israelites, in itself and through its offshoots, has endured as a powerful force.

▼ Early Humans and Their Culture

Scientists estimate the earth may be as many as 6 billion years old and that creatures very much like humans appeared perhaps 3 to 5 million years ago, probably in Africa. Some 1 to 2 million years ago, erect and tool-using early humans spread over much of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Our own species, *Homo sapiens*, probably emerged some 200,000 years ago, and the earliest remains of fully modern humans date to about 90,000 years ago.

Humans, unlike other animals, are cultural beings. **Culture** may be defined as the ways of living built up by a group and passed on from one generation to another. It includes behavior such as courtship or childrearing practices; material things such as tools, clothing, and shelter; and ideas, institutions, and beliefs. Language, apparently a uniquely human trait, lies behind our ability to create ideas and institutions and to transmit culture from one generation to another. Our flexible and dexterous hands enable us to hold and make tools and so to create the material artifacts of culture. Because culture is learned and not inherited, it permits rapid adaptation to changing conditions, making possible the spread of humanity to almost all the lands of the globe.

The Paleolithic Age

Anthropologists designate early human cultures by their tools. The earliest period—the **Paleolithic** (from Greek, “old stone”)—dates from the earliest use of stone tools

some 1 million years ago to about 10,000 B.C.E. During this immensely long period, people were hunters, fishers, and gatherers, but not producers, of food. They learned to make and use increasingly sophisticated tools of stone and perishable materials like wood; they learned to make and control fire; and they acquired language and the ability to use it to pass on what they had learned.

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“The Toolmaker
3300 B.C.E.” on
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These early humans, dependent on nature for food and vulnerable to wild beasts and natural disasters, may have developed responses to the world rooted in fear of the unknown—of the uncertainties of human life or the overpowering forces of nature. Religious and magical beliefs and practices may have emerged in an effort to propitiate or coerce the superhuman forces thought to animate or direct the natural world. Evidence of religious faith and practice, as well as of magic, goes as far back as archaeology can take us. Fear or awe, exaltation, gratitude, and empathy with the natural world must all have figured in the cave art and in the ritual practices, such as burial, that we find evidenced at Paleolithic sites around the globe. The sense that there is more

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to the world than meets the eye—in other words, the religious response to the world—seems to be as old as humankind.

The style of life and the level of technology of the Paleolithic period could support only a sparsely settled society. If hunters were too numerous, game would not suffice. In Paleolithic times, people were subject to the same natural and ecological constraints that today maintain a balance between wolves and deer in Alaska.

Evidence from Paleolithic art and from modern hunter-gatherer societies suggests that human life in the Paleolithic Age was probably characterized by a division of labor by sex. Men engaged in hunting, fishing, making tools and weapons, and fighting against other families, clans, and tribes. Women, less mobile because of childbearing, gathered nuts, berries, and wild grains, wove baskets, and made clothing. Women gathering food probably discovered how to plant and care for seeds. This knowledge eventually made possible the development of agriculture and animal husbandry.

The Neolithic Age

Only a few Paleolithic societies made the initial shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture. Anthropologists and archaeologists disagree as to why, but however it happened, some 10,000 years ago parts of what we now call the Near East began to change from a nomadic hunter-gatherer culture to a more settled agricultural one. Because the shift to agriculture coincided with

advances in stone tool technology—the development of greater precision, for example, in chipping and grinding—this period is called the **Neolithic Age** (from Greek, “new stone,” the later period in the Stone Age). Productive animals, such as sheep and goats, and food crops, such as wheat and barley, were first domesticated in the mountain foothills where they already lived or grew in the wild. Once domestication had taken place, people could move to areas where these plants and animals did not occur naturally, such as the river valleys of the Near East. The invention of pottery during the Neolithic Age enabled people to store surplus foods and liquids and to transport them, as well as to cook agricultural products that were difficult to eat or digest raw. Cloth was made from flax and wool. Crops required constant care from planting to harvest, so Neolithic farmers built permanent dwellings. The earliest of these tended to be circular huts, large enough to house only one or two people and clustered in groups around a central storage place. Later people built square and rectangular family-sized houses with individual storage places and enclosures to house livestock. Houses in a Neolithic village were normally all the same size and were built on the same plan, suggesting that most Neolithic villagers had about the same level of wealth and social status. A few items, such as stones and shells, were traded long distance, but Neolithic villages tended to be self-sufficient.

Two larger Neolithic settlements do not fit this village pattern. One was found at Çatal Höyük, in a fertile agricultural region about 150 miles south of Ankara, the capital of present-day Turkey. This was a large town covering over fifteen acres, with a population probably well over 6,000 people. The houses were clustered so closely that they had no doors but were entered by ladders from the roofs. Many were decorated inside with sculptures of animal heads and horns, as well as paintings that were apparently redone regularly. Some appear to depict ritual or festive occasions involving men and women. One is the world’s oldest landscape picture, showing a nearby volcano exploding. The agriculture, arts, and crafts of this town were astonishingly diversified and at a much higher level of attainment than other, smaller settlements of the period. The site of Jericho, an oasis around a spring near the Dead Sea, was occupied as early as 12,000 B.C.E. Around 8000 B.C.E., a town of eight to ten acres grew up, surrounded by a massive stone wall with at least one tower against the inner face. Although this wall may have been for defense, its use is disputed because no other Neolithic settlement has been found with fortifications. The inhabitants of Neolithic Jericho had a mixed agricultural, herding, and hunting economy and may have traded salt. They had no pottery but plastered the skulls of their dead to make realistic memorial portraits of them. These two sites show that the economy and the settlement patterns of the Neolithic period may be more complicated than many scholars have thought.

Throughout the Paleolithic Age, the human population had been small and relatively stable. The shift from food gathering to food production may not have been associated with an immediate change in population, but over time in the regions where agriculture and animal husbandry appeared, the number of human beings grew at an unprecedented rate. One reason for this is that farmers usually had larger families than hunters. Their children began to work and matured at a younger age than the children of hunters. When animals and plants were domesticated and brought to the river valleys, the relationship between human beings and nature was changed forever. People had learned to control nature, a vital prerequisite for the emergence of civilization. But farmers had to work harder and longer than hunters did, and they had to stay in one place. Herders, in contrast, often moved from place to place in search of pasture and water, returning to their villages in the spring. Some scholars refer to the dramatic changes in subsistence, settlement, technology, and population of this time as the *Neolithic Revolution*. The earliest Neolithic societies appeared in the Mideast about 8000 B.C.E., in China about 4000 B.C.E., and in India about 3600 B.C.E. Neolithic agriculture was based on wheat and barley in the Mideast, on millet and rice in China, and on corn in Mesoamerica, several millennia later.

In 1991 a discovery in the Ötztal Tyrolean Alps on the border between Italy and Austria shed new light on the Neolithic period. A tourist came upon a frozen body, which turned out to be the oldest mummified human being yet discovered. Dated to about 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, and several of his ribs were fractured. An arrowhead in his shoulder suggests he bled to death in the ice and snow. He wore a fur robe made of the skins of mountain animals, and under it he wore a woven grass cape. His shoes were made of leather stuffed

with grass. He was heavily armed for his time, carrying a dagger of flint and a bow with arrows also tipped in flint. He also carried an axe whose



Ötzi is the nickname scientists have given to the remains of the oldest mummified human body yet discovered. This reconstruction shows his probable appearance and the clothing and weapons found on and with him. Wieslaw Smetek/Stern/Black Star

blade was made of copper, indicating that metallurgy was already under way. His discovery provides vivid evidence of the beginning of the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age.

The Bronze Age and the Birth of Civilization

Neolithic agricultural villages and herding cultures gradually replaced Paleolithic culture in much of the world. Then another major shift occurred, first in the plains along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the region the Greeks and Romans called **Mesopotamia** (modern Iraq), later in the valley of the Nile River in Egypt, and somewhat later in India and the Yellow River basin in China. This shift was associated initially with the growth of towns alongside villages, creating a hierarchy of larger and smaller settlements in the same region. Some towns then grew into much larger urban centers and often drew population into them, so that nearby villages and towns declined. The urban centers, or cities, usually had monumental buildings, such as temples and fortifications. These were vastly larger than individual houses and could be built only by the sustained effort of hundreds and even thousands of people over many years. Elaborate representational artwork appeared, sometimes made of rare and

imported materials. New technologies, such as smelting and the manufacture of metal tools and weapons, were characteristic of urban life. Commodities, like pottery and textiles that had been made in individual houses in villages, were mass produced in cities, which also were characterized by social stratification—that is, the grouping of people into classes based on factors such as control of resources, family, religious or political authority, and personal wealth. The earliest writing is also associated with the growth of cities. Writing, like representational art, was a powerful means of communicating over space and time and was probably invented to deal with urban problems of management and record keeping.

These attributes—urbanism; technological, industrial, and social change; long-distance trade; and new methods of symbolic communication—are defining characteristics of the form of human culture called **civilization**. At about the time the earliest civilizations were emerging, someone discovered how to combine tin and

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“A Visitor from the Neolithic Age—The Iceman (3300 B.C.E.)” on MyHistoryLab.com

copper to make a stronger and more useful material—bronze. Archaeologists coined the term **Bronze Age** to refer to the period 3100 to 1200 B.C.E. in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean.

▼ Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

By 4000 B.C.E., people had settled in large numbers in the river-watered lowlands of Mesopotamia and Egypt. By about 3000 B.C.E., when the invention of writing gave birth to history, urban life and the organization of society into centralized states were well established in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia and of the Nile River in Egypt.

Much of the population of cities consists of people who do not grow their own food, so urban life is possible only where farmers and stockbreeders can be made to produce a substantial surplus beyond their own needs. Also, some process has to be in place so this surplus can be collected and redeployed to sustain city dwellers. Efficient farming of plains alongside rivers, moreover, requires intelligent management of water resources for irrigation. In Mesopotamia, irrigation was essential because in the south (later Babylonia), there was not enough rainfall to sustain crops. Furthermore, the rivers, fed by melting snows in Armenia, rose to flood the fields in the spring, about the time for harvest, when water was not needed. When water was needed for the autumn planting, less was available. This meant that people had to build dikes to keep the rivers from flooding the fields in the spring and had to devise means to store water for use in the autumn. The Mesopotamians became skilled at that activity early on. In Egypt, however, the Nile River flooded at the right moment for cultivation, so irrigation was simply a matter of directing the water to the fields. In Mesopotamia, villages, towns, and cities tended to be strung along natural watercourses and, eventually, man-made canal systems. Thus, control of water could be important in warfare because an enemy could cut off water upstream of a city to force it to submit. Since the Mesopotamian plain was flat, branches of the rivers often changed their courses, and people would have to abandon their cities and move to new locations. Archeologists once believed that urban life and centralized government arose in response to the need to regulate irrigation. This theory supposed that only a strong, central authority could construct and maintain the necessary waterworks. However, archeologists have now shown that large-scale irrigation appeared only long after urban civilization had already developed, so major waterworks were a *consequence* of urbanism, not a cause of it.

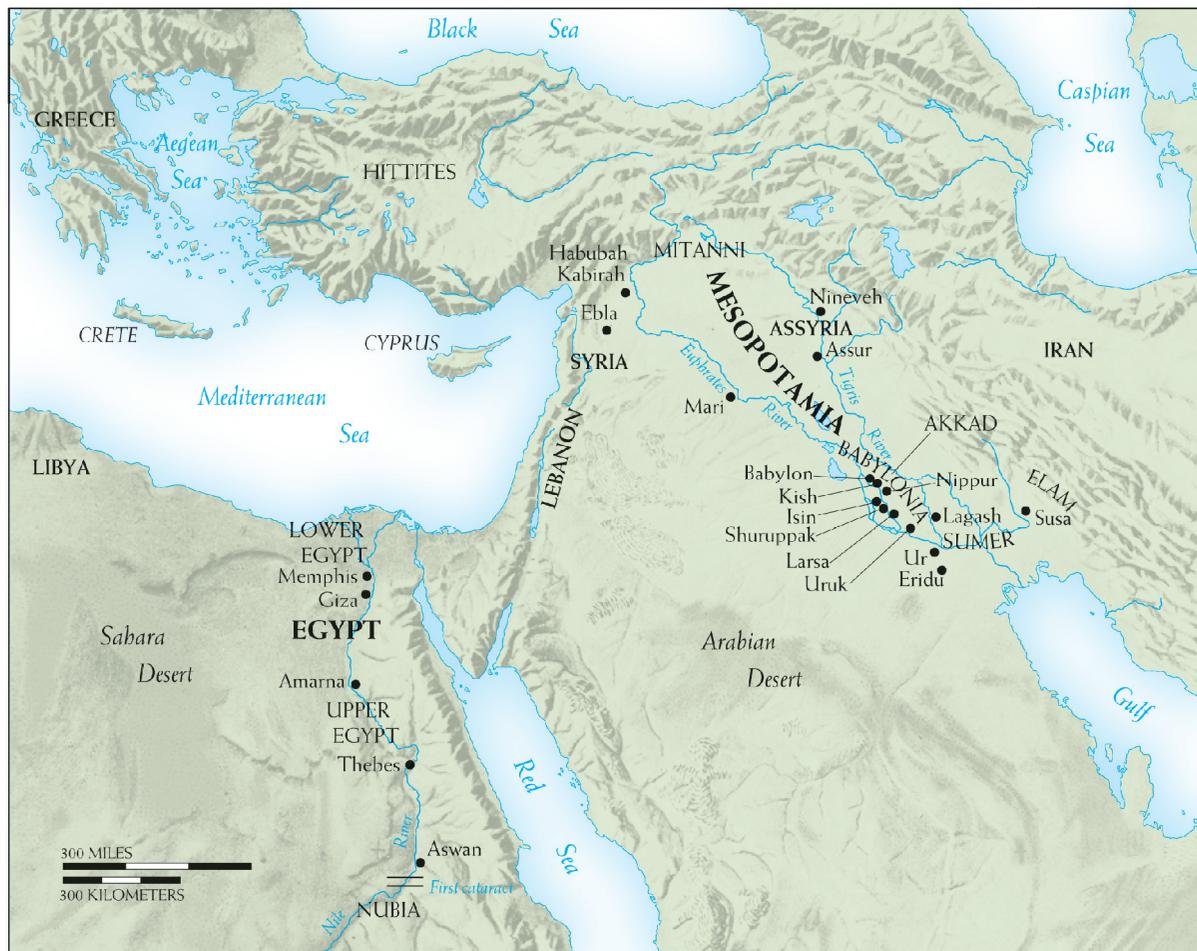
Mesopotamian Civilization

The first civilization appears to have arisen in Mesopotamia. The region is divided into two ecological zones, roughly north and south of modern Baghdad. In the south (Babylonia), as noted, irrigation is vital; in the north (later Assyria), agriculture is possible with rainfall and wells. The south has high yields from irrigated lands, whereas the north has lower yields, but much more land under cultivation, so it can produce more than the south. The oldest Mesopotamian cities seem to have been founded by a people called the Sumerians during the fourth millennium B.C.E. in the land of Sumer, which is the southern half of Babylonia. By 3000 B.C.E., the Sumerian city of Uruk was the largest city in the world. (See Map 1–1.) Colonies of people from Uruk built cities and outposts in northern Syria and southern Anatolia. One of these, at Habubah Kabirah on the Euphrates River in Syria, was built on a regular plain on virgin ground, with strong defensive walls, but was abandoned after a few generations and never inhabited again. No one knows how the Sumerians were able to establish colonies so far from their homeland or even what their purpose was. They may have been trading centers.

From about 2800 to 2370 B.C.E., in what is called the Early Dynastic period, several Sumerian city-states, independent political units consisting of a major city and its surrounding territory, existed in southern Mesopotamia, arranged in north–south lines along the major watercourses. Among these cities were Uruk, Ur, Nippur, Shuruppak, and Lagash. Some of the city-states formed leagues among themselves that apparently had both political and religious significance. Quarrels over water and agricultural land led to incessant warfare, and in time, stronger towns and leagues conquered weaker ones and expanded to form kingdoms ruling several city-states.

Peoples who, unlike the Sumerians, mostly spoke Semitic languages (that is, languages in the same family as Arabic and Hebrew) occupied northern Mesopotamia and Syria. The Sumerian language is not related to any language known today. Many of these Semitic peoples absorbed aspects of Sumerian culture, especially writing. At the western end of this broad territory, at Ebla in northern Syria, scribes kept records using Sumerian writing and studied Sumerian word lists. In northern Babylonia, the Mesopotamians believed the large city of Kish had the first kings in history. In the far east of this territory, not far from modern Baghdad, a people known as the Akkadians established their own kingdom at a capital city called Akkade, under their first king, Sargon, who had been a servant of the king of Kish.

The Akkadians conquered all the Sumerian city-states and invaded southwestern Iran and northern Syria. This was the first empire in history, having a heartland, provinces, and an absolute ruler. It included numerous



Map 1-1 **THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST** There were two ancient river valley civilizations. Egypt was united into a single state, and Mesopotamia was long divided into a number of city-states.

peoples, cities, languages, and cultures, as well as different ecological zones, under one rule. Sargon's name became legendary as the first great conqueror of history. His grandson, Naram-Sin, ruled from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, with a standardized administration, unheard-of wealth and power, and a grand style that to later Mesopotamians was a high point of their history. Naram-Sin even declared himself a god and had temples built to himself, something no Sumerian ruler had ever done. External attack and internal weakness destroyed the Akkadian Empire, but several smaller states flourished independently, notably Lagash in Sumer, under its ruler Gudea.

About 2125 B.C.E., the Sumerian city of Ur rose to dominance, and the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur established an empire built on the foundation of the Akkadian Empire, but far smaller. In this period, Sumerian culture and literature flourished. Epic poems were composed, glorifying the deeds of the ancestors of the kings of Ur. A highly centralized administration kept detailed records of agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce, and other matters. Over 100,000 of these documents have been found in the ruins of Sumerian

cities. After little more than a century of prominence, the kingdom of Ur disintegrated in the face of famine and invasion. From the east, the Elamites attacked the city of Ur and captured the king. From the north and west, a Semitic-speaking people, the Amorites, invaded Mesopotamia in large numbers, settling around the Sumerian cities and eventually founding their own dynasties in some of them, such as at Uruk, Babylon, Isin, and Larsa.

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"The Royal Standard of Ur" on
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The fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur put an end to Sumerian rule, and the Sumerians gradually disappeared as an identifiable group. The Sumerian language survived only in writing as the learned language of Babylonia taught in schools and used by priests and scholars. So great was the respect for Sumerian that seventeen centuries after the fall of Ur, when Alexander the Great arrived in Babylon in 331 B.C.E., Sumerian was still used as a scholarly and religious language there.

For some time after the fall of Ur, there was relative peace in Babylonia under the Amorite kings of Isin, who used Sumerian at their court and considered themselves



The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, the Akkadian ruler, commemorates the king's campaign (c. 2230 B.C.E.) against the Lullubi, a people living in the northern Zagros Mountains, along the eastern frontier of Mesopotamia. Kings set up monuments like this one in the courtyards of temples to record their deeds. They were also left in remote corners of the empire to warn distant peoples of the death and enslavement awaiting the king's enemies (pink sandstone). Victory stele of Naram-Sin, King of Akkad, over the mountain-dwelling Lullubi, Mesopotamian, Akkadian Period, c. 2230 B.C. (pink sandstone). Louvre, Paris, France/The Bridgeman Art Library International Ltd.

the successors of the kings of Ur. Eventually, another Amorite dynasty at the city of Larsa contested control of Babylonia, and a period of warfare began, mostly centering around attacks on strategic points on waterways. A powerful new dynasty at Babylon defeated Isin, Larsa, and other rivals and dominated Mesopotamia for nearly 300 years. Its high point was the reign of its most famous king, Hammurabi (r. ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.), best known

today for the collection of laws that bears his name. (See “Hammurabi’s Law Code,” page 10.) Hammurabi destroyed the great city of Mari on the Euphrates and created a kingdom embracing most of Mesopotamia.

 **Read the Document**
“Hammurabi’s Law Code (1700s B.C.E.)” on MyHistoryLab.com

Collections of laws existed as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur, and Hammurabi’s owed much to earlier models and different legal traditions. His collection of laws, now referred to as the Code of Hammurabi, reveals a society divided by class. There were nobles, commoners, and slaves, and the law did not treat all of them equally. In general, punishments were harsh, based literally on the principle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” whereas Sumerian law often levied fines instead of bodily mutilation or death. Disputes over property and other complaints were heard in the first instance by local city assemblies of leading citizens and heads of families. Professional judges heard cases for a fee and held court near the city gate. In Mesopotamian trials, witnesses and written evidence had to be produced and a written verdict issued. False testimony was punishable by death. Sometimes the contesting parties would submit to an oath before the gods, on the theory that no one would risk swearing a false oath. In cases where evidence or oath could not establish the truth, the contesting parties might take an ordeal, such as being thrown into the river for the god to decide who was telling the truth. Cases of capital punishment could be appealed to the king. Hammurabi was closely concerned with the details of his kingdom, and his surviving letters often deal with minor local disputes.

About 1600 B.C.E., the Babylonian kingdom fell apart under the impact of invasions from the north by the Hittites, Hurrians, and Kassites, all non-Mesopotamian peoples.

KEY EVENTS AND PEOPLE IN MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY

ca. 3500 B.C.E.	Development of Sumerian cities, especially Uruk
ca. 2800–2370 B.C.E.	Early Dynastic period of Sumerian city-states
ca. 2370 B.C.E.	Sargon establishes Akkadian dynasty and Akkadian Empire
ca. 2125–2027 B.C.E.	Third Dynasty of Ur
ca. 2000–1800 B.C.E.	Establishment of Amorites in Mesopotamia
ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.	Reign of Hammurabi

Government From the earliest historical records, it is clear that the Sumerians were ruled by monarchs in some form. The earliest Sumerian rulers are shown in their art leading an army, killing prisoners, and making offerings to the gods. The type of rule varied at different times and places. In later Assyria, for example, the king served as chief priest; in Babylonia, the priesthood was separate from royalty. Royal princesses were sometimes appointed as priestesses of important gods. One of the most famous of these was Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad. She is the first author in history whose writings can be identified with a real person. Although she was an Akkadian, she wrote complicated, passionate, and intensely personal poetry in the Sumerian language, in which she tells of important historical events that she experienced. In one passage, she compares the agony of writing a poem to giving birth.

The government and the temples cultivated large areas of land to support their staffs and retinue. Laborers of low social status who were given rations of raw foods and other commodities to sustain them and their families did some of the work on this land. Citizens leased some land for a share of the crop and a cash payment. These lands were carefully surveyed, and sometimes the crop could be estimated in advance. The government and temples owned large herds of sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys. The Sumerian city-states exported wool and textiles to buy metals, such as copper, that were not available in Mesopotamia. Families and private individuals often owned their own farmland or houses in the cities, which they bought and sold as they liked.

Writing and Mathematics Government, business, and scholarship required a good system of writing. The Sumerians invented the writing system now known as **cuneiform** (from the Latin *cuneus*, “wedge”) because of the wedge-shaped marks they made by writing on clay tablets with a cut reed stylus. At first the writing system was sketchy, giving only a few elements of a sentence to help a reader remember something he probably already knew. Later, people thought to write whole sentences in the order in which they were to be spoken, so writing could communicate new information to a reader. The Sumerian writing system used several thousand characters, some of which stood for words and some for sounds. Some characters stood for many different sounds or words, and some sounds could be written using a choice of many different characters. The result was a writing system that was difficult to learn. Sumerian students were fond of complaining about their unfair teachers, how hard their schoolwork was, and their too-short vacations. Sumerian and Babylonian schools emphasized language and literature, accounting, legal practice, and mathematics, especially geometry, along with memorization of much abstract knowledge

that had no relevance to everyday life. The ability to read and write was restricted to an elite who could afford to go to school. Success in school, however, and factors such as good family connections meant a literate Sumerian could find employment as a clerk, surveyor, teacher, diplomat, or administrator.

The Sumerians also began the development of mathematics. The earliest Sumerian records suggest that before 3000 B.C.E. people had not yet thought of the concept of “number” independently of counting specific things. Therefore, the earliest writing used different numerals for counting different things, and the numerals had no independent value. (The same sign could be 10 or 18, for example, depending on what was counted.) Once an independent concept of number was established, mathematics developed rapidly. The Sumerian system was based on the number 60 (“sexagesimal”), rather than the number 10 (“decimal”), the system in general use today. Sumerian counting survives in the modern 60-minute hour and the circle of 360 degrees. By the time of Hammurabi, the Mesopotamians were expert in many types of mathematics, including mathematical astronomy. The calendar the Mesopotamians used had twelve lunar months of thirty days each. To keep it in accordance with the solar year and the seasons, the Mesopotamians occasionally introduced a thirteenth month.

Religion The Sumerians and their successors worshiped many gods and goddesses. They were visualized in human form, with human needs and weaknesses. Most of the gods were identified with some natural phenomenon such as the sky, fresh water, or storms. They differed from humans in their greater power, sublime position in the universe, and immortality. The Mesopotamians believed the human race was created to serve the gods and to relieve the gods of the necessity of providing for themselves. The gods were considered universal, but also residing in specific places, usually one important god or goddess in each city. Mesopotamian temples were run like great households where the gods were fed lavish meals, entertained with music, and honored with devotion and ritual. There were gardens for their pleasure and bedrooms to retire to at night. The images of the gods were dressed and adorned with the finest materials. Theologians organized the gods into families and generations. Human social institutions, such as kingship, or crafts, such as carpentry, were associated with specific gods, so the boundaries between human and divine society were not always clearly drawn. Because the great gods were visualized like human rulers, remote from the common people and their concerns, the Mesopotamians imagined another more personal intercessor god who was supposed to look after a person, rather like a guardian spirit. The public festivals of the gods were important holidays, with

A Closer LOOK

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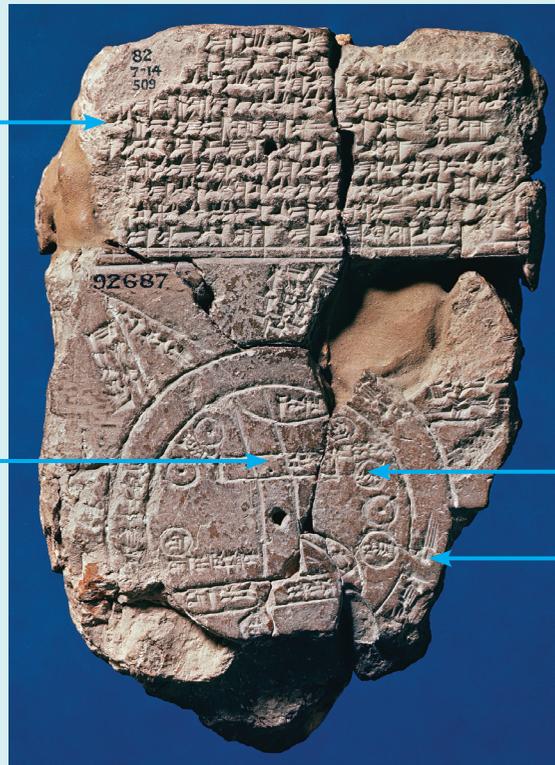
BABYLONIAN WORLD MAP

Cartography was among the many intellectual achievements of the Babylonians. The map illustrated here was inscribed on a clay tablet about 600 B.C.E., and appears to be the earliest surviving map of the world.

The Babylonians did not intend this map to be a precise or literal picture of the universe or even of the land on which human beings lived, for they omitted any representation of such important and numerous peoples as the Egyptians and Persians, whom they knew very well.

There is a text written in cuneiform script above the picture and on the back of the tablet that help makes its identification as a map secure.

The tablet shows the world from a Babylonian point of view as flat and round, with Babylon sitting at its center on the Euphrates River.



Surrounding Babylon are cities and lands, including Armenia and Assyria, and all the lands are encircled by a "Bitter River." Beyond that are seven islands arranged to form a seven-pointed star.

Babylonian/The Art Gallery Collection/Alamy

What can we learn from this map about how the Babylonians saw the world around them and their own place in it?

Why do you think this map locates some of the Babylonians' neighbors but ignores other important neighboring cultures?

Why has cartography remained so important throughout the ages?

Is the subjectivity reflected here confined to this map or is it a general characteristic of cartography throughout history?

Document

HAMMURABI'S LAW CODE



Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.E.) ruled the great Babylonian Empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. Building on older Mesopotamian laws, he compiled one of the great ancient codes, the most complete collection of Babylonian laws. His legal decisions were inscribed in the Semitic Akkadian language in cuneiform script placed in Babylon's temple of Marduk. It contains 282 case laws dealing with economics (prices, tariffs, trade, and commerce), family law (marriage and divorce), criminal law (assault, theft), and civil law (slavery, debt). The stone was discovered in the ancient Persian capital of Susa in 1901 and can now be found in the Louvre in Paris.

What principles of justice underlie the cases shown here? By what rights did Hammurabi claim to declare the law?

LAWS

- If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.
- If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye.
- If he has broken another seignior's bone, they shall break his bone.
- If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver.
- If he has destroyed the eye of a seignior's slave or broken the bone of a seignior's slave, he shall pay one-half his value.
- If a seignior has knocked out a tooth of a seignior of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.
- If he has knocked out a commoner's tooth, he shall pay one-third mina of silver. . . .

EPILOGUE

I, Hammurabi, the perfect king,
 was not careless (or) neglectful of the black-headed (people),
 whom Enlil had presented to me,
 (and) whose shepherding Marduk had committed to me;
 I sought out peaceful regions for them;
 I overcame grievous difficulties; . . .
 With the mighty weapon which Zababa and Inanna entrusted to me,
 with the insight that Enki allotted to me,
 with the ability that Marduk gave me,
 I rooted out the enemy above and below;
 I made an end of war;
 I promoted the welfare of the land;
 I made the peoples rest in friendly habitations; . . .
 The great gods called me,
 so I became the beneficent shepherd whose scepter is righteous . . .

From James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*. © 1958 Princeton University Press, 1986 renewed PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

parades, ceremonies, and special foods. People wore their best clothes and celebrated their city and its gods. The Mesopotamians were religiously tolerant and readily accepted the possibility that different people might have different gods.

The Mesopotamians had a vague and gloomy picture of the afterworld. The winged spirits of the dead were recognizable as individuals. They were confined to a dusty, dark netherworld, doomed to perpetual hunger and thirst unless someone offered them food and

drink. Some spirits escaped to haunt human beings. There was no preferential treatment in the afterlife for those who had led religious or virtuous lives—everyone was in equal misery. Mesopotamian families often had a ceremony to remember and honor their dead. People were usually buried together with goods such as pottery and ornaments. In the Early Dynastic period, certain kings were buried with a large retinue

 **Read the Document**
 "Excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*" on
MyHistoryLab.com

of attendants, including soldiers and musicians, who apparently took poison during the funeral ceremony and were buried where they fell. But this practice soon disappeared. Children were sometimes buried under the floors of houses. Some families used burial vaults; others, large cemeteries. No tombstones or inscriptions identified the deceased. Mesopotamian religion focused on problems of this world and how to lead a good life before dying. (See “Encountering the Past: Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia,” page 12.)

Religion played a large part in the literature and art of Mesopotamia. Epic poems told of the deeds of the gods, such as how the world was created and organized, of a great flood the gods sent to wipe out the human race, and of the hero-king Gilgamesh, who tried to escape death by going on a fantastic journey to find the sole survivor of the great flood. (See “Compare and Connect: The Great Flood,” page 14.) There were also many literary and artistic works that were not religious in character, so we should not imagine religion dominated all aspects of the Mesopotamians’ lives. Religious architecture took the form of great temple complexes in the major cities. The most imposing religious structure was the *ziggurat*, a tower in stages, sometimes with a small chamber on top. The terraces may have been planted with trees to resemble a mountain. Poetry about ziggurats often compares them to mountains, with their peaks in the sky and their roots in the netherworld, linking heaven to earth, but their precise purpose is not known. Eroded remains of many of these monumental structures still dot the Iraqi landscape. Through the Bible, they have entered Western tradition as “the tower of Babel.”

Society Hundreds of thousands of cuneiform texts from the early third millennium B.C.E. until the third century B.C.E. give us a detailed picture of how peoples in ancient Mesopotamia conducted their lives and of the social conditions in which they lived. From the time of Hammurabi, for example, there are many royal letters to and from the various rulers of the age, letters from the king to his subordinates, administrative records from many different cities, and numerous letters and documents belonging to private families.

Categorizing the laws of Hammurabi according to the aspects of life with which they deal reveals much about Babylonian life in his time. The third largest category of laws deals with commerce, relating to such issues as contracts, debts, rates of interest, security, and default. Business documents of Hammurabi’s time show how people invested their money in land, money-lending, government contracts, and international trade. Some of these laws regulate professionals, such as builders, judges, and surgeons. The second largest category of laws deals with land tenure, especially land given by the king to soldiers and marines in return for their service. The letters of Hammurabi that deal with

land tenure show he was concerned with upholding the individual rights of landholders against powerful officials who tried to take their land from them. The largest category of laws relates to the family and its maintenance and protection, including marriage, inheritance, and adoption.

Parents usually arranged marriages, and betrothal was followed by the signing of a marriage contract. The bride usually left her own family to join her husband’s. The husband-to-be could make a bridal payment, and the father of the bride-to-be provided a dowry for his daughter in money, land, or objects. A marriage started out monogamous, but a husband whose wife was childless or sickly could take a second wife. Sometimes husbands also sired children from domestic slave women. Women could possess their own property and do business on their own. Women divorced by their husbands without good cause could get their dowry back. A woman seeking divorce could also recover her dowry if her husband could not convict her of wrongdoing. A married woman’s place was thought to be in the home, but hundreds of letters between wives and husbands show them as equal partners in the ventures of life. (See “An Assyrian Woman Writes to Her Husband, ca. 1800 B.C.E.,” page 17.) Single women who were not part of families could set up in business on their own, often as tavern owners or moneylenders, or could be associated with temples, sometimes working as midwives and wet nurses, or taking care of orphaned children.

Slavery: Chattel Slaves and Debt Slaves There were two main types of slavery in Mesopotamia: chattel and debt slavery. Chattel slaves were bought like any other piece of property and had no legal rights. They had to wear their hair in a certain way and were sometimes branded or tattooed on their hands. They were often non-Mesopotamians bought from slave merchants. Prisoners of war could also be enslaved. Chattel slaves were expensive luxuries during most of Mesopotamian history. They were used in domestic service rather than in production, such as fieldwork. A wealthy household might have five or six slaves, male and female.

Debt slavery was more common than chattel slavery. Rates of interest were high, as much as 33.3 percent, so people often defaulted on loans. One reason the interest rates were so high was that the government periodically canceled certain types of debts, debt slavery, and obligations, so lenders ran the risk of losing their money. If debtors had pledged themselves or members of their families as surety for a loan, they became the slave of the creditor; their labor went to pay the interest on the loan. Debt slaves could not be sold but could redeem their freedom by paying off the loan. True chattel slavery did not become common until the Neo-Babylonian period (612–539 B.C.E.).

DIVINATION IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

DIVINATION ATTEMPTS TO foretell the future by the use of magic or occult practices. The ancient Mesopotamians put much thought and effort into discovering signs that they believed would indicate future events, interpreting the meaning of these signs, and taking steps to avert evil. Mesopotamians believed in divination the way many people today put their trust in science.

One of the earliest divination methods the Mesopotamians used involved the sacrifice of sheep and goats. Seers examined the entrails of the sacrificed animals to look for deformations that could foretell the future. Clay tablets recorded particular deformations and the historical events they had foretold. The search for omens in the entrails of sacrificial animals was especially important for Mesopotamian kings, who always performed that ceremony before undertaking important affairs of state.

But animal sacrifice was expensive. Most Mesopotamians, therefore, used other devices. They burned incense and examined the shape of the smoke that arose. They poured oil into water and studied the resulting patterns for signs. They found omens in how people

answered questions or in what they overheard strangers say. They collected clay tablets—their books—that described people's appearance and what it might tell them about the future.

The heavens were another source of omens. Astrologers recorded and interpreted the movements of the stars, planets, comets, and other heavenly bodies. Mesopotamia's great progress in astronomy derived in large part from this practice. The study of dreams and of unusual births, both human and animal, was also important. Troubled dreams and monstrous offspring had frightening implications for human affairs.

All these practices derived from the belief that the gods sent omens to warn human beings. Once the omens had been interpreted, the Mesopotamians sought to avert danger with magic and prayers.

How did the Mesopotamians try to learn what would happen in the future, and what did they try to do about what they learned?

How would they explain their great interest in omens?



Astrological calendar. From Uruk, Mesopotamia. Astrological calendar. From Uruk, Mesopotamia. Babylonian, 1st mill. B.C.E. Museum of Oriental Antiquities, Istanbul, Turkey. Photograph © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Although laws against fugitive slaves or slaves who denied their masters were harsh—the Code of Hammurabi permits the death penalty for anyone who sheltered or helped a runaway slave to escape—Mesopotamian slavery appears enlightened compared with other slave systems in history. Slaves were generally of the same people as their masters. They had been enslaved because of misfortune from which their masters were not immune, and they generally labored alongside them. Slaves could engage in business and, with certain restrictions, hold property. They could marry free men or women, and the resulting children would normally be free. A slave who acquired the means could buy his or her freedom. Children of a slave by a master might be allowed to share his property after his death. Nevertheless, slaves were property, subject to an owner's will, and had little legal protection.

Egyptian Civilization

As Mesopotamian civilization arose in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, another great civilization emerged in Egypt, centered on the Nile River. From its sources in Lake Victoria and the Ethiopian highlands, the Nile flows north some 4,000 miles to the Mediterranean. Ancient Egypt included the 750-mile stretch of smooth, navigable river from Aswan to

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the sea. South of Aswan the river's course is interrupted by several cataracts—rocky areas of rapids and whirlpools.

The Egyptians recognized two sets of geographical divisions in their country. **Upper** (southern) **Egypt** consisted of the narrow valley of the Nile. **Lower** (northern) **Egypt** referred to the broad triangular area, named by the Greeks after their letter “delta,” formed by the Nile as it branches out to empty into the Mediterranean. (See Map 1–2, page 16.) They also made a distinction between what they termed the “black land,” the dark fertile fields along the Nile, and the “red land,” the desert cliffs and plateaus bordering the valley.

The Nile alone made agriculture possible in Egypt's desert environment. Each year the rains of central Africa caused the river to rise over its floodplain, cresting in September and October. In places the plain extends several miles on either side; elsewhere the cliffs slope down to the water's edge. When the floodwaters receded, they left a rich layer of organically fertile silt. The construction and maintenance of canals, dams, and irrigation ditches to control the river's water, together with careful planning and organization of planting and harvesting, produced an agricultural prosperity unmatched in the ancient world.

The Nile served as the major highway connecting Upper and Lower Egypt. There was also a network of desert roads running north and south, as well as routes

across the eastern desert to the Sinai and the Red Sea. Other tracks led to oases in the western desert. Thanks to geography and climate, Egypt was more isolated and enjoyed far more security than Mesopotamia. This security, along with the predictable flood calendar, gave Egyptian civilization a more optimistic outlook than the civilizations of the Tigris and Euphrates, which were more prone to storms, flash floods, and invasions.

The 3,000-year span of ancient Egyptian history is traditionally divided into thirty-one royal dynasties, from the first, said to have been founded by Menes, the king who originally united Upper and Lower Egypt, to the last, established by Alexander the Great, who conquered Egypt in 332 B.C.E. (as we see in Chapter 3). Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals, founded the Ptolemaic Dynasty, whose last ruler was Cleopatra. In 30 B.C.E., the Romans defeated Egypt, effectively ending the independent existence of a civilization that had lasted three millennia.

The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt was vital, for it meant the entire river valley could benefit from an unimpeded distribution of resources. Three times in its history, Egypt experienced a century or more of political and social disintegration, known as Intermediate Periods. During these eras, rival dynasties often set up separate power bases in Upper and Lower Egypt until a strong leader reunified the land.

The Old Kingdom (2700–2200 B.C.E.) The Old Kingdom represents the culmination of the cultural and historical developments of the Early Dynastic period. For over four hundred years, Egypt enjoyed internal stability and great prosperity. During this period, the **pharaoh** (the term comes from the Egyptian for “great house,” much as we use “White House” to refer to the president) was a king who was also a god. From his capital at Memphis, the god-king administered Egypt according to set principles, prime among them being *maat*, an ideal of order, justice, and truth. In return for the king's building and maintaining temples, the gods preserved the equilibrium of the state and ensured the king's continuing power, which was absolute. Since the king was obligated to act infallibly in a benign and beneficent manner, the welfare of the people of Egypt was automatically guaranteed and safeguarded.

Nothing better illustrates the nature of Old Kingdom royal power than the pyramids built as pharaonic tombs. Beginning in the Early Dynastic period, kings constructed increasingly elaborate burial complexes in Upper Egypt. Djoser, a Third Dynasty king, was the first to erect a monumental six-step pyramid of hard stone. Subsequent pharaohs built other stepped pyramids until Snefru, the founder of the Fourth Dynasty, converted a stepped to a true pyramid over the course of putting up three monuments.

 **View the Architectural Simulation** “Mastaba to Pyramid” on **MyHistoryLab.com**

 Read the **Compare and Connect** on [MyHistoryLab.com](https://www.mychistorylab.com)

STORIES OF A great deluge appeared in many cultures at various times in the ancient world. In the Mesopotamian world the earliest known story of a great flood sent by the gods to destroy mankind appeared in the Sumerian civilization. Later the story was included in the Gilgamesh epic in a Semitic language. The great flood of Noah's time appears in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible.

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is the story from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* similar to the Story of Noah in the Hebrew Bible?
2. How is the account of a great flood in the Story of Noah different from that in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*?
3. What is the significance of the similarities and differences between the two accounts?

I. The Babylonian Story of the Flood

The passage that follows is part of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. An earlier independent Babylonian Story of the Flood suggested that the gods sent a flood because there were too many people on the earth. A version of this story was later combined with the Epic of Gilgamesh, a legendary king who became terrified of death when his best friend and companion died. After many adventures, Gilgamesh crossed the distant ocean and the "waters of death" to ask Utanapishtim, who, with his wife, was the only survivor of the great flood, the secret of eternal life. In response, Utanapishtim narrated the story of the great flood, to show that his own immortality derived from a onetime event in the past, so Gilgamesh could not share his destiny.

'For six days and [seven] nights the wind blew, and the flood and the storm swept the land. But the seventh day arriving did the rainstorm subside and the flood which had heaved like a woman in travail; there quieted the sea, and the storm-wind stood still, the flood stayed her flowing. I opened a vent and the fresh air moved over my cheek-bones. And I looked at the sea; there was silence, the tide-way lay flat as a roof-top—but the whole of mankind had returned unto clay. I bowed low: I sat and I wept: o'er my cheek-bones my tears kept on running.

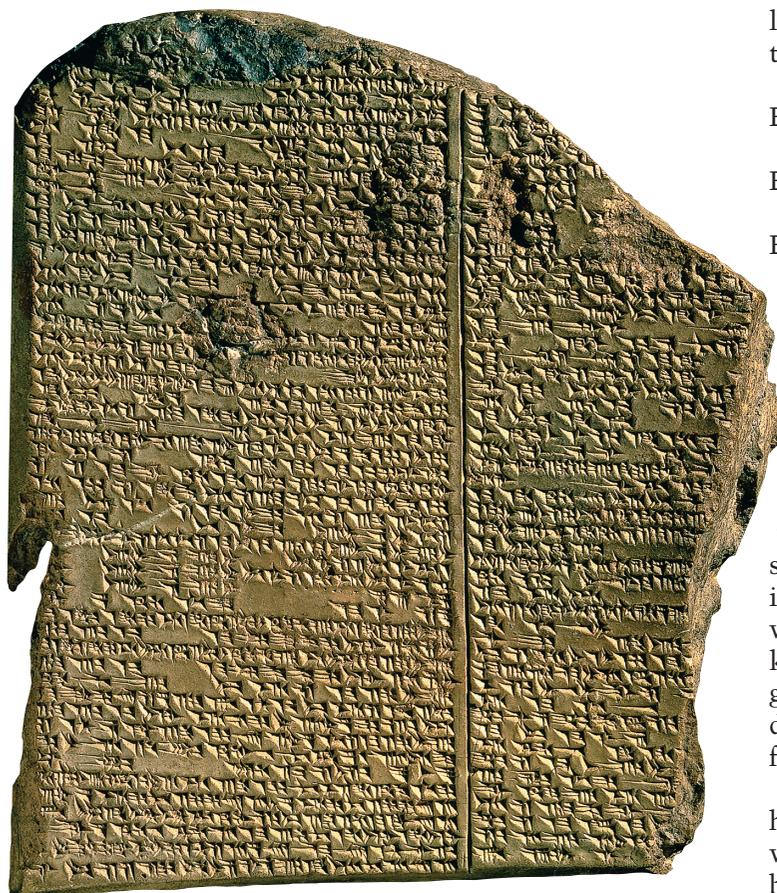
'When I looked out again in the directions, across the expanse of the sea, mountain ranges had emerged in twelve places and on Mount Nisir the vessel had grounded. Mount Nisir held the vessel fast nor allowed any movement. For a first day and a second, fast Mount

Nisir held the vessel nor allowed of any movement. For a third day and a fourth day, fast Mount Nisir held the vessel nor allowed of any movement. For a fifth and a sixth day, held Mount Nisir fast the vessel nor allowed of any movement.

'On the seventh day's arriving, I freed a dove and did release him. Forth went the dove but came back to me: there was not yet a resting-place and he came returning. Then I set free a swallow and did release him. Forth went the swallow but came back to me: there was not yet a resting-place and he came returning. So I set free a raven and did release him. Forth went the raven—and he saw again the natural flowing of the waters, and he ate and he flew about and he croaked, and came not returning.

'So all set I free to the four winds of heaven, and I poured a libation, and scattered a food-offering, on the height of the mountain. Seven and seven did I lay the vessels, heaped into their incense-basins sweet cane, cedar-wood and myrtle. And the gods smelled the savour, the gods smelled the sweet savour, the gods gathered like flies about the priest of the offering.

'Then, as soon as the Mother-goddess arrived, she lilted up the great jewels which, (in childhood, her father) Anu had made as a plaything for her: "O ye gods here present, as I still do not forget these lapis stones of my neck, so shall I remember these days—shall not forever forget them! If it please now the gods to come here to the offering, never shall Enlil come here to the offering, for without any discrimination he brought on the deluge, even (the whole of) my people consigned to destruction."



The Flood Tablet (Tablet XI), which relates part of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The eleventh tablet describes the meeting of Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim who, along with his wife, survived a great flood that destroyed the rest of humankind. British Museum, London, Great Britain/The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY

‘But as soon as Enlil arrived, he saw only the vessel—and furious was Enlil, he was filled with anger against the (heaven-) gods, the Igi: “Has aught of

livingkind escaped? Not a man should have survived the destruction!”

‘Ninurta opened his mouth and spake unto warrior Enlil:

“Who except Ea could have designed such a craft? For Ea doth know every skill of invention.”

‘Then Ea opened his mouth and spake unto warrior Enlil:

“O warrior, thou wisest among gods, how thus indiscriminately couldst thou bring about this deluge? (Had thou counselled): On the sinner lay his sin, on the transgressor lay his transgression: loosen (the rope) that his life be not cut off, yet pull tight (on the rope) that he do not [escape]; then instead of thy sending a Flood would that the lion had come and diminished mankind: instead of thy sending a Flood would that the wolf had come and diminished mankind; instead of thy sending a Flood would that a famine had occurred and impoverished mankind; instead of thy sending a Flood would that a pestilence had come and smitten mankind. And I, since I could not oppose the decision of the great gods, did reveal unto the Exceeding-Wise a (magic) dream, and thus did he hear the gods’ decision. Wherefore now take thee counsel concerning him.”

‘Thereupon Enlil went up into the vessel: he took hold of my hand and made me go aboard, he bade my wife go aboard and made her kneel at my side. Standing between us, he touched our foreheads and did bless us, saying: “Hitherto Utnapishti has been but a man; but now Utnapishti and his wife shall be as gods like ourselves. In the Far Distance, at the mouth of the Rivers, Utnapishti shall dwell.”

‘So they took me and did make me to dwell in the Far Distance, at the mouth of the Rivers. . . .’ ■

“The Babylonian Story of the Flood” from *Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, editor and translator (Harper Torchbook Series, 1958), pp. 22–24.

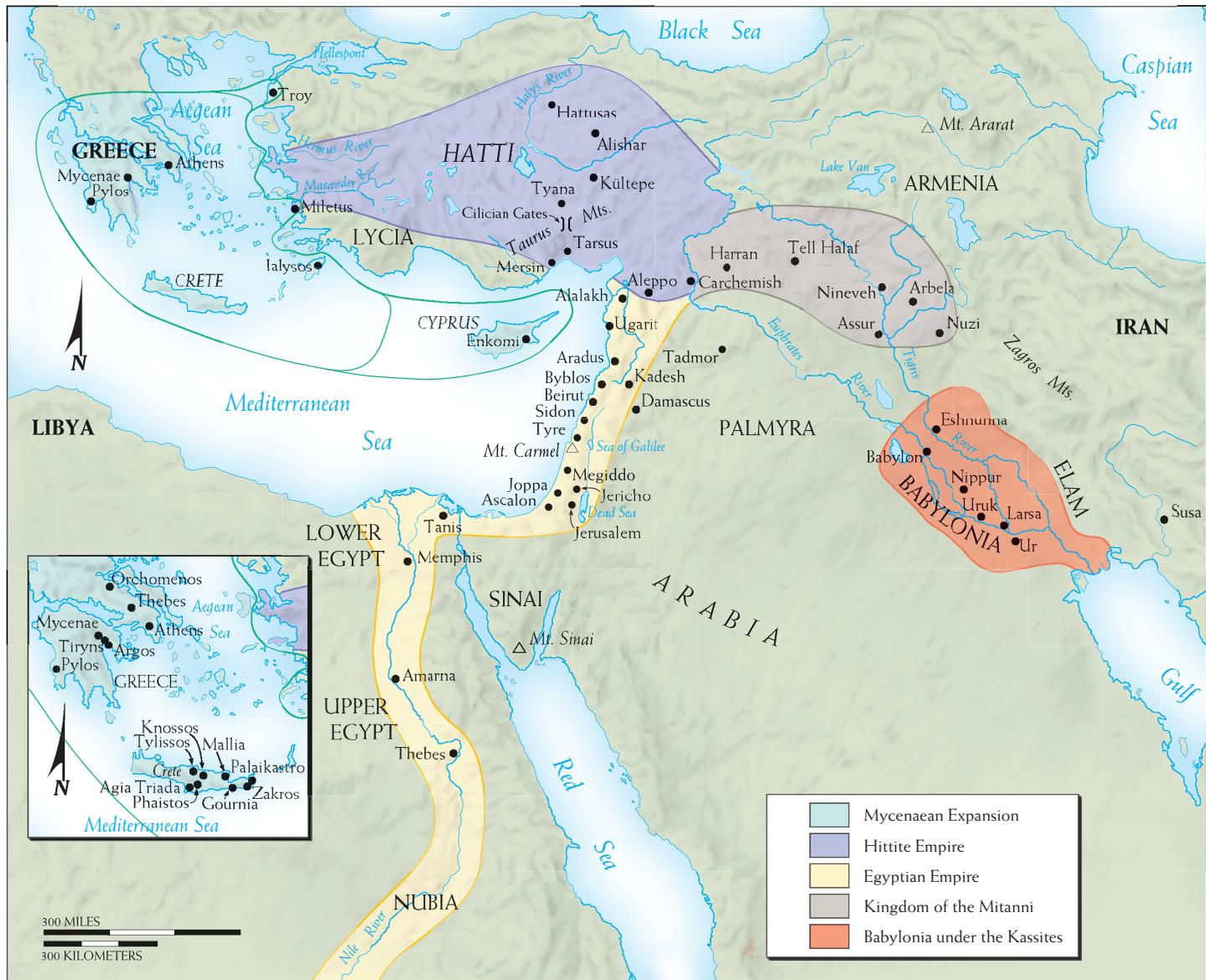
II. Noah’s Flood—Genesis 7.11–9.11

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. . . .

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it

and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more. . . .

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ■



Map 1-2 **THE NEAR EAST AND GREECE ABOUT 1400 B.C.E.** About 1400 B.C.E., the Near East was divided among four empires. Egypt extended south to Nubia and north through Palestine and Phoenicia. The Kassites ruled in Mesopotamia, the Hittites in Asia Minor, and the Mitanni in Assyrian lands. In the Aegean, the Mycenaean kingdoms were at their height.

MAJOR PERIODS IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HISTORY (DYNASTIES IN ROMAN NUMERALS)	
3100–2700 B.C.E.	Early Dynastic Period (I–II)
2700–2200 B.C.E.	Old Kingdom (III–VI)
2200–2052 B.C.E.	First Intermediate Period (VII–XI)
2052–1630 B.C.E.	Middle Kingdom (XII–XIII)
1630–1550 B.C.E.	Second Intermediate Period (XIV–XVII)
1550–1075 B.C.E.	New Kingdom (XVIII–XX)

His son Khufu (Cheops in the Greek version of his name) chose the desert plateau of Giza, south of Memphis, as the site for the largest pyramid ever constructed. Its dimensions are prodigious: 481 feet high, 756 feet long on each side, and its base covering 13.1 acres. The pyramid is made of 2.3 million stone blocks averaging 2.5 tons each. It is also a geometrical wonder, deviating from absolutely level and square only by the most minute measurements using the latest modern devices. Khufu's successors, Khafre (Chephren) and Menkaure (Mycerinus), built equally perfect pyramids at Giza, and together, the three constitute one of the most extraordinary achievements in human history. Khafre also built

Document

AN ASSYRIAN WOMAN WRITES TO HER HUSBAND, CA. 1800 B.C.E.



The wives of early Assyrian businessmen were often active in their husbands' business affairs. They made extra money for themselves by having slave girls weave textiles that the husbands then sold on business trips. Their letters are one of the largest groups of women's records from the ancient world. The woman writing this letter, Taram-Kubi, complains of her husband's selfishness and points out all the matters she has worked on during his absence on business.

What functions did this woman perform on behalf of the family? How do you judge her real power in regard to her husband? On what evidence do you base that judgment? What does this document reveal about the place of women in Assyrian society?

You wrote to me saying, "You'll need to safeguard the bracelets and rings which are there so they'll be available [to buy] food." In fact, you sent [the man] Ilum-bani a half pound of gold! Which are the bracelets you left me? When you left, you didn't leave me an ounce of silver, you picked the house clean and took away everything! After you left, there was a severe famine in the city. Not so much as a quart of grain did you leave me, I always had to buy grain for our food. Besides that, I paid

the assessment for the divine icon (?); in fact, I paid for my part in full. Besides that, I paid over to the Town Hall the grain owed [the man] Atata. What is the extravagance you keep writing to me about? There is nothing for us to eat—we're the ones being extravagant? I picked up whatever I had to hand and sent it to you—today I'm living in an empty house. It's high time you sent me the money realized on my weavings, in silver, from what you have to hand, so I can buy ten quarts of grain!

Trans. by Benjamin R. Foster, 1999.

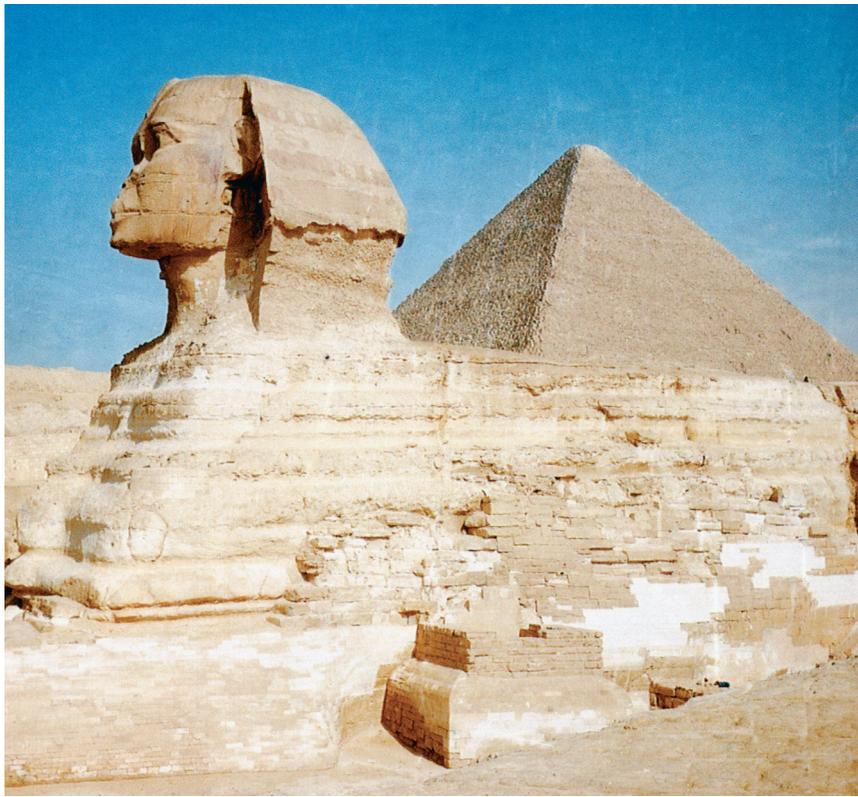
the huge composite creature, part lion and part human, that the Greeks named the Sphinx. Recent research has shown that the Sphinx played a crucial role in the solar cult aspects of the pyramid complex.

The pyramids are remarkable not only for the great technical skill they demonstrate, but also for the concentration of resources they represent. They are evidence that the pharaohs controlled vast wealth and had the power to focus and organize enormous human effort over the years it took to build each pyramid. They also provide a visible indication of the nature of the Egyptian state: The pyramids, like the pharaohs, tower above the land; the low tombs at their base, like the officials buried there, seem to huddle in relative unimportance.

Originally, the pyramids and their associated cult buildings contained statuary, offerings, and all the pharaoh needed for the afterlife. Despite great precautions and ingenious concealment methods, tomb robbers took nearly everything, leaving little for modern

archeologists to recover. Several full-size wooden boats have been found, however, still in their own graves at the base of the pyramids, ready for the pharaoh's journeys in the next world. Recent excavations have uncovered remains of the large town built to house the thousands of pyramid builders, including the farmers who worked at Giza during the annual flooding of their fields.

Numerous officials, both members of the royal family and nonroyal men of ability, aided the god-kings. The highest office was the *vizier* (a modern term from Arabic). Central offices dealing with granaries, surveys, assessments, taxes, and salaries administered the land. Water management was local rather than on a national level. Upper and Lower Egypt were divided into *nomes*, or districts, each governed by a *nomarch*, or governor, and his local officials. The kings could also appoint royal officials to oversee groups of nomes or to supervise pharaonic landholdings throughout Egypt.



The Great Sphinx has the body of a lion and the head of a man. It was carved at Giza in the reign of the Pharaoh Khafre (c. 2570–2544 B.C.E.). SEF/Art Resource, NY

The First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom (2200–1786 B.C.E.) Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, for a combination of political and economic reasons, absolute pharaonic power waned as the nomarchs and other officials became more independent and influential. About 2200 B.C.E., the Old Kingdom collapsed and gave way to the decentralization and disorder of the First Intermediate Period, which lasted until about 2052 B.C.E. Eventually, the kings of Dynasty 11, based in Thebes in Upper Egypt, defeated the rival Dynasty 10, based in a city south of Giza.

Amunemhet I, the founder of Dynasty 12 and the Middle Kingdom, probably began his career as a successful vizier under an Eleventh Dynasty king. After reuniting Upper and Lower Egypt, he turned his attention to making three important and long-lasting administrative changes. First, he moved his royal residence from Thebes to a brand-new town, just south of the old capital at Memphis, signaling a fresh start rooted in past glories. Second, he reorganized the nome structure by more clearly defining the nomarchs' duties to the state, granting them some local autonomy within the royal structure. Third, he established a co-regency system to smooth transitions from one reign to another.

Amunemhet I and the other Middle Kingdom pharaohs sought to evoke the past by building pyramid complexes like those of the later Old Kingdom rulers. Yet the

events of the First Intermediate Period had irrevocably changed the nature of Egyptian kingship. Gone was the absolute, distant god-king; the king was now more directly concerned with his people. In art, instead of the supremely confident faces of the Old Kingdom pharaohs, the Middle Kingdom rulers seem thoughtful, careworn, and brooding.

Egypt's relations with its neighbors became more aggressive during the Middle Kingdom. To the south, royal fortresses were built to control Nubia and the growing trade in African resources. To the north and east, Syria and Palestine increasingly came under Egyptian influence, even as fortifications sought to prevent settlers from the Levant from moving into the Delta.

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

For some unknown reason, during Dynasty 13, the kingship changed hands rapidly and the western Delta established itself as an independent Dynasty 14, ushering in the Second Intermediate Period. The eastern Delta, with its expanding Asiatic populations, came under the control of the Hyksos (Dynasty 15) and minor

Asiatic kings (Dynasty 16). Meanwhile, the Dynasty 13 kings left their northern capital and regrouped in Thebes (Dynasty 17).

Though much later sources describe the Hyksos ("chief of foreign lands" in Egyptian) as ruthless invaders from parts unknown, they were almost certainly Amorites from the Levant, part of the gradual infiltration of the Delta during the Middle Kingdom. Ongoing excavations at the Hyksos capital of Avaris in the eastern Delta have revealed architecture, pottery, and other goods consistent with that cultural background. After nearly a century of rule, the Hyksos were expelled, a process begun by Kamose, the last king of Dynasty 17, and completed by his brother Ahmose, the first king of the Eighteenth Dynasty and the founder of the New Kingdom.

During Dynasty 18, Egypt pursued foreign expansion with renewed vigor. Military expeditions reached as far north as the Euphrates in Syria, with frequent campaigns in the Levant. To the south, major Egyptian temples were built in the Sudan, almost 1,300 miles from Memphis. Egypt's economic and political power was at its height.

Egypt's position was reflected in the unprecedented luxury and cosmopolitanism of the royal court and in the ambitious palace and temple projects undertaken

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throughout the country. Perhaps to foil tomb robbers, the Dynasty 18 pharaohs were the first to cut their tombs deep into the rock cliffs of a desolate valley in Thebes, known today as the Valley of the Kings. To date, only one intact royal tomb has been discovered there, that of the young Dynasty 18 king, Tutankhamun, and even it had been disturbed shortly after his death. The thousands of goods buried with him, many of them marvels of craftsmanship, give an idea of Egypt's material wealth during this period.

Following the premature death of Tutankhamun in 1323 B.C.E., a military commander named Horemheb assumed the kingship, which passed in turn to his own army commander, Ramses I. The pharaohs Ramessides of Dynasty 19 undertook numerous monumental projects, among them Ramses II's rock-cut temples at Abu Simbel, south of the First Cataract, which had to be moved to a higher location when the Aswan High Dam was built in the 1960s. There and elsewhere, Ramses II left textual and pictorial accounts of his battle in 1285 B.C.E. against the Hittites at Kadesh on the Orontes in Syria. Sixteen years later, the Egyptians and Hittites signed a formal peace treaty, forging an alliance against an increasingly

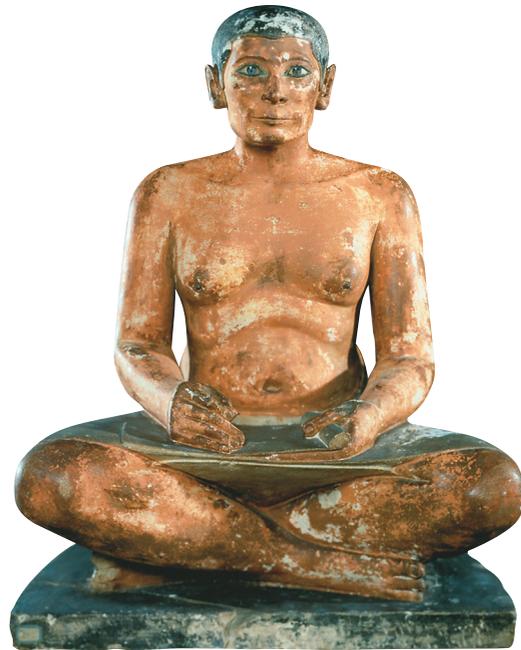
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volatile political situation in the Mideast and eastern Mediterranean during the thirteenth century B.C.E.

Merneptah, one of the hundred offspring of Ramses II, held off a hostile Libyan attack, as well as incursions by the Sea Peoples, a loose coalition of Mediterranean raiders who seem to have provoked and taken advantage of unsettled conditions. One of Merneptah's inscriptions commemorating his military triumphs contains the first known mention of Israel.

Despite his efforts, by the end of Dynasty 20, Egypt's period of imperial glory had passed. The next thousand years witnessed a Third Intermediate Period, a Saite Renaissance, Persian domination, conquest by Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic period, and finally, defeat at the hands of Octavian in 30 B.C.E.

Language and Literature Writing first appears in Egypt about 3000 B.C.E. Although the impetus for the first Egyptian writing probably came from Mesopotamia, the Egyptians may have invented it on their own. The writing system, dubbed **hieroglyphics** ("sacred carvings") by the Greeks, was highly sophisticated, involving hundreds of picture signs that remained relatively constant in the way they were rendered for over 3,000 years. Many of them formed a syllabary of one, two, or three consonantal sounds; some conveyed a word's meaning or category, either independently or added to the end of the word. Texts were usually written horizontally from right to left, but could be written from left to right, as well as vertically from top to bottom in both horizontal directions. A cursive version of hieroglyphics was



Seated Egyptian scribe, fifth dynasty, c. 2510–2460 B.C.E. One of the hallmarks of the early river valley civilizations was the development of writing. Ancient Egyptian scribes had to undergo rigorous training but were rewarded with a position of respect and privilege. "Seated Scribe" from Saqqara, Egypt. Fifth Dynasty, c. 2510–2460 B.C.E. Painted limestone, 21' (53 cm) in height. Musee du Louvre, Paris/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

used for business documents and literary texts, which were penned rapidly in black and red ink. The Egyptian language, part of the Afro-Asiatic (or Hamito-Semitic) family, evolved through several stages—Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic—thus giving it a history of continuous recorded use well into the medieval period.

Egyptian literature includes narratives, myths, books of instruction in wisdom, letters, religious texts, and poetry, written on papyri, limestone flakes, and potsherds. Unfortunately, only a small fraction of this enormous literature has survived, and many texts are incomplete. Though they surely existed, we have no epics or dramas from ancient Egypt. Such nonliterary documents as lists of kings, autobiographies in tombs, wine jar labels, judicial records, astronomical observations, and medical and other scientific texts are invaluable for our understanding of Egyptian history and civilization.

Religion: Gods and Temples Egyptian religion encompasses a multitude of concepts that often seem mutually contradictory to us. Three separate explanations for the origin of the universe were formulated, each based in the philosophical traditions of a venerable Egyptian city. The cosmogony of Heliopolis, north of Memphis, held that the creator sun god Atum (also identified

as Re) emerged from the darkness of a vast sea to stand upon a primeval mound, containing within himself the life force of the gods he was to create. At Memphis, it was the god Ptah who created the other gods by uttering their names. Further south, at Hermopolis, eight male and female entities within a primordial slime suddenly exploded, and the energy that resulted created the sun and Atum, from which the rest came.

The Egyptian gods, or pantheon, similarly defy neat categorization, in part because of the common tendency to combine the character and function of one or more gods. Amun, one of the eight entities in the Hermopolitan cosmogony, provides a good example. Thebes, Amun's cult center, rose to prominence in the Middle Kingdom. In the New Kingdom, Amun was elevated above his seven cohorts and took on aspects of the sun god Re to become Amun-Re.

Not surprisingly in a nearly rainless land, solar cults and mythologies were highly developed. Much thought was devoted to conceptualizing what happened as the sun god made his perilous way through the underworld in the night hours between sunset and sunrise. Three long texts trace Re's journey as he vanquishes immense snakes and other foes.

The Eighteenth Dynasty was one of several periods during which solar cults were in ascendancy. Early in his reign, Amunhotep IV promoted a single, previously minor aspect of the sun, the Aten ("disk") above Re himself and the rest of the gods. He declared that the Aten was the creator god who brought life to humankind and all living beings, with himself and his queen Nefertiti the sole mediators between the Aten and the people. For religious and political reasons still imperfectly understood, he went further, changing his name to Akhenaten ("the effective spirit of the Aten"), building a new capital called Akhetaten ("the horizon of the Aten") near Amarna north of Thebes, and chiseling out the name of Amun from inscriptions everywhere. Shortly after his death, Amarna was abandoned and partially razed. A large diplomatic archive of tablets written in Akkadian was left at the site, which give us a vivid, if one-sided, picture of the political correspondence of the day. During the reigns of Akhenaten's successors, Tutankhamun (born Tutankhaten) and Horemheb, Amun was restored to his former position, and Akhenaten's monuments were defaced and even demolished.

In representations, Egyptian gods have human bodies, possess human or animal heads, and wear crowns, celestial disks, or thorns. The lone exception is the Aten, made nearly abstract by Akhenaten, who altered its image to a plain disk with solar rays ending in small hands holding the hieroglyphic sign for life to the nostrils of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. The gods were thought to reside in their cult centers, where, from the New Kingdom on, increasingly ostentatious temples were built, staffed by full-time priests. At Thebes, for instance, successive kings enlarged

the great Karnak temple complex dedicated to Amun for over 2,000 years. Though the ordinary person could not enter a temple precinct, great festivals took place for all to see. During Amun's major festival of Opet, the statue of the god traveled in a divine boat along the Nile, whose banks were thronged with spectators.

Worship and the Afterlife For most Egyptians, worship took place at small local shrines. They left offerings to the chosen gods, as well as votive inscriptions with simple prayers. Private houses often had niches containing busts for ancestor worship and statues of household deities. The Egyptians strongly believed in the power of magic, dreams, and oracles, and they possessed a wide variety of amulets to ward off evil.

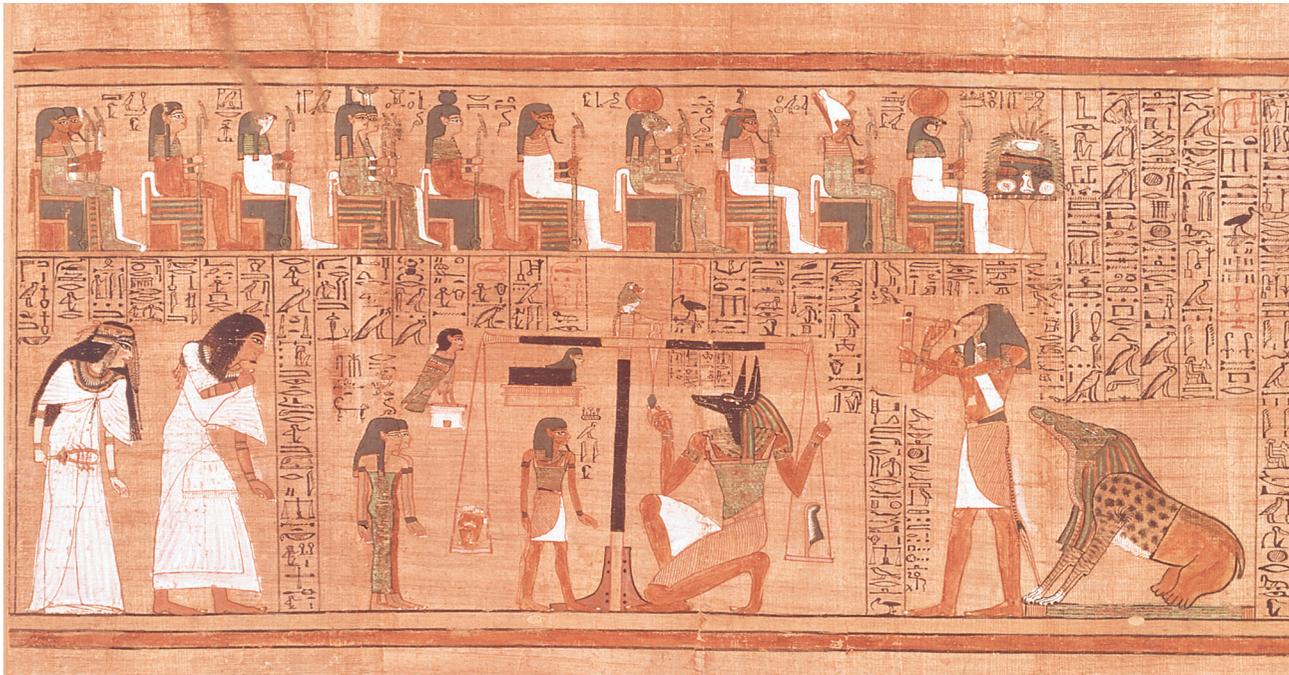
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"Scene from the
Egyptian Afterlife" on
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The Egyptians thought the afterlife was full of dangers, which could be overcome by magical means, among them the spells in the *Book of the Dead*. The goals were to join and be identified with the gods, especially Osiris, or to sail in the "boat of millions." Originally only the king could hope to enjoy immortality with the gods, but gradually this became available to all. Since the Egyptians believed the preservation of the body was essential for continued existence in the afterlife, early on they developed mummification, a process that took seventy days by the New Kingdom. How lavishly tombs were prepared and decorated varied over the course of Egyptian history and in accordance with the wealth of a family. A high-ranking Dynasty 18 official, for example, typically had a Theban rock-cut tomb of several rooms embellished with scenes from daily life and funerary texts, as well as provisions and equipment for the afterlife, statuettes of workers, and a place for descendants to leave offerings.

Women in Egyptian Society It is difficult to assess the position of women in Egyptian society, because our pictorial and textual evidence comes almost entirely from male sources. Women's prime roles were connected with the management of the household. They could not hold office, go to scribal schools, or become artisans. Nevertheless, women could own and control property, sue for divorce, and, at least in theory, enjoy equal legal protection.

Royal women often wielded considerable influence, particularly in the Eighteenth Dynasty. The most remarkable was Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmose I and widow of Thutmose II, who ruled as pharaoh for nearly twenty years. Many Egyptian queens held the title "god's wife of Amun," a power base of great importance.

In art, royal and nonroyal women are conventionally shown smaller than their husbands or sons (see illustration). Yet it is probably of greater significance that they are so frequently depicted in such a wide variety



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. The Weighing of the Heart against the Feather of Truth, from the *Book of the Dead* of the Scribe Any, c.1250 B.C.E. (painted papyrus), Egyptian 19th Dynasty (c.1297–1185 B.C.E.)/British Museum, London, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library International Ltd.

of contexts. Much care was lavished on details of their gestures, clothing, and hairstyles. With their husbands, they attend banquets, boat in the papyrus marshes, make and receive offerings, and supervise the myriad affairs of daily life.

Slaves Slaves did not become numerous in Egypt until the growth of Egyptian imperial power in the Middle Kingdom (2052–1786 B.C.E.). During that period, black Africans from Nubia to the south and Asians from the east were captured in war and brought back to Egypt as slaves. The great period of Egyptian imperial expansion, the New Kingdom (1550–1075 B.C.E.), vastly increased the number of slaves and captives in Egypt. Sometimes an entire people was enslaved, as the Bible says the Hebrews were.

Slaves in Egypt performed many tasks. They labored in the fields with the peasants, in the shops of artisans, and as domestic servants. Others worked as policemen and soldiers. Many slaves labored to erect the great temples, obelisks, and other huge monuments of Egypt's imperial age. As in Mesopotamia, slaves were branded for identification and to help prevent their escape. Slaves could be freed in Egypt, but manumission seems to have been rare. Nonetheless, former slaves were not set apart and could expect to be assimilated into the mass of the population.

▼ Ancient Near Eastern Empires

In the time of Dynasty 18 in Egypt, new groups of peoples had established themselves in the Near East: the Kassites in Babylonia, the Hittites in Asia Minor, and the Mitannians in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. (See Map 1–2.) The Kassites and Mitannians were warrior peoples who ruled as a minority over more civilized folk and absorbed their culture. The Hittites established a kingdom of their own and forged an empire that lasted some two hundred years.

The Hittites

The Hittites were an Indo-European people, speaking a language related to Greek and Sanskrit. By about 1500 B.C.E., they established a strong, centralized government with a capital at Hattusas (near Ankara, the capital of modern Turkey). Between 1400 and 1200 B.C.E., they emerged as a leading military power in the Mideast and contested Egypt's ambitions to control Palestine and Syria. This struggle culminated in a great battle between the Egyptian and Hittite armies at Kadesh in northern Syria (1285 B.C.E.) and ended as a standoff. The Hittites adopted Mesopotamian writing and many aspects of Mesopotamian culture, especially through the Hurrian peoples of northern Syria and southern Anatolia. Their extensive historical records are the first

to mention the Greeks, whom the Hittites called Ahhiyawa (the Achaeans of Homer). The Hittite kingdom disappeared by 1200 B.C.E., swept away in the general invasions and collapse of the Mideastern states at that time. Successors to the empire, called the Neo-Hittite states, flourished in southern Asia Minor and northern Syria until the Assyrians destroyed them in the first millennium B.C.E.

The government of the Hittites was different from that of Mesopotamia in that Hittite kings did not claim to be divine or even to be the chosen representatives of the gods. In the early period, a council of nobles limited the king's power, and the assembled army had to ratify his succession to the throne. The Hittite kingdom expanded and came into conflict with the Egyptian empire. The great battle of Kadesh in the thirteenth century was indecisive, as neither side could defeat the other and dominate the region. Before long these states weakened and

 **Read the Document**
 "Hittite Law Code:
 Excerpts from *The Code of the Nesilim*" on
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collapsed under the strain of external attacks from peoples outside the more civilized kingdoms and from economic and social strains within them.

The Discovery of Iron An important technological change took place in northern Anatolia, somewhat earlier than the creation of the Hittite kingdom, but perhaps within its region. This was the discovery of how to smelt iron and the decision to use it to manufacture weapons and tools in preference to copper or bronze. Archaeologists refer to the period after 1100 B.C.E. as the Iron Age.

The Assyrians

The Assyrians were originally a people living in Assur, a city in northern Mesopotamia on the Tigris River. They spoke a Semitic language closely related to Babylonian. They had a proud, independent culture heavily influenced by Babylonia. Assur had been an early center for trade but emerged as a political power during the fourteenth century B.C.E. The first Assyrian Empire spread north and west but was brought to an end in the general collapse of Near Eastern states at the end of the second

millennium. A people called the Arameans, a Semitic nomadic and agricultural people originally from northern Syria who spoke a language called Aramaic, invaded Assyria. Aramaic is still used in parts of the Near East and is one of the languages of medieval Jewish and Mideastern Christian culture.

The Second Assyrian Empire

After 1000 B.C.E., the Assyrians began a second period of expansion, and by 665 B.C.E., they controlled all of Mesopotamia, much of southern Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to its southern frontier. They succeeded, thanks to a large, well-disciplined army and a society that valued military skills. Some Assyrian kings boasted of their atrocities, so their names inspired terror throughout the Near East. They constructed magnificent palaces at Nineveh and Nimrud (near modern Mosul, Iraq), surrounded by parks and gardens. The walls of the reception rooms and hallways were decorated with stone reliefs and inscriptions proclaiming the power and conquests of the king.

The Assyrians organized their empire into provinces with governors, military garrisons, and administration



Relief, Israel, tenth–sixth century: Judean exiles carrying provisions. Detail of the Assyrian conquest of the Jewish fortified town of Lachish (battle 701 B.C.). Relief, Israel, tenth–sixth century: Judean exiles carrying provisions. Detail of the Assyrian conquest of the Jewish fortified town of Lachish (battle 701 B.C.). Part of a relief from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Mesopotamia (Iraq). British Museum, London, Great Britain. Copyright Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

for taxation, communications, and intelligence. Important officers were assigned large areas of land throughout the empire, and agricultural colonies were set up in key regions to store up supplies for military actions beyond the frontiers. Vassal kings had to send tribute and delegations to the Assyrian capital every year. Tens of thousands of people were forcibly displaced from their homes and resettled in other areas of the empire, partly to populate sparsely inhabited regions, partly to diminish resistance to Assyrian rule. People of the kingdom of Israel, which the Assyrians invaded and destroyed, were among them.

The empire became too large to govern efficiently. The last years of Assyria are obscure, but civil war apparently divided the country. The Medes, a powerful people from western and central Iran, had been expanding across the Iranian plateau. They were feared for their cavalry and archers, against which traditional Mideastern armies were ineffective. The Medes attacked Assyria and were joined by the Babylonians, who had always been restive under Assyrian rule, under the leadership of a general named Nebuchadnezzar. They eventually destroyed the Assyrian cities, including Nineveh in 612 B.C.E., so thoroughly that Assyria never recovered. The ruins of the great Assyrian palaces lay untouched until archaeologists began to explore them in the nineteenth century.

The Neo-Babylonians

The Medes did not follow up on their conquests, so Nebuchadnezzar took over much of the Assyrian Empire. Under him and his successors, Babylon grew into one of the greatest cities of the world. The Greek traveler Herodotus described its wonders, including its great temples, fortification walls, boulevards, parks, and palaces, to a Greek readership that had never seen the like. Babylon prospered as a center of world trade, linking Egypt, India, Iran, and Syria-Palestine by land and sea routes. For centuries, an astronomical center at Babylon kept detailed records of observations that were the longest-running chronicle of the ancient world. Nebuchadnezzar's dynasty did not last long, and the government passed to various men in rapid succession. The last independent king of Babylon set up a second capital in the Arabian desert and tried to force the Babylonians to honor the Moon-god above all other gods. He allowed dishonest or incompetent speculators to lease huge areas of temple land for their personal profit. These policies proved unpopular—some said that the king was insane—and many Babylonians may have welcomed the Persian conquest that came in 539 B.C.E. After that, Babylonia began another, even more prosperous phase of its history as one of the most important provinces of another great Eastern empire, that of the Persians.

▼ The Persian Empire

The great Persian Empire arose in the region now called Iran. The ancestors of the people who would rule it spoke a language from the Aryan branch of the family of Indo-European languages, related to the Greek spoken by the Hellenic peoples and the Latin of the Romans. 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 were the first Iranian people to organize their tribes into a union. They were aggressive enough to build a force that challenged the great empires of Mesopotamia. With the help of the ruler of Babylon, they defeated the mighty Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.E. Until the middle of the sixth century, the Persians were subordinate to the Medes, but when Cyrus II (called the Great) became King of the Persians (r. 559–530 B.C.E.), their positions were reversed. About 550 B.C.E., Cyrus captured the capital at Ecbatana and united the Medes and Persians under his own rule.

Cyrus the Great

Cyrus quickly expanded his power. The territory he inherited from the Medes touched on Lydia, ruled by the rich and powerful king Croesus. Croesus controlled western Asia Minor, having conquered the Greek cities of the coast about 560 B.C.E. Made confident by his victories, by alliances with Egypt and Babylon, and by what he thought was a favorable signal from the Greek oracle of Apollo at Delphi, he invaded Persian territory in 546 B.C.E. Cyrus achieved a decisive victory, capturing Croesus and his capital city of Sardis. By 539 B.C.E. he had conquered the Greek cities and extended his power as far to the east as the Indus valley and modern Afghanistan.

In that same year he captured Babylon. Because its last king was unpopular, Cyrus was greeted not as a conqueror, but as a liberator. On the cylinder on which was inscribed his version of events, he claimed that the Babylonian god Marduk had “got him into his city Babylon without fighting or battle.”¹

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 from their native lands and destroying their cities, he rebuilt their cities and allowed the exiles to return. The conquest of the Babylonian Empire had brought Palestine under Persian rule, so Cyrus permitted the Hebrews, taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E., to return to their native land of Judah. This policy, followed by his successors, was effective but not as gentle as it

¹“The Cyrus Cylinder,” in D. Winton Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 92.

might seem. Wherever they ruled, Cyrus and his successors demanded tribute from their subjects and military service, enforcing these requirements strictly and sometimes brutally.

Darius the Great

Cyrus's son Cambyses succeeded to the throne in 529 B.C.E. His great achievement was the conquest of Egypt, establishing it as a satrapy (province) that ran as far west as Libya and as far south as Ethiopia. The Persians ruled, as the Bible puts it, "from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces" (Esther 1:1). (See Map 1–3.)

Read the Document
 "Darius the Great: Ruler of Persia 522 B.C.E." on MyHistoryLab.com

On Cambyses's death in 522 B.C.E., a civil war roiled much of the Persian Empire. Darius emerged as the new emperor in 521 B.C.E.

On a great rock hundreds of feet in the air near the mountain Iranian village of Behistun, Darius had carved an inscription in three languages—Babylonian, Old Persian, and Elamite—all in the cuneiform script. They boasted of his victories and the greatness of his rule and, discovered almost two thousand years later, greatly helped scholars

decipher all three languages. Darius's long and prosperous reign lasted until 486 B.C.E., during which he brought the empire to its greatest extent. To the east he added new conquests in northern India. In the west he sought to conquer the nomadic people called Scythians who roamed around the Black Sea. For this purpose he crossed into Europe over the Hellespont (Dardanelles) to the Danube River and beyond, taking possession of Thrace and Macedonia on the fringes of the Greek mainland. In 499 B.C.E., the Ionian Greeks of western Asia Minor rebelled, launching the wars between Greeks and Persians that would not end until two decades later. (See Chapter 2.)

Government and Administration

Like the Mesopotamian kingdoms, the Persian Empire was a hereditary monarchy that claimed divine sanction from the god Ahura Mazda. The ruler's title was *Shahanshah*, "king of kings." In theory all the land and the peoples in the empire belonged to him as absolute monarch, and he 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 provincial governors, the satraps. He was expected, as Ahura Mazda's chosen representative, to rule with justice,



Map 1–3 **THE ACHAEMENID PERSIAN EMPIRE** The empire created by Cyrus had reached its fullest extent under Darius when Persia attacked Greece in 490 B.C.E. It extended from India to the Aegean, and even into Europe, encompassing the lands formerly ruled by Egyptians, Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians.



Persian nobles pay homage to King Darius in this relief from the treasury at the Persian capital of Persepolis. Darius is seated on the throne; his son and successor Xerxes stands behind him. Darius and Xerxes are carved in larger scale to indicate their royal status. Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago

in accordance with established custom and the precedents in the Law of the Medes and Persians. Still, the king ruled as a semi-divine autocrat; anyone approaching him prostrated himself as before a god who could demand their wealth, labor, and military service and had the power of life and death. 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. The satraps were allowed considerable autonomy. They ruled over civil affairs and commanded the army in war, but the king exercised several means of control. In each satrapy he appointed a secretary and a military commander. He also chose inspectors called “the eyes and ears of the king” who traveled throughout the empire reporting on what they learned in each satrapy. Their travels and those of royal couriers were made swifter and easier by a system of excellent royal roads. The royal postal system was served by a kind of “pony express” that placed men mounted on fast horses at stations along the way. It normally took three months to travel the 1,500 miles from Sardis in Lydia to the Persian capital at Susa. The royal postal service made the trip in less than two weeks. Ruling over a vast empire whose people spoke countless different languages, the Persians did not try to impose their own, but instead adopted Aramaic, the most common language of Middle-Eastern commerce, as the imperial tongue. This practical decision simplified both civil and military administration.

Medes and Persians made up the core of the army. The best of them served in the 10,000 Immortals, while an additional 4,000 composed the Great King’s bodyguard, divided equally between infantry and cavalry. Royal schools trained aristocratic Median and Persian boys as military officers and imperial administrators. The

officers commanded not only the Iranian troops but also drafted large numbers of subject armies when needed. 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. Its roots lay in the Indo-European traditions of the Vedic religion that Aryan peoples brought into India about 1500 B.C.E. Their religious practices included animal sacrifices and a reverence for fire. Although the religion was polytheistic, its chief god Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord,” demanded an unusual emphasis on a stern ethical code. It took a new turn with the appearance of Zarathushtra, a Mede whom the Greeks called Zoroaster, perhaps as early as 1000 B.C.E., as tradition states, although some scholars place him about 600 B.C.E. He was a great religious prophet and teacher who changed the traditional Aryan worship.

Zarathushtra’s reform made Ahura Mazda the only god, dismissing the others as demons not to be worshipped but fought. There would be no more polytheism and no sacrifices. The old sacrificial fire was converted into a symbol of goodness and light. Zarathushtra insisted that the people should reject the “Lie” (*druj*) and speak only the “Truth” (*asha*), portraying 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. He urged human beings to fight for the good, in the expectation that the good would be rewarded with glory and the evil punished with suffering.

Traditions and legends about Zarathustra as well as law, liturgy, and the teachings of the prophet are contained in the *Avesta*, the sacred book of the Persians. 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 paid public homage to 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."²

Art and Culture

The Persians learned much from the people they encountered and those they conquered, especially from Mesopotamia and Egypt, but they shaped it to fit comfortably on a Persian base. A good example is to be found in their system of writing. 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 contain similar elements of talents and styles borrowed from other societies and blended with Persian traditions to serve Persian purposes. In describing, with justifiable pride, the construction of his palace at Susa, Darius says:

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 Medes 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.³

Probably the most magnificent of Persian remains are those of the Royal Palace at Persepolis, built by Darius and his successor Xerxes (r. 485–465 B.C.E.). Its foundation is a high platform supported on three sides by a stone wall 20 or 30 feet high. This was reached by a grand stairway whose sides are covered with carvings.

The complex contained the Hall of a Hundred Columns where the kings did their judicial duties. Better than any other tangible objects, the columns, stairway, and the gateway with winged bulls reveal the grandeur of the ancient Persian Empire.

²J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Times: A History of the Early World*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1935), p. 277.

³T. Cuyler Young, Jr., "Iran, ancient," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*.

KEY EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN EMPIRES

ca. 1400–1200 B.C.E.	Hittite Empire
ca. 1100 B.C.E.	Rise of Assyrian power
732–722 B.C.E.	Assyrian conquest of Syria-Palestine
671 B.C.E.	Assyrian conquest of Egypt
612 B.C.E.	Destruction of Assyrian capital at Nineveh
612–539 B.C.E.	Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire
550 B.C.E.	Cyrus the Great unites Persians and Medes
546 B.C.E.	Persia conquers Lydia
521–486 B.C.E.	Reign of Darius the Great

▼ Palestine

None of the powerful kingdoms of the ancient Near East had as much influence on the future of Western civilization as the small stretch of land between Syria and Egypt, the land called Palestine for much of its history. The three great religions of the modern world outside the Far East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—trace their origins, at least in part, to the people who arrived there a little before 1200 B.C.E. The book that recounts their experiences is the Hebrew Bible.

The Canaanites and the Phoenicians

Before the Israelites arrived in their promised land, it was inhabited by groups of people speaking a Semitic language called Canaanite. The Canaanites lived in walled cities and were farmers and seafarers. They had their own writing system, an alphabet that may have originated among people who were impressed by Egyptian writing, but wanted something much simpler to use. Instead of the hundreds of characters required to read Egyptian or cuneiform, their alphabet used between twenty and thirty characters. The Canaanites, like the other peoples of Syria-Palestine, worshipped many gods, especially gods of weather and fertility, whom they thought resided in the clouds atop the high mountains of northern Syria. The invading Israelites destroyed various Canaanite cities and holy places and may have forced some of the population to move north and west, though Canaanite and Israelite culture also intermingled.

The **Phoenicians** were the descendants of the Canaanites and other peoples of Syria-Palestine, especially those who lived along the coast. They played an important role in Mediterranean trade, sailing to ports in

Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Egypt, and North Africa, as far as Gibraltar and possibly beyond. They founded colonies throughout the Mediterranean as far west as Spain. The most famous of these colonies was Carthage, near modern Tunis in North Africa. Sitting astride the trade routes, the Phoenician cities were important sites for the transmission of culture from east to west. The Greeks, who had long forgotten their older writing system of the Bronze Age, adopted a Phoenician version of the Canaanite alphabet that is the origin of our present alphabet.

The Israelites

The history of the Israelites must be pieced together from various sources. They are mentioned only rarely in the records of their neighbors, so we must rely chiefly on their own account, the Hebrew Bible. This is not a history in our sense, but a complicated collection of historical narrative, pieces of wisdom, poetry, law, and religious witness. Scholars of an earlier time tended to discard it as a historical source, but the most recent trend is to take it seriously while using it with caution.

According to tradition, the patriarch Abraham came from Ur and wandered west to tend his flocks in the land of the Canaanites. Some of his people settled there, and others wandered into Egypt. By the thirteenth century B.C.E., led by Moses, they had left Egypt and wandered in the desert until they reached and conquered Canaan. They established a united kingdom that reached its peak under David and Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E. The sons of Solomon could not maintain the unity of the kingdom, and it split into two parts: Israel in the north and Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem, in the south. (See Map 1–4.) The rise of the great empires brought disaster to the Israelites. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., and its people—the **ten lost tribes**—were scattered and lost forever. Only the kingdom of Judah remained. It is from this time that we may call the Israelites Jews.

In 586 B.C.E., Judah was defeated by the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II. He destroyed the great temple built by Solomon and took thousands of hostages off to Babylon. When the Persians defeated Babylonia, they ended this Babylonian captivity of the Jews and allowed them to return to their homeland. After that, the area of the old kingdom of the Jews in Palestine was dominated by foreign peoples for some 2,500 years, until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 C.E.

The Jewish Religion

The fate of the small nation of Israel would be of little interest were it not for its unique religious achievement. The great contribution of the Jews is the development of



Map 1–4 **ANCIENT PALESTINE** The Hebrews established a unified kingdom under Kings David and Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E. After Solomon, the kingdom was divided into Israel in the north and Judah, with its capital, Jerusalem, in the south. North of Israel were the great commercial cities of Phoenicia, Tyre, and Sidon.

THE ISRAELITES

ca. 1000–961 B.C.E.	Reign of King David
ca. 961–922 B.C.E.	Reign of King Solomon
722 B.C.E.	Assyrian conquest of Israel (northern kingdom)
586 B.C.E.	Destruction of Jerusalem; fall of Judah (southern kingdom); Babylonian captivity
539 B.C.E.	Restoration of temple; return of exiles

monotheism—the belief in one universal God, the creator and ruler of the universe. Among the Jews, this idea may be as old as Moses, as the Jewish tradition asserts, and it certainly dates as far back as the prophets of the eighth century B.C.E. The Jewish God is neither a natural force nor like human beings or any other creatures; he is so elevated that those who believe in him may not picture him in any form. The faith of the Jews is given special strength by their belief that God made a covenant with Abraham that his progeny would be a chosen people who would be rewarded for following God’s commandments and the law he revealed to Moses.

Like the teachings of Zarathushtra in Iran, Jewish religious thought included a powerful ethical element. God is a severe, but just, judge. Ritual and sacrifice are not enough to achieve his approval. People must be righteous, and God himself appears to be bound to act righteously. The Jewish prophetic tradition was a powerful ethical force. The prophets constantly criticized any falling away from the law and the path of righteousness. They placed God in history, blaming the misfortunes of the Jews on God’s righteous and necessary intervention to punish the people for their misdeeds. The prophets also promised the redemption of the Jews if they repented, however. The prophetic tradition expected the redemption to come in the form of a

 **Read the Document**
“The Book of Job and Jewish Literature” on MyHistoryLab.com

Jewish religious ideas influenced the future development of the West, both directly and indirectly. The Jews’ belief in an all-powerful creator (who is righteous himself and demands righteousness and obedience from humankind) and a universal God (who is the father and ruler of all peoples) is a critical part of the Western heritage.

▼ General Outlook of Mideastern Cultures

Our brief account of the history of the ancient Mideast so far reveals that its various peoples and cultures were different in many ways. Yet the distance between all of them and the emerging culture of the Greeks (see Chapter 2) is striking. We can see this distance best by comparing the approach of the other cultures to several fundamental human problems with that of the Greeks: What is the relationship of humans to nature? To the gods? To each other? These questions involve attitudes toward religion, philosophy, science, law, politics, and government. Unlike the Greeks, the civilizations of the Mideast seem to have these features in common: Once established, they tended toward cultural uniformity and stability. Reason, though employed for practical

and intellectual purposes, lacked independence from religion and the high status to challenge the most basic received ideas. The standard form of government was a monarchy; republics were unknown. Rulers were considered divine or the appointed spokesmen for divinity. Religious and political institutions and beliefs were thoroughly intertwined. Government was not subject to secular, reasoned analysis but rested on religious authority, tradition, and power. Individual freedom had no importance.

Humans and Nature

For the peoples of the Mideast, there was no simple separation between humans and nature or even between animate creatures and inanimate objects. Humanity was part of a natural continuum, and all things partook of life and spirit. These peoples imagined that gods more or less in the shape of humans ruled a world that was irregular and unpredictable, subject to divine whims. The gods were capricious because nature seemed capricious.

A Babylonian story of creation makes it clear that humanity’s function is merely to serve the gods. The creator Marduk says,

I shall compact blood, I shall cause bones to be,
I shall make stand a human being, let “Man” be its name.
I shall create humankind,
They shall bear the gods’ burden that those may rest.⁴

In a world ruled by powerful deities of this kind, human existence was precarious. Disasters that we would think human in origin, the Mesopotamians saw as the product of divine will. Thus, a Babylonian text depicts the destruction of the city of Ur by invading Elamites as the work of the gods, carried out by the storm god Enlil:

Enlil called the storm.
The people mourn.
Exhilarating winds he took from the land.
The people mourn.
Good winds he took away from Sumer.
The people mourn.
He summoned evil winds.
The people mourn.
Entrusted them to Kingaluda, tender of storms.
He called the storm that will annihilate the land.
The people mourn.
He called disastrous winds.
The people mourn.
Enlil—choosing Gibil as his helper—
Called the (great) hurricane of heaven.
The people mourn.⁵

⁴Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days, Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1999), p. 38.

⁵Thorkild Jacobsen in Henri Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), p. 154.

Both the Egyptian and the Babylonian versions of the destruction of humankind clearly show human vulnerability in the face of divine powers. In one Egyptian tale, Re, the god who had created humans, decided to destroy them because they were plotting evil against him. He sent the goddess Sekhmet to accomplish the deed, and she was resting in the midst of her task, having enjoyed the work and wading in a sea of blood, when Re changed his mind. He ordered 7,000 barrels of blood-colored beer poured in Sekhmet's path. She quickly became too drunk to continue the slaughter and thus humanity was preserved. In the Babylonian story of the flood, the motive for the destruction of humanity is given as follows:

The land had grown numerous, the peoples had increased,
The land was bellowing like a bull.
The god was disturbed by their uproar,
The god Enlil heard their clamor.
He said to the great gods,
"The clamor of mankind has become burdensome to me,
"I am losing sleep to their uproar!"⁶

Utanapishtim and his wife survived because he was friendly with Enki, the god of wisdom, who helped him to pull through by a trick.

In such a universe, humans could not hope to understand nature, much less control it. At best, they could try by magic to use uncanny forces against others. An example of this device is provided by a Mesopotamian incantation to cure sickness. The sufferer tries to use magical powers by acting out the destruction of the powers he thinks caused his illness:

As this garlic is peeled off and thrown into the fire,
[And the Fire God] burns it up with fire,
Which will not be cultivated in a garden patch,
Whose roots will not take hold in the ground,
Whose sprout will not come forth nor see the sun,
Which will not be used for the repast of god or king,
[So] may the curse, something evil, revenge, interrogation,
The sickness of my suffering, wrong-doing, crime, mis-
deed, sin
The sickness which is in my body, flesh, and sinews
Be peeled off like this garlic,
May [the Fire God] burn it with fire this day,
May the wicked thing go forth, that I may see light.⁷

Humans and the Gods, Law, and Justice

Human relationships to the gods were equally humble. There was no doubt that the gods could destroy human beings and might do so at any time for no good reason. Humans could—and, indeed, had to—try to win the gods over by prayers and sacrifices, but there was no guarantee

⁶Foster, pp. 170–171.

⁷Foster, p. 412.

of success. The gods were bound by no laws and no morality. The best behavior and the greatest devotion to the cult of the gods were no defense against the divine and cosmic caprice.

Read the Document

"Sumerian Law Code: The Code of Lipit-Ishtar" on MyHistoryLab.com

In the earliest civilizations, human relations were guided by laws, often set down in written codes. The basic question about law concerned its legitimacy: Why, apart from the lawgiver's power to coerce obedience, should anyone obey the law? For Old Kingdom Egyptians, the answer was simple: The king was bound to act in accordance with *maat*, and so his laws were righteous. For the Mesopotamians, the answer was almost the same: The king was a representative of the gods, so the laws he set forth were authoritative. The prologue to the most famous legal document in antiquity, the Code of Hammurabi, makes this plain:

I am the king who is preeminent among kings;
my words are choice; my ability has no equal.
By the order of Sharnash, the great judge of heaven and earth,
may my justice prevail in the land;
by the word of Marduk, my lord,
may my statutes have no one to rescind them.⁸

The Hebrews introduced some important new ideas. Their unique God was capable of great anger and destruction, but he was open to persuasion and subject to morality. He was therefore more predictable and comforting, for all the terror of his wrath. The biblical version of the flood story, for instance, reveals the great difference between the Hebrew God and the Babylonian deities. The Hebrew God was powerful and wrathful, but he was not arbitrary. He chose to destroy his creatures for their moral failures:

the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thought of his heart was evil continually . . . the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence.⁹

When he repented and wanted to save someone, he chose Noah because "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation."¹⁰

The biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that God was bound by his own definition of righteousness. He had chosen to destroy these wicked cities but felt obliged by his covenant to inform Abraham first.¹¹ Abraham called on God to abide by his own moral principles, and God saw Abraham's point.

⁸James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 164.

⁹Genesis 6:5, 6:11.

¹⁰Genesis 6:9.

¹¹Genesis 18:20–33.

Such a world offers the possibility of order in the universe and on this earth. There is also the possibility of justice among human beings, for the Hebrew God had provided his people with law. Through his prophet Moses, he had provided humans with regulations that would enable them to live in peace and justice. If they would abide by the law and live upright lives, they and their descendants could expect happy and prosperous lives. This idea was different from the uncertainty of the Babylonian view, but like it and its Egyptian partner, it left no doubt of the certainty of the divine. Cosmic order, human survival, and justice all depended on God.

▼ Toward the Greeks and Western Thought

Greek thought offered different approaches and answers to many of the concerns we have been discussing. Calling attention to some of those differences will help convey the distinctive outlook

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 Podcast: What is the
 Western Heritage?” on
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of the Greeks and the later cultures within Western civilization that have drawn heavily on Greek influence.

Greek ideas had much in common with the ideas of earlier peoples. The Greek gods had most of the characteristics of the Mesopotamian deities. Magic and incantations played a part in the lives of most Greeks, and Greek law, like that of earlier peoples, was usually connected with divinity. Many, if not most, Greeks in the ancient world must have lived their lives with notions similar to those other peoples held. The surprising thing is that some Greeks developed ideas that were strikingly different and, in so doing, set part of humankind on an entirely new path.

As early as the sixth century B.C.E., some Greeks living in the Ionian cities of Asia Minor raised questions and suggested answers about the nature of the world that produced an intellectual revolution. In their speculations, they made guesses that were completely naturalistic and made no reference to supernatural powers. One historian of Greek thought, discussing the views of Thales, the first Greek philosopher, put the case particularly well:

In one of the Babylonian legends it says: “All the lands were sea . . . Marduk bound a rush mat upon the face of the waters, he made dirt and piled it beside the rush mat.” What Thales did was to leave Marduk out. He, too, said that everything was once water. But he thought that earth and everything else had been formed out of water by a natural process, like the silting up of the Delta of the Nile. . . . It is an admirable beginning, the whole point of which is that it gathers into a coherent picture a number of observed facts without letting Marduk in.¹²

¹²Benjamin Farrington, *Greek Science* (London: Penguin, 1953), p. 37.

By putting the question of the world’s origin in a naturalistic form, Thales, in the sixth century B.C.E., may have begun the unreservedly rational investigation of the universe and, in so doing, initiated both philosophy and science.

The same relentlessly rational approach was used even in regard to the gods themselves. In the same century as Thales, Xenophanes of Colophon expressed the opinion that humans think of the gods as resembling themselves, that, like themselves, they were born, that they wear clothes like theirs, and that they have voices and bodies like theirs. If oxen, horses, and lions had hands and could paint like humans, Xenophanes argued, they would paint gods in their own image; the oxen would draw gods like oxen and the horses like horses. Thus, Africans believed in flat-nosed, black-faced gods, and the Thracians in gods with blue eyes and red hair.¹³ In the fifth century B.C.E., Protagoras of Abdera went so far toward agnosticism as to say, “About the gods I can have no knowledge either that they are or that they are not or what is their nature.”¹⁴

This rationalistic, skeptical way of thinking carried over into practical matters. The school of medicine led by Hippocrates of Cos (about 400 B.C.E.) attempted to understand, diagnose, and cure disease without any attention to supernatural forces. One of the Hippocratic writers, of the mysterious disease epilepsy:

It seems to me that the disease is no more divine than any other. It has a natural cause, just as other diseases have. Men think it divine merely because they do not understand it. But if they called everything divine which they do not understand, why, there would be no end of divine things.¹⁵

By the fifth century B.C.E., the historian Thucydides could analyze and explain human behavior completely in terms of human nature and chance, leaving no place for the gods or supernatural forces.

The same absence of divine or supernatural forces characterized Greek views of law and justice. Most Greeks, of course, liked to think that, in a vague way, law came ultimately from the gods. In practice, however, and especially in the democratic states, they knew that laws were made by humans and should be obeyed because they represented the expressed consent of the citizens. Law, according to the fourth-century B.C.E. statesman Demosthenes, is “a general covenant of the whole State, in accordance with which all men in that State ought to regulate their lives.”¹⁶

¹³Henri Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), pp. 14–16.

¹⁴Hermann Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 5th ed., ed. by Walter Krantz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1934–1938), Frg. 4.

¹⁵Diels, Frgs. 14–16.

¹⁶Demosthenes, *Against Aristogeiton* 16.

In Perspective

The statement of the following ideas, so different from any that came before the Greeks, opens the discussion of most of the issues that appear in the long history of Western civilization and that remain major concerns in the modern world. What is the nature of the universe, and how can it be controlled? Are there divine powers, and, if so, what is humanity's relationship to them? Are law and justice human, divine, or both? What is the place in human society of freedom, obedience, and reverence? These and many other matters were either first considered or first elaborated on by the Greeks.

The Greeks' sharp departure from the thinking of earlier cultures marked the beginning of the unusual experience that we call Western civilization. Nonetheless, they built on a foundation of lore that people in the Near East had painstakingly accumulated. From ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, they borrowed important knowledge and skills in mathematics, astronomy,

art, and literature. From Phoenicia, they learned the art of writing. The discontinuities, however, are more striking than the continuities.

Hereditary monarchies, often elevated by the aura of divinity, ruled the great civilizations of the river valleys. Powerful priesthoods presented yet another bastion of privilege that stood between the ordinary person and the knowledge and opportunity needed for freedom and autonomy. Religion was an integral part of the world of the ancient Near East, in the kingdoms and city-states of Palestine, Phoenicia, and Syria, just as in the great empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia. The secular, reasoned questioning that sought to understand the world in which people lived—that sought explanations in the natural order of things rather than in the supernatural acts of the gods—was not characteristic of the older cultures. Nor would it appear in similar societies at other times in other parts of the world. The new way of looking at things was uniquely the product of the Greeks. We now need to see why they raised fundamental questions in the way that they did.

KEY TERMS

Bronze Age (p. 5)
civilization (p. 4)
culture (p. 2)
cuneiform (p. 8)

hieroglyphics (p. 19)
Homo sapiens (p. 2)
Lower Egypt (p. 13)
Mesopotamia (p. 4)

monotheism (p. 28)
Neolithic Age (p. 3)
nomes (p. 17)
Paleolithic (p. 2)

pharaoh (p. 13)
Phoenicians (p. 26)
ten lost tribes (p. 27)
Upper Egypt (p. 13)

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you define "history"? What different academic disciplines do historians rely on, and why is the study of history important?
2. How was life during the Paleolithic Age different from that in the Neolithic Age? What advancements in agriculture and human development had taken place by the end of the Neolithic era? Is it valid to speak of a Neolithic Revolution?
3. What were the political and intellectual outlooks of the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia? How did geography influence the religious outlooks of these two civilizations?
4. To what extent did the Hebrew faith bind the Jews politically? Why was the concept of monotheism so radical for Near Eastern civilizations?
5. How did the Assyrian Empire differ from that of the Hittites or Egyptians? Why did the Assyrian Empire ultimately fail to survive? Why was the Persian Empire so successful? What were the main teachings of Zarathustra? How did his concept of the divine compare to that of the Jews?
6. In what ways did Greek thought develop along different lines from that of Near Eastern civilizations? What new questions about human society did the Greeks ask?

SUGGESTED READINGS

C. Aldred, *The Egyptians* (1998). Probably the best one-volume history of the subject.
P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (2002). A scholarly account of ancient Persia with greater knowledge of the Persian evidence than is usual.

T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (1998). A fine new account.
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- I. Tattersall, *The World from Beginnings to 4000 BCE* (2008). A lively and readable introduction by a leading anthropologist.
- M. Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC* (2006). A concise history of the civilizations of the ancient Near East, their political and military events, and their cultures and societies.

MyHistoryLab™ MEDIA ASSIGNMENTS

Find these resources in the Media Assignments folder for Chapter 1 on **MyHistoryLab**.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- Given our uncertainties about the function of the Standard of Ur, how can it be used by historians to understand Sumerian culture?

Section: Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

 **View the Closer Look** The Royal Standard of Ur, p. 6

- Do these two flood accounts tend to highlight similarities or differences in these two cultures?

Section: Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

 **Read the Compare and Connect** The Great Flood, p. 14

- How did changes in architecture—from the earlier mastaba to later pyramids—reflect changes in Egyptian culture?

Section: Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

 **View the Architectural Simulation** Mastaba to Pyramid, p. 13

- What was the goal of Darius in having such an inscription created?

Section: The Persian Empire

 **Read the Document** Darius the Great: Ruler of Persia 522 B.C.E., p. 24

- Is the question of the identity of the Ancient Egyptians relevant to understanding Egyptian history?

Section: Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

 **Watch the Video** Who Were the Ancient Egyptians?, p. 13

OTHER RESOURCES FROM THIS CHAPTER

Early Humans and Their Culture

 **Read the Document** The Toolmaker 3300 B.C.E., p. 3

 **View the Image** Lascaux Bull, p. 3

 **Read the Document** A Visitor from the Neolithic Age—The Iceman, p. 4

Early Civilizations to about 1000 B.C.E.

 **Read the Document** Hammurabi's Law Code, p. 7

 **Read the Document** Excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 10

 **Read the Document** Mission to Byblos: The Report of Wenamun, p. 18

 **Watch the Video** Ramses II's Abu Simbel, p. 19

 **View the Image** Scene from the Egyptian Afterlife, p. 20

Ancient Near Eastern Empires

 **Read the Document** Hittite Law Code: Excerpts from *The Code of the Nesilim*, p. 22

Palestine

 **Read the Document** The Book of Job and Jewish Literature, p. 28

General Outlook of Mideastern Cultures

 **Read the Document** Sumerian Law Code: The Code of Lipit-Ishtar, p. 29

Toward the Greeks and Western Thought

 **Watch the Video** Author Video Podcast: What is the Western Heritage?, p. 30