

Origins of Western Society



- **What Is History and Why?** History is mankind's effort to reconstruct the past. It is a uniquely human endeavor that involves the study and analysis of primary sources, as well as the utilization of the tools of archaeology. Historians piece together sources of primary information to create a believable picture of the past. The study of history leads almost inevitably to the study of civilization: What is a civilization? What is a citizen? The study of history provides students with answers to these and other questions.

- **From Caves to Towns** From perhaps 400,000 to 7,000 B.C., early human beings survived as hunter gatherers in extended family units. This period is known as the Paleolithic, or "Old Stone Age," from the primitive stone tools and weapons these people produced. Around 7,000 B.C., an obvious transformation began: some hunter-gatherer societies began to rely chiefly on agriculture for their subsistence. Neolithic peoples contributed a great deal to the development of human society, including systematic agriculture, writing, sedentary living, and improved tools and weapons. Stonehenge and other stone circles scattered throughout Great Britain, Ireland, and Brittany were built by Neolithic societies that must have been prosperous, well organized, and centrally led.

- **Mesopotamian Civilization** Most historians trace civilization back to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The geography of the area provided irrigation for surplus food supplies and Sumerians and Babylonians built cities along these two rivers. These cities became independent political states that shared a common civilization.

- A. **Invention of Writing in Sumeria** Writing appears to have begun at Sumer. The Sumerian pictographic form evolved by the fourth millennium into cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") writing. The signs in the cuneiform system later became ideograms and evolved into an

intricate system of communication. The writing system was so complicated that only professional scribes mastered it. Scribal schools flourished throughout Sumer. Although practical, scribal schools were also centers of culture and learning. These schools set the standard for all of Mesopotamia.

- B. **Thought and Religion** Mesopotamians made great strides in mathematics, medicine, and religion. Mesopotamian religion was polytheistic; gods and goddesses existed to represent almost everything in the cosmos. The gods were much like human beings, only with supernatural powers. In Mesopotamian religion, we find attempts to explain the origins of mankind. There are numerous myths woven into the Mesopotamian religious tapestry. Additionally, there is the Sumerian epic of creation, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its hero, Gilgamesh, is a wandering king who seeks immortality.
- C. **Sumerian Society** The arid and harsh environment of Sumer fostered a religion based on placating a pantheon of harsh and capricious gods and goddesses. The temple, or ziggurat, was the center of Sumerian life and religion. The temple priests oversaw the agricultural work and the distribution of the agricultural yield. The lugal (king) exercised political power over the landowning populace. Sumerian society was organized into four classes of people: nobles, free clients of the nobility, commoners, and slaves.

- **The Spread of Mesopotamian Culture** The third millennium witnessed the growth and spread of Sumerian culture, by the Sumerians themselves and by the Semitic peoples who conquered them.

- A. **The Triumph of Babylon** One of the Semitic groups to conquer Mesopotamia was the Babylonians. Babylon's best-known king, Hammurabi (ca 1792–1750 B.C.), forged a vibrant Sumero-Babylonian culture through conquest and assimilation.
- B. **Life under Hammurabi** Hammurabi also created one of the world's earliest comprehensive law codes, which today provides much useful information on daily life in ancient Mesopotamia.

- **Egypt, the Land of the Pharaohs (3100–1200 B.C.)**

- A. **Egyptian Society under the Old Kingdom** Egyptian society revolved around the life-giving waters of the Nile River. The regularity of the Nile's floods and the fertility of its mud made agriculture productive and dependable. By around 3100 B.C., there were some forty agricultural communities along the Nile. The Nile, deserts, and the Mediterranean Sea isolated Egypt. This isolation afforded centuries of peace for Egypt. During this pacific period, Egypt developed a vital civilization. Sometime around 3100 B.C., Egypt was united under the rule of a single great king, or "pharaoh."
- B. **Egyptian Religion and Government** Egyptian religion was a complex polytheism rooted in the environment. The most powerful gods were Amon, associated with the annual floods of the Nile, and Ra, the sun-god. Central to the religion was pharaoh's place in the pantheon of gods and goddesses—his presence assured the people that the gods cared for them. The pharaoh's ostentation reflected his power. The famous pyramids attest to the power and prestige of the pharaoh.

C. The New Kingdom Following a period of conquest by the Hyksos, a Semitic people, around 1600 B.C., a new line of pharaohs extended Egyptian rule into Palestine and Syria. During this period slavery became a prominent feature of Egyptian life.

- The Hittites The Hittites, an Indo-European people settled in Anatolia, became a major power in the Near East around 1600 B.C., conquering the northern part of the Babylonian empire. The Hittites introduced iron tools into agriculture and war. After about 1300 B.C. the Hittites, the Egyptian New Kingdom, and the Babylonian empire cooperated in a kind of détente. This peaceful situation was disrupted by the invasion of a group the Egyptians labeled “the Sea Peoples” in the late thirteenth century.

- The Fall of Empires and the Survival of Cultures (ca 1200 B.C.)

- A. In the late thirteenth century B.C. invaders destroyed the Hittite Empire and severely disrupted Egypt.

- B. Egyptians and Mesopotamians established basic social, economic, and cultural patterns in the ancient Near East.