

CHAPTER  
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CHAPTERS IN BRIEF

# Early River Valley Civilizations, 3500 B.C.—450 B.C.

Summary

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** *The world's first civilizations developed along rivers in four different regions. Each culture met problems caused by the geography of its particular area. While the cultures shared many traits with each other, each had a special characteristic that made it unique.*

## 1 City-States in Mesopotamia

**KEY IDEA** *The first civilization in the world arose in Mesopotamia. It took the form of city-states.*

There is an arc of rich land in Southwest Asia that is called the Fertile Crescent. Two of its rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, flow southeastward toward the Persian Gulf. Each spring the snow in nearby Turkish mountains melts, swelling the rivers. This flooding leaves rich mud in the plain between the rivers. Because of this, many thousands of years ago humans began to settle in that plain, known as Mesopotamia. They grew wheat and barley. It was here that the first civilization began.

About 3500 B.C., the Sumerians moved into this region and settled. They faced three problems. First, the floods were not regular. One year they would come in April, and the next year they might come in June. Once the flood passed, the hot sun quickly baked the land into clay. Second, the small farming villages had no protection against enemies. Third, the area lacked stone, wood, and metal to use for tools.

The Sumerians solved these problems. They dug ditches from the river to their fields so they could bring water to their crops. They built walls of baked mud around their villages for defense. Because they could grow more food than they needed, they traded the extra for stone, wood, and metal from other lands.

Several large city-states were at the center of the Sumerian world. These cities had control over a surrounding area and could act independently much like a country does today. Slowly some people rose to power in many of the city-states. They became rulers, as did their children after them. Rule of an area by the same family is called a dynasty.

The Sumerians believed in many gods, each of whom had power over different forces of nature or parts of their lives. People, they thought, were just the servants of the gods. They believed that the souls of the dead went to a joyless place under the

earth's crust. These views spread to other areas and shaped the ideas of other peoples.

Society was divided into social classes. At the top were the priests and kings, after whom came wealthy merchants. Next were ordinary Sumerian workers in fields and workshops. Slaves made up the lowest level. Women could enter most careers and could own property, but there were some limits on them.

The people of Sumer invented the sail, the wheel, and the plow. They were the first to use bronze. They also developed the first writing system—on clay tablets. They invented arithmetic and geometry, which they used to help them build large structures.

Centuries of fighting between the city-states made the Sumerians weak. In 2350 B.C., the conqueror Sargon defeated Sumer and captured other cities to the north. By bringing together many different groups, he made the world's first empire. It spread the culture of Sumer to a wider area. A few hundred years later, a different group of people conquered the Sumerian region. These people were led by a king named Hammurabi, who is famous for his code of laws. It was a harsh code that punished people for wrongdoing. However, it also made it clear that the government had some responsibility for taking care of its people.

## 2 Pyramids on the Nile

**KEY IDEA** *The earliest civilization in Africa arose along the Nile River. A ruler called the pharaoh brought people together in a united kingdom.*

Another civilization arose along the banks of the Nile River of East Africa. The Nile flows to the north, toward the Mediterranean Sea. It, too, floods each year, and the waters leave rich soil on the river banks. There the people of ancient Egypt grew food and began to build their own culture. They worshiped the Nile as a life-giving god.

For many centuries, the people of Egypt lived in two kingdoms, Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt.

The former extended from the Nile's marshy delta region north to the Mediterranean, just 100 miles away. Upper Egypt began at the Nile delta and extended south to the Nile's first area of churning rapids. About 3100 B.C., the king of Upper Egypt united the two kingdoms.

In the years between 2660 and 2180 B.C., the basic marks of the culture of Egypt arose. Ruling over the land was the pharaoh, who was not only a king but also seen as a god. Pharaohs believed that they had an eternal spirit that allowed them to rule the land after their death. So these kings built themselves magnificent tombs. The tombs were huge pyramids made out of massive limestone blocks.

Egyptians believed in many gods and in an after-life. One god, they thought, weighed the hearts of each dead person. Hearts judged heavy with sin were eaten by a beast. Good people, with feather-weight hearts, would live forever in a beautiful Other World.

The pharaoh and his family were at the top of Egyptian society. Below them were people of wealth who owned large amounts of land, the priests, and members of the government and army. Then came the middle class—merchants and people who worked in crafts. At the base were the peasants. In later times, the Egyptians had slaves. People could move from one rank of society to another. Those who could read and write held important positions.

The Egyptians, like the Sumerians, developed a way of writing. They used pictures to stand for sounds. The pictures could be put together to make words and sentences. At first they wrote on stone, but later they began to make a kind of paper out of a water plant. The Egyptians invented many new things such as a system of written numbers and a calendar. Their calendar had 12 months, each of which had 30 days. They were famous in the ancient world for their ideas in medicine.

After 2180 B.C., the pharaohs lost power. Egypt went through a time of troubles until strong rulers once again took control. They ruled for four centuries until the land fell prey to invaders in 1640 B.C.

### 3 Planned Cities on the Indus

**KEY IDEA** *People of the first civilization in India built cities on the banks of the Indus River.*

South Asia—modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—lies separated from the rest of Asia by tall mountains. Just below the mountains

are two large plains that hold the Ganges and Indus rivers. The high mountains gave the people safety from invaders. Because they lived close to the sea, the people could travel over the water to trade with other peoples.

The people along the Indus River had many of the same challenges that the people in Mesopotamia had. Their river flooded each year and left soil good for farming, but the floods did not occur at the same time each year. In addition, the river sometimes changed course. The region's weather caused problems also. Each winter, strong winds blew dry air across the area. Each spring, the winds brought heavy rains.

Historians have not learned much about the people who settled in the Indus Valley because they cannot understand their way of writing. They know that people were farming along the river by about 3200 B.C. They also know that the culture of these people covered an area larger than either Mesopotamia or Egypt.

About 2500 B.C., these people began building their first cities. The cities showed careful planning. In Mesopotamia, cities were a jumble of streets laid down without planning. In the Indus Valley, however, the builders of cities created a grid of streets. They built a strong area called a citadel that was easy to defend and held all the important buildings. They also had systems for carrying water and sewage. These features suggest people had developed a strong central government.

The civilization of the Indus was peaceful. Because the houses were mostly like one another, scholars think that the Indus culture did not have sharp differences between social classes.

These early people left an important mark on the region. Some religious objects include symbols that became part of the culture that developed later in India. Historians have discovered that the people of the area traded with the people of Mesopotamia.

Around 1750 B.C., though, the cities began to show signs of trouble. The Indus Valley civilization collapsed around 1500 B.C. No one knows the reason, but there are several possibilities. Satellite images show there were earthquakes in the region. Because of the quakes, the Indus River may have changed its course. This ended the good effects of the yearly floods. The people may have overworked the land and left the soil too poor to produce crops any longer.

## 4 River Dynasties in China

**KEY IDEA** *The first rulers of China introduced ideas about government and society. These ideas had a lasting effect on Chinese civilization.*

The last of the great early civilizations arose in China—and continues to this day. China’s geography insured that it would develop apart from other cultures. It was isolated from other areas. The land lies protected by a great ocean, huge deserts, and high mountains. Within China, though, are two rich rivers, the Huang He and the Chang Jiang. Almost all the good farmland in China lies between these two rivers. The Chinese people also made use of the flood waters of these rivers. They had to be careful, though, for the Huang He could cause terrible floods that could kill whole villages of people. The mountains did not protect China totally. Many times during Chinese history, people living to the north and west of China invaded the land.

Just a few thousand years ago, some people began to farm along the rivers. About 2000 B.C., the first dynasty of rulers brought government to China. A Chinese legend tells of a clever engineer who told the people how to build walls to control the flooding river and bring water to the farm fields. It is not certain that such a person lived, but it is known that about this time the Chinese began to build cities.

Around 1500 B.C., a new dynasty began to rule. They are called the Shang, and they began to leave the first written records in China. Objects found in their palaces and tombs also tell us much about their society. Chinese people built their buildings of wood, not mud-dried brick as the other early cultures did. Huge walls made of earth surrounded these buildings to protect them. The walls were needed because it was a time of constant war.

At the top of Shang society were the king and the nobles who helped him fight these wars. At the bottom was the mass of peasants who lived in huts outside the city walls. They worked hard on the farms, using wooden tools because the Shang believed that bronze was too good to be used for farming.

Shang society was held together by a strong belief in the importance of the group—all the people—and not any single person. The most important part of society was the family, and children grew up learning to respect their parents. The family played a central role in Chinese religion, too. The Chinese thought that family members who had died could

still influence the lives of family members still alive. They gave respect to dead members of the family, hoping to keep them happy.

The Chinese system of writing differed from those of other groups. Symbols stood for ideas, not sounds. As a result, the many different groups in China, who all had a separate spoken language, could still understand the same writing. The written language had thousands of symbols, however, which made it very hard to learn. Only specially trained people learned to read and write.

About 1027 B.C., a new group, the Zhou, took control of China. They adopted Shang culture, but started an idea of royalty that was new to China. Good rulers, they said, got authority to rule from heaven. They claimed the Shang rulers were not just and had lost the favor of the gods. That is why they had to be replaced. From then on, the Chinese believed in divine rule. However, it also meant that disasters such as floods or war pointed to a ruler that had lost the support of the gods and needed to be replaced.

The Zhou gave the rights to large areas of land to members of the royal family and other nobles. The nobles promised to fight for the rulers and to protect the peasants who lived on the land. Later the power of these nobles grew great. Eventually the Zhou rulers lost all power. The nobles fought each other for control of China in a period called the “time of the warring states.” It lasted many hundred years, and the Chinese people suffered during this time.

## Review

1. **Determining Main Ideas** What challenges did the Sumerians face, and how did they solve them?
2. **Comparing and Contrasting** How was the religion of Egypt different from the religion of Mesopotamia?
3. **Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** Why did the pharaohs of Egypt build large tombs?
4. **Clarifying** What was special about the cities built by the people of the Indus Valley?
5. **Determining Main Ideas** What new idea of kingship did the Zhou rulers bring to China?