

CHAPTER 2

The First River-Valley Civilizations, 3500–1500 B.C.E.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter students should be able to:

1. Explain how the earliest civilizations developed in challenging environments.
2. Draw connections between the organization of labor resources in early civilizations and their social and political structures.
3. Assess the impact of new technologies on the social, economic and political development of early civilizations.
4. Trace the development of social and political institutions and religious beliefs in river-valley civilizations and understand the relationship between these societies' cultures and the natural environment.
5. Discuss what scholars and historians mean when they talk about "civilization."

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- I. Mesopotamia
 - A. Settled Agriculture in an Unstable Landscape
 1. Mesopotamia is the alluvial plain area alongside and between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The area is a difficult environment for agriculture because there is little rainfall, the rivers flood at the wrong time for grain agriculture, and the rivers change course unpredictably.
 2. Mesopotamia does have a warm climate and good soil. By 4000 B.C.E., farmers were using ox-drawn plows and a sort of planter to cultivate barley. Just after 3000 B.C.E., they began constructing irrigation canals to bring water to fields farther away from the rivers.
 3. Other crops and natural resources of the area included date palms, vegetables, reeds and fish, and fallow land for grazing goats and sheep. Draft animals included cattle and donkeys and, later (second millennium B.C.E.), camels and horses. The area has no significant wood, stone, or metal resources.
 - B. Sumerians and Semites
 1. The evidence suggests that the earliest people of Mesopotamia and the initial creators of Mesopotamian culture were the Sumerians, who were present at least as early as 5000 B.C.E. By 2000 B.C.E., the Sumerians were supplanted by Semitic-speaking peoples who dominated and intermarried with the Sumerians but preserved many elements of Sumerian culture.
 - C. Cities, Kings, and Trade

1. Early Mesopotamian society was a society of villages and cities linked together in a system of mutual interdependence. Cities depended on villages to produce surplus food to feed the nonproducing urban elite and craftspeople. In return, the cities provided the villages with military protection, markets, and specialist-produced goods. The development of such settled societies was not limited to southern Mesopotamia, but also seems to have included parts of what is now modern Syria.
 2. Together, a city and its agricultural territories formed what we call a city-state. The Mesopotamian city-states sometimes fought with each other over resources like water and land; at other times, city-states cooperated with each other in sharing resources. City-states also traded with one another.
 3. City-states could mobilize human resources to open new agricultural land and to build and maintain irrigation systems. Construction of irrigation systems or fortifications, as well as the harvest or the protection of animals required the organization of large numbers of people for labor. This mobilization of labor ultimately required effective and capable leaders.
 4. Although we know little of the political institutions of Mesopotamian city-states, we do have written and archeological records of two centers of power: temples and palaces. Temples were landholders, and their priests controlled considerable wealth. Their religious power predates the secular power of the palaces.
 5. Secular leadership developed in the third millennium B.C.E. when “big men” (*lugal*), who may have originally been leaders of armies, emerged as secular leaders. The *lugal* ruled from their palaces and tended to take over religious control of institutions.
 6. Eventually some of the city-states became powerful enough to absorb others and thus create larger territorial states. Two examples of this development are the Akkadian state, founded by Sargon of Akkad around 2350 B.C.E., and the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004 B.C.E.).
 7. A third territorial state was established by Hammurabi and is known to historians as the Old Babylonian state. Hammurabi is also known for the Law Code associated with his name, which provides us with a source of information about Old Babylonian law, punishments, and society.
 8. The states of Mesopotamia needed resources and obtained them not only by territorial expansion but also through a flourishing long-distance trade. Merchants were originally employed by temples or palaces; later, in the second millennium B.C.E., private merchants emerged. Trade was carried out through barter or traded for fixed weights of precious metal or measurements of grains.
- D. Mesopotamian Society
1. Mesopotamia had a stratified society in which kings and priests controlled much of the wealth. The three classes of Mesopotamian society were: (1) the free landowning class, (2) dependent farmers and artisans, and (3) slaves. Slavery was not a fundamental part of the economy, and most slaves were prisoners of war.
 2. Some scholars believe that the development of agriculture brought about a decline in the status of women because men did the value-producing work of plowing and irrigation. Women were able to own property, control their dowry, and engage in trade. The rise of an urban merchant class in the second millennium B.C.E. appears to have been accompanied by greater emphasis on male privilege and an attendant decline in women’s status.
- E. Gods, Priests, and Temples
1. The religion of Mesopotamia was an amalgam of Sumerian and later Semitic beliefs and deities. Mesopotamian deities were anthropomorphic, and each city had its own tutelary gods.

2. Humans were regarded as servants of the gods. In temples, a complex, specialized hereditary priesthood served the gods as a servant serves a master. The temples themselves were walled compounds containing religious and functional buildings. The most visible part of the temple compound was the ziggurat.
3. We have little knowledge of the beliefs and religious practices of common people. Evidence indicates a popular belief in magic and in the use of magic to influence the gods.

F. Technology and Science

1. Technology is defined as “any specialized knowledge that is used to transform the natural environment and human society.” Thus defined, the concept of technology includes not only things like irrigation systems but also nonmaterial specialized knowledge such as religious lore and ceremony and writing systems.
2. The Mesopotamian writing system (cuneiform) evolved from the use of pictures to represent the sounds of words or parts of words. The writing system was complex, required the use of hundreds of signs, and was a monopoly of the scribes.
3. Cuneiform was developed to write Sumerian but was later used to write Akkadian and other Semitic and non-Semitic languages. Cuneiform was used to write economic, political, legal, literary, religious, and scientific texts.
4. Other technologies developed by the Mesopotamians included irrigation, transportation (boats, barges, and the use of donkeys), bronze metallurgy, brickmaking, and engineering.
5. Military technology employed in Mesopotamia included paid, full-time soldiers; horses; the horse-drawn chariot; the bow and arrow; and siege machinery. Mesopotamians also used numbers (a base-60 system) and made advances in mathematics and astronomy.

II. Egypt

A. The Land of Egypt: “Gift of the Nile”

1. The land of Egypt is defined by the Nile River, the narrow green strip of arable land on either side of its banks, and the fertile Nile delta area. The rest of the country is barren desert, the unfriendly “Red Land” that contrasted with the “Black Land,” which was home to the vast majority of the Egyptian population.
2. Egypt was traditionally divided into two areas: Upper Egypt, along the southern part of the Nile as far south as the First Cataract, and Lower Egypt, the northern delta area. The climate was good for agriculture, but with little or no rainfall, farmers had to depend on the river for irrigation.
3. The Nile floods regularly and at the right time of year, leaving a rich and easily worked deposit of silt. Egyptian agriculture depended upon the floods, and crops could be adversely affected if the floods were too high or not high enough. Generally speaking, however, the floods were regular, and this inspired the Egyptians to view the universe as a regular and orderly place.
4. Egypt’s other natural resources included reeds (such as papyrus for writing), wild animals, birds and fish, plentiful building stone and clay, and access to copper and turquoise from the desert and gold from Nubia.

B. Divine Kingship

1. Egypt’s political organization evolved from a pattern of small states ruled by local kings to the emergence of a large, unified Egyptian state around 3100 B.C.E. Historians organize Egyptian history into a series of thirty dynasties falling into three longer periods: the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms. These three periods were divided by periods of political fragmentation and chaos.
2. Kings, known as pharaohs, dominated the Egyptian state. The pharaohs were regarded as gods come to earth to ensure the welfare and prosperity of the people. The death of a

pharaoh was thought to be the beginning of his journey back to the land of the gods. Funeral rites and proper preservation of the body were therefore of tremendous importance.

3. Early pharaohs were buried in flat-topped rectangular tombs. Stepped pyramid tombs appeared about 2630 B.C.E. and smooth-sided pyramids a bit later.
4. The great pyramid tombs at Giza were constructed between 2550 and 2490 B.C.E. The great pyramids were constructed with stone tools and simple lever, pulley, and roller technology and required substantial inputs of resources and labor.

C. Administration and Communication

1. Egypt was governed by a central administration in the capital city through a system of provincial and village bureaucracies. Bureaucrats at the center kept track of land, labor, taxes, and people; collected resources from throughout the country; and used them to support the central government institutions (the palace, the bureaucracy, and the army) and to maintain temples and construct monuments.
2. The ancient Egyptians developed two writing systems: hieroglyphics and a cursive script. Egyptians wrote on papyrus and used writing for religious and secular literature as well as for record keeping.
3. Tensions between central and local government are a constant feature of Egyptian political history. At times when the central power was predominant, provincial officials were appointed and promoted by the central government on the basis of merit. When central power was weak, provincial officials tended to become autonomous, made their positions hereditary, and had themselves buried in their own districts rather than near the tombs of their kings.
4. Egypt was more rural than Mesopotamia. It did have cities, but since they have not been excavated, we know little about urban life in Egypt.
5. Egypt regarded all foreigners as enemies, but its desert nomad neighbors posed no serious military threat. Egypt was generally more interested in acquiring resources than in acquiring territory; resources could often be acquired through trade.
6. Egypt traded directly with the Levant and Nubia and indirectly with the land of Punt (probably part of modern Somalia). Items of trade included exports of papyrus, grain, and gold and imports of incense, Nubian gold, Lebanese cedar, and tropical African ivory, ebony, and animals.

D. The People of Egypt

1. Ancient Egypt had a population of about 1 to 1.5 million physically heterogeneous people, some dark-skinned, and some lighter-skinned. The people were divided into several social strata: (1) the king and high-ranking officials; (2) lower-level officials, local leaders and priests, professionals, artisans, well-off farmers; and (3) peasants, the majority of the population.
2. Peasants lived in villages, cultivated the soil, and were responsible for paying taxes and providing labor service.
3. Paintings indicate that women were subordinate to men and engaged in domestic activities. Egyptian women did have the right to hold, inherit, and will property and retained rights over their own dowry after divorce. They probably had more rights than Mesopotamian women.

E. Belief and Knowledge

1. Egyptian religious beliefs were based on a cyclical view of nature. Two of the most significant gods, the sun-god Re and Osiris, god of the Underworld, who was killed, dismembered, and then restored to life, represented renewal and life after death.
2. The kings who were identified with Re and with Horus, the son of Osiris, served as chief priests. The supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon was generally the god of the city that was serving as the capital.

3. The Egyptians spent a large amount of their wealth in constructing fabulous temples. Temple activities included regular offerings to the gods and great festivals.
4. We know little about popular religious beliefs. What we do know indicates that the Egyptians generally believed in magic and in an afterlife. Concern with the afterlife inspired Egyptians to mummify the bodies of the dead before entombing them.
5. Tombs contain pictures and samples of food and other necessities and thus are a valuable source of information about daily life in Egypt. Tombs were usually built at the end of the desert to avoid wasting arable land. The amount and quality of tomb goods and the form of the tombs themselves reflect the social status of the deceased.
6. The ancient Egyptians acquired much advanced knowledge and technology. Knowledge of chemistry and anatomy was gained in the process of mummification. Other areas of scientific and technological advance included mathematics, astronomy, calendar making, irrigation, engineering and architecture, and transportation technology.

III. The Indus Valley Civilization

A. Natural Environment

1. The central part of the Indus Valley area is the Sind region of modern Pakistan. Adjacent related areas included the Hakra River (now dried up), the Punjab, and the Indus delta region.
2. The Indus carries a lot of silt and floods regularly twice a year. Access to river water for irrigation allowed farmers in the Indus Valley and related areas to produce two crops a year despite the region's sparse rainfall.

B. Material Culture

1. The Indus Valley civilization flourished from 2600 to 1900 B.C.E. Knowledge of the civilization is gained from archaeological excavation of the remains of Indus Valley settlements. The two largest and best-known sites are those at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.
2. The two major urban centers of the Indus Valley were Harappa (3½ miles in circumference, population about 35,000) and Mohenjo-Daro (several times larger). Both settlements are surrounded by brick walls, have streets laid out in a grid pattern, and are supplied with covered drainage systems to carry away waste. There are remains of something like a citadel that may have been a center of authority, structures that may have been storehouses for grain, and barracks that may have been for artisans.
3. Both urban centers may have controlled the surrounding farmland. Harappa was located on the frontier between agricultural land and pastoral economies and may have been a nexus of trade in copper, tin, and precious stones from the northwest.
4. The Indus Valley civilization is characterized by a high degree of standardization in city planning, architecture, and even the size of the bricks. Some scholars argue that this uniformity may have been a result of extensive trade within the region rather than the existence of an authoritarian central government.
5. The people of the Indus Valley had better access to metal than did the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians. Thus, the Indus Valley artisans used metal to create utilitarian goods as well as luxury items.
6. Technological achievements of the Indus Valley civilization included extensive irrigation systems, the potter's wheel, kiln-baked bricks, and a sophisticated bronze metallurgy. The people of the Indus Valley carried out an extensive trade with the northwestern mountain areas, Iran and Afghanistan, and even Mesopotamia.
7. We know little of the identity, origins, or fate of the people of the Indus Valley, nor do we know what historical circumstances led to the development of a sophisticated urban civilization. Part of the problem is that, although they had a writing system, modern scholars are unable to decipher it.

C. Transformation of the Indus Valley Civilization

1. Scholars formerly believed that the Indus Valley cities were abandoned around 1900 B.C.E. because of an invasion. Further evidence has convinced researchers that the decline of the Indus Valley civilizations was due to a breakdown caused by natural disasters and ecological change.
2. Ecological changes that probably led to a decline in agricultural production and the eventual collapse of the Indus Valley civilizations include the drying up of the Hakra River, salinization, and erosion. When urban centers collapsed, so did the way of life of the elite, but the peasants probably adapted and survived.

IV. Conclusion

A. Political and Economic Comparisons

1. Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley civilizations all developed along river systems where they were assured an adequate water supply for agriculture.
2. They all developed political structures for organization of labor to provide irrigation systems.
3. Kingship developed as the political leadership system of both Egypt and Mesopotamia, though Egypt's kings were believed to be divine in origin, while Mesopotamia's rulers were not.

B. Religious and Cultural Comparisons

1. The predictable flooding of the Nile translated into a relatively optimistic outlook on the afterlife for Egyptians.
2. In contrast, the unpredictable and violent flooding of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin gave Mesopotamians a more fearful expectation of their afterlife.
3. All three civilizations developed architectural techniques for building large structures.
4. Egyptian women appear to have enjoyed more equality in society than did Mesopotamian women.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did differences in the environment and geographical location affect the development of these three early civilizations, especially in regard to their growth as centralized and organized states?
2. What evidence do you see here of interaction between these civilizations and other peoples (including interaction among the three civilizations themselves)? How important do you think that interaction with other peoples was for the development of these three civilizations?
3. What demands arose for these civilizations that led to their technological advancements?
4. What factors might explain the rise and decline of civilizations in general and of these particular civilizations?
5. How do the religious beliefs and world-views in Mesopotamia and Egypt reflect the relationships between the environment and the people of these civilizations?
6. How well do the three societies presented here match the template for “civilization” presented at the beginning of the chapter?

LECTURE TOPICS

1. The World of Gilgamesh

Sources:

- a. Postgate, J. N. *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*. London: Routledge, 1994.
 - b. Roaf, Michael. *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*. New York: Checkmark Books, 1990.
 - c. Sandars, N. K. trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
2. Religion in the Ancient World

Sources:

 - a. Hornung, Erik. *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
 - b. Jacobson, T. *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
 - c. Quirke, Stephen. *Ancient Egyptian Religion*. New York: Dover Publishers, 1990.
3. The Great Pyramids of Giza

Sources:

 - a. Edwards, I. E. S. *The Pyramids of Egypt*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.
 - b. Hawass, Zahi, and Mark Lehner. "Builders of the Pyramids." *Archaeology* 50:1 (Jan. 1997).
 - c. O'Connor, David. "Boat Graves and Pyramid Origins: New Discoveries at Abydos, Egypt." *Expedition* 33:3 (1991).
 - d. Smith, William Stevenson. *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*. 3rd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
4. Indus Valley Civilizations

Sources:

 - a. Kenoyer, Jonathan M. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
 - b. Possehl, Gregory L., ed. *Ancient Cities of the Indus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979.
 - c. Possehl, Gregory L. *Harappan Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.
5. Trade and Trade Networks in the Early Civilizations

Sources:

 - a. Cameron, Rondo E. *A Concise Economic History of the World: From Paleolithic Times to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
 - b. Curtin, Philip D. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Chapter 4, "Ancient Trade" discusses Mesopotamian, Assyrian, and Egyptian trade and includes references to a number of useful articles.
 - c. Shereen, Ratnagar. *Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappan Civilization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.
6. Daily Life in River-Valley Civilizations

Sources:

- a. Collon, Dominique. *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- b. Kenoyer, Jonathan Mark. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- c. Postgate, J. N. *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- d. Romer, John. *People of the Nile: Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Crown, 1982.
- e. Strouhal, Eugen. *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

PAPER TOPICS

1. Compare the development of political institutions or religious belief systems in these three civilizations, paying particular attention to the impact of environmental and natural forces on them.
2. Research the development and applications of bronze metallurgy in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley.
3. Write a paper expressing and justifying your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Despite their different environmental conditions, Egypt and Mesopotamia developed very similar institutions of government.”
4. What does the study of the Great Pyramids tell us about the Egyptian technology of the time?
5. Compare women’s roles in the different river-valley societies. How much did economic practices and opportunities shape women’s lives?

INTERNET RESOURCES

Oriental Institute Museum (University of Chicago—virtual museum and highlights from the collection)

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum/meso/>

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum/egypt/>

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (explore Ancient Egypt and collection highlights)

<http://www.mfa.org/egypt>

University of Mississippi, David M. Robinson Collection

<http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/classics/egyptian.html>

ABZU: Guide to resources for the study of the Ancient Near East available on the Internet

<http://www.etana.org/abzu/>

Egypt and the Ancient Near East for young people and teachers

http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/ABZU/YOUTH_RESOURCES.HTML

NOVA Explore Ancient Egypt

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/egypt>

Harappa: The Indus Valley and the Raj

<http://www.harappa.com/welcome.html>