



The beginning of Western civilization can be traced back to the ancient Near East, where people in Mesopotamia and Egypt developed organized societies and created ideas and institutions that we associate with civilization. Around 3000 B.C., people in Mesopotamia and Egypt began to develop cities. They invented writing to keep records and created literature; they constructed monumental architecture to please their gods, symbolize their power, and preserve their culture for all time; they developed political, military, social, and religious structures to deal with basic existence and organization. All these allow us to view how they dealt with three of the fundamental problems that humans have pondered: the nature of human relationships, the nature of the universe, and the role of divine forces in that cosmos.

Chapter 1

Civilization in Mesopotamia

1. The Earliest Cities and Empires

Just like later ancient Greece, Mesopotamia was characterized first by the rise of small city-states near the Persian Gulf. During the 3rd millennium B.C., cities such as Ur, Larsa, and Lagash fought for the political control over Lower Mesopotamia for over 500 years until they were conquered by the mighty Sargon of the Semitic Akkadians in about 2350 B.C. About 400 years later, the Akkadian power was overthrown by another group of Semites, the Amorites. Political power now moved to the city of Babylon. By 1800 B.C., the new state was at its acme under the famous king Hammurabi. A Babylonian culture was established common to all Mesopotamia, extending from the north of Babylon to the Persian Gulf. However, the new power was short lived. A wave of invaders of Indo-Europeans upset the entire Middle East, plunging it into an era of political upheaval and cultural darkness.

By 1500 B.C., much of the creative impulse of the Mesopotamian civilization was beginning to wane. The invasion from new peoples known as Indo-Europeans led to the creation of a Hittite kingdom. The invasion from the Sea Peoples around 1200 B.C. destroyed the Hittite Empire and created a power vacuum that allowed a patchwork of petty kingdoms and city-states to emerge, especially in the area of Syria and Palestine. These small city-states did not last with the emergence of empires that embraced the entire Near East in the 1st millennium B.C. Between 1000 B.C. and 500 B.C., the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Persians all created empires that encompassed either large areas or all of the ancient Near East. Among them, the Persian Empire was perhaps the largest. Under the two great kings Cyrus the Great (559 B.C.–530 B.C.) and Darius (522 B.C.–486 B.C.), the Persian Empire embraced all the land from the Indus River to Europe and from the Caucasus Mountains and Aral Sea down to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. It remained intact for more than 150 years until it was conquered by Alexander the Great.

The Persians excelled in war and political organization. The king held absolute power. The empire was divided into some twenty provinces known as satrapies governed by satraps. Inspectors from the royal court traveled all of the empire checking on the satraps. To secure

efficient administration over the sprawling lands, the Persian kings constructed a marvelous system of roads and post houses. The Persian rule was lenient, for as long as their tributary peoples paid taxes and did not revolt, they were treated most leniently and were even allowed to follow their religious traditions. It is no wonder that many peoples owed their gratitude to the Persians, especially the Hebrews.

2. Society, Culture, and Religion in Mesopotamia

The society in Mesopotamia was well stratified. At the top were the kings and their royal families. Next to them were the great landlords and the priests. At the bottom were peasants and slaves. The rights of each class were closely related to their social and economic status.

It was in Mesopotamia that the earliest codes of laws appeared, as early as the 3rd millennium B.C. The most famous is the Code of Hammurabi in the 18th century B.C. (see Figure 1-1).



It survives on an eight-foot column made of basalt. The upper quarter of the column depicts the Babylonian king (standing at left) being vested with authority by Shamash, the god of justice. The lower quarter is the code's text in cuneiform inscriptions.

Figure 1-1 The Code of Hammurabi

Providing for both civil and criminal cases, the law well illustrated ancient man's concept of justice which demanded "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". The law covered almost all aspects of human life at that time, from penalties for crimes to regulations of marriage, divorce, inheritance, business transactions, and slavery. Most of our knowledge of the early Mesopotamian society comes from this remarkable code.

From ancient Sumerians came the first writing. One thing is sure that writing evolved as a practical recording technology to support economic pursuits. Because it existed to represent real things; its system of symbols—pictograms were also realistic. Over time, however, a symbol might be used not only to represent a physical object but to evoke an idea associated with that object. For example, the symbol for a bowl of food, a *ninda*, might be used to express something more abstract, such as "nourishment" or "sustenance." Pictograms also came to be associated with particular spoken sounds, or phonemes. When a scribe needed to employ the

sound *ninda* as part of another word or name, he would use the symbol for a bowl of food to represent that phoneme. Later, special marks were added to the symbol, so that a reader could tell what the writer meant was to represent the object itself, or a larger concept, or a sound used in a context that might have nothing to do with the food. The writing developed into what was known as cuneiform, because the writing tool, a square-tipped stylus can leave an impression on the clay shaped like a wedge (in Latin, *cuneus*). For over 2,000 years, cuneiform remained the principal writing system of the ancient Near East. The development of writing stimulated speculation in all fields of thought, enabled poetry to be created, and initiated business records such as contracts. People even invented double-entry bookkeeping.

The achievements of cities and city-states were astonishing, with a remarkable number of innovations being introduced which created much of the world as we know it and live in it. It was in Babylonia that music, medicine, and mathematics were developed, the first libraries were created, the first maps were drawn, and chemistry, botany, and zoology were conceived. Babylon is the home of so many “firsts” because it was also the place where writing was invented and therefore we know about Babylon in a way that we do not know history before then.

People in Mesopotamia already devised a sophisticated mathematics based on the sexagesimal system, in which the number 60 rather than 10 is the base unit. Our hour of 60 minutes and our circle of 360 degrees derive from this sexagesimal system. With knowledge of reasonably advanced mathematical principles, it was possible to design more advanced irrigation systems and to construct temples, known as ziggurats.

The religion in Mesopotamia was basically polytheism, numerous gods being associated with natural phenomena and arranged according to power and functions as those of the Greeks and Romans. Some deities were only local; others were universal. Religion was a vital force in Mesopotamia. It stimulated architecture, sculpture, literature, astronomy, and cosmology. From Persia during the 6th century B.C. came the new religion of Zoroastrianism named after the prophet Zoroaster. The beliefs of this religion were significant because they paralleled many of those in the Old Testament. Both, for example, forbade the worship of idols, taught an admirable system of ethics, emphasized monotheism, and saw a conflict between the forces of good and evil.

3. The Hebrews and Their Religion

While political and military power in the ancient Middle East was concentrated for approximately 2,500 years between the Two Rivers, there were other areas which made basic cultural contributions to the Western world. The most important was a thin band of land lying along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was inhabited by the Phoenicians and the Hebrews.

3.1 Establishment of Kingdoms and Division

The Hebrews were a Semitic-speaking people who had a tradition concerning their origins and a history that was eventually written down as a part of the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament. Describing themselves as nomads organized into clans, the Hebrews' tradition stated that they were descendants of the patriarch Abraham, who had migrated from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan, where they became identified as the "Children of Israel." Again, according to the tradition, a drought in Canaan caused many Hebrews to migrate to Egypt, where they lived peacefully until they were enslaved by pharaohs. They remained in bondage until Moses led his people out of Egypt in the well-known Exodus. According to the biblical account, the Hebrews wandered for many years in the desert before they entered Canaan. Organized into 12 tribes, they became embroiled in conflict with the Philistines, a people who had settled in the coastal area of Canaan but were beginning to move into the inland area.

Scholars today generally agree that between 1200 B.C. and 1000 B.C., the Israelites emerged as a distinct group of people, possibly organized into tribes or a league of tribes. The first king of Israelites was Saul (1020 B.C.–1000 B.C.), who initially achieved some success in the ongoing struggle with the Philistines. But after his death in a disastrous battle with this enemy, a brief period of anarchy ensued until one of Saul's lieutenants, David (1000 B.C.–970 B.C.), reunited the Israelites, defeated the Philistines, and established control over Canaan. Among David's conquests was the city of Jerusalem, which he made as the capital of a united kingdom. David centralized Israel's political organization and accelerated the integration of the Israelites into a settled community based on farming and urban life. David's son Solomon (970 B.C.–930 B.C.) did even more to strengthen royal power. He expanded the political and military establishments, and he was especially active in extending the trading activities of the Israelites. Under Solomon, ancient Israel was at the height of its power.

After Solomon's death, tensions between the northern and southern tribes in Israel led to the establishment of two separate kingdoms, the kingdom of Israel, composed of the ten northern tribes, with its capital eventually at Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah, consisting of two tribes, with its capital at Jerusalem. By the end of the 9th century, the kingdom of Israel was forced to pay tribute to Assyria. In the next century, Israel itself was destroyed. The Assyrians overran the kingdom, destroyed the capital Samaria in 722 B.C. or 721 B.C., and deported many Israelites to other parts of the Assyrian Empire. These dispersed Israelites merged with neighboring peoples and gradually lost their identity. The southern kingdom of Judah was also forced to pay tribute to Assyria, but managed to survive as an independent state before the Assyrian power declined. A new enemy, however, appeared on the horizon. The Chaldeans first demolished Assyria, then under King Nebuchadnezzar II,

conquered Judah, and completely destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Many people were deported to Babylonia, but the Babylonian captivity of the people of Judah did not last. Upon the destruction of Chaldean kingdom by the Persians, the people of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their city and the Temple. Judah remained under the Persian control until the Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great in the 4th century B.C. The people of Judah survived, eventually becoming known as the Jews and giving their name to Judaism, the religion of Jehovah, the Israelite God.

3.2 Religion—Judaism

Early Israelites, like other ancient peoples in Mesopotamia, were polytheistic. It was among the Babylonian exiles in the 6th century B.C. that Jehovah—the God of Israel—came to be seen as the only God. After the return of these exiles to Judah, their point of view eventually became dominant, and pure monotheism came to be the major tenet of Judaism. According to the Jewish conception, there is but one God, whom the Jews called Jehovah. God is the creator of the world and everything in it. To the Jews, the gods of all other peoples were merely idols. All peoples were God's servants, whether they knew it or not. This God was also transcendent. God had created nature but was not in nature. The stars, moon, rivers, wind, and other natural phenomena were not divinities or suffused with divinity, as other peoples of the ancient Near East believed, but were God's handiwork. All of God's creations could be admired for their awesome beauty but not worshiped as gods.

The chief source of information about Israel's spiritual conception is the Hebrew Bible, which is the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The Hebrew Bible focuses on one basic theme: the necessity for the Jews to obey their God. According to the tradition, God entered into a covenant or contract with the tribes of Israel, who believed that Jehovah had spoken to them through Moses. The Israelites promised to obey Jehovah and follow his law. In return, Jehovah promised to take special care of his people. All Hebrew history is interpreted by the Old Testament as reward or punishment meted out by Jehovah. When the Hebrew people obeyed Jehovah, they flourished; when they did not, Jehovah punished them and evil times befell them. For the first time, a religion of high ethical principles was closely bound to society, so that religion became an inspiring and deterring force in human conduct. From the vital concepts of this religion arose later the two most widespread modern religions—Christianity and Islam.

4. The Phoenicians

As a Semitic-speaking people, the Phoenicians resided along the Mediterranean coast

on a narrow band of land. They were famous for seafaring and trading. Culturally, the Phoenicians are best known as transmitters. Instead of using pictographs or signs to represent whole words and syllables as the Mesopotamians and Egyptians did, the Phoenicians simplified their writing by using 22 different signs to represent the sounds of their speech. Although the Phoenicians were not the only people to invent an alphabet, theirs would have special significance because it was eventually passed to the Greeks. From the Greek alphabet was derived the Roman alphabet that people still use today. The Phoenicians achieved much while independent, but they ultimately fell subject to the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Persians.

The reason for including the civilization in Mesopotamia, which is geographically east, is not only because Mesopotamia developed the first civilization in human history, but because the Greeks, when increasingly coming into control in the Middle East, fused the culture of Mesopotamia to their own and more importantly, developed a culture and outlook of their own.

Key Terms

city-states → Babylonian culture → Persian Empire → Hammurabi's Code of Laws → first writing (cuneiform) → polytheism → Hebrews and Judaism → monotheism → Phoenician alphabet

Exercises

Vocabulary Building

 Fill in each blank with a synonym to the word or phrase in the brackets.

- 1) The Persian rule was _____ (lenient), for as long as their _____ (tributary) peoples paid taxes and did not _____ (revolt), they were treated most leniently and were even allowed to follow their religious traditions.
- 2) All Hebrew history is _____ (interpreted) by the Old Testament as reward or punishment _____ (meted out) by Jehovah. When the Hebrew people obeyed Jehovah, they _____ (flourished); when they did not, Jehovah punished them and evil times _____ (befell) them. For the first time, a religion of high ethical principles was closely _____ (bound) to society, so that religion became a(n) _____ (inspiring) and _____ (detering) force in human conduct.

❷ Translation

🔗 Translate the following sentences into Chinese.

- 1) The invasion from the Sea Peoples around 1200 B.C. destroyed the Hittite Empire, and created a power vacuum that allowed a patchwork of petty kingdoms and city-states to emerge, especially in the area of Syria and Palestine. These small city-states did not last with the emergence of empires that embraced the entire Near East in the 1st millennium B.C.
- 2) To the Jews, the gods of all other peoples were merely idols. All peoples were God's servants, whether they knew it or not. This God was also transcendent. God had created nature but was not in nature. The stars, moon, rivers, wind and other natural phenomena were not divinities or suffused with divinity, as other peoples of the ancient Near East believed, but were God's handiwork. All of God's creations could be admired for their awesome beauty but not worshiped as gods.

❸ Questions

🔗 Answer the following questions.

- 1) How did the Israelites establish a united state, and what did it become eventually?
- 2) In what ways was the Jewish faith unique in the ancient Near East, and how did it evolve over time?
- 3) Who were the Phoenicians, and what was their significance?

Chapter 2

The Civilization of the Greeks

Although the first significant steps in civilization were made in the ancient Middle East and ultimately found their way into what is regarded as the Western tradition, it was the Greeks who created a civilization that was truly Western. It is to the Greeks more than to the peoples of the ancient Middle East that the Western world is indebted for its underlying ethical, esthetic, literary, social, and political outlooks.

The story of ancient Greek civilization is a remarkable one that began with the first arrival of the Greeks around 2000 B.C. By the 8th century B.C., the characteristic institution of ancient Greek life, the polis or city-states, had emerged. Greek civilization flourished and reached its height in the classical era of the 5th century B.C., which was closely identified with the achievements of Athenian democracy. It is generally believed that it was the Greeks who created the intellectual foundations of Western heritage. They asked some basic questions about human life that still dominate the intellectual pursuits in the West: What is the nature of the universe? What is the purpose of human existence? What is our relationship to divine force? What constitutes a community? What constitutes a state? What is justice? What is truth, and how do we realize it? Not only did the Greeks provide answers to these questions, but they created a system of logical, analytical thought to examine them. This rational outlook has remained an important feature of Western civilization.

1. Early Greece: Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Civilization

Geography played an important role in the evolution of Greek history. Compared to the landmasses of Mesopotamia and Egypt, Greece occupied a small area, a mountainous peninsula that encompassed only 45,000 square miles of territory. The mountains and the sea played especially significant roles in the development of Greek history. Much of Greece consists of small plains and river valleys surrounded by mountains ranging 8,000 to 10,000 feet high. The mountainous terrain had the effect of isolating Greeks from one another. Consequently, Greek communities tended to follow their own separate paths and develop their own way of life. Thus was born the spirit of particularism that was to be both the nemesis and

glory of the Greeks, which ultimately destroyed Greek political life but also nourished the individualism responsible for the supreme creations of classical civilization.

The earliest civilization in the Aegean region emerged on the large island of Crete, southeast of the Greek mainland. A Bronze Age civilization that used metals, especially bronze, in making weapons had been established there by 2800 B.C. This civilization was discovered at the turn of the 20th century by the English archaeologist Arthur Evans, who named it “Minoan” after Minos, a legendary king of Crete. The civilization of Crete was apparently built upon sea power. The quality of the civilization can be seen in the great palace at Knossos built by King Minos about 1600 B.C. After 1500 B.C., the island of Crete was invaded by the Mycenaeans. Mycenaean civilization reached its high point between 1400 B.C. and 1200 B.C. It is especially noted for its fortified palace-centers, which were built on hills surrounded by gigantic stone walls. As the culture of Crete had been partially destroyed and appropriated by the Mycenaeans, the Mycenaeans fell before a new wave of Greek people that began rolling down from the Balkans about 1200 B.C. and by 1000 B.C. had swept over the whole peninsula. Some time before 1000 B.C., a group of Greeks known as Dorians coming from the Balkans plunged Greece into a period of darkness which lasted for almost 400 years.

2. The Archaic Age of Greek City-States (c. 750 B.C.–c. 500 B.C.)

In the 8th century B.C., Greek civilization burst forth with new energy, beginning the period that historians have called the Archaic Age of Greece. Two major developments stood out in this era: the evolution of the polis, or city-states, as the central institution in Greek life and the Greeks’ colonization of the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

With overpopulation, the Greeks were finding it ever more difficult to make a living from the soil, often stony and unfertile. It was natural therefore when observing their fellow Greeks along the coast making a decent living, those from the interior should seek homes overseas for better opportunities. The 8th to the end of the 6th century B.C. was the great era of Greek expansion and colonization. The Greeks established colonies in Asia Minor, Thrace, the lands ringing the Black Sea, and southern Italy, Sicily. They founded city-states, introduced their culture abroad, and stimulated the economy of Greece. This was an essential step in the cultural exchange between Greece and the Middle East.

2.1 Forms of Government

When Greece was expanding, city-states were undergoing political transformations that were to result in three forms of government that characterized Greek political life in later