

UNIT TWO

MAJOR SPOTS OF ANCIENT WORLD CIVILIZATIONS UP TO c.500 A.D

The Ancient World and Major Civilizations

The ancient world saw significant cultural and technological advancements that reshaped human life. Key centers of early civilization included Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, each contributing to the rich tapestry of human history.

The Neolithic/Agricultural Revolution

A major factor in the emergence of ancient civilizations was the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution. This period marked a transition from nomadic lifestyles to settled agricultural societies. The development of farming allowed for surplus food production, which in turn supported larger, more complex societies.

Common Features of Early Civilizations

Early civilizations shared several common features:

- **Organized Governments:** These coordinated food production and large-scale projects. Governments were often centralized and bureaucratic, managing various functions through appointed officials.
- **Religion:** Most early civilizations practiced polytheism, worshipping multiple gods and goddesses. Religion played a crucial role in daily life and governance.
- **Social Structure:** Societies were divided into social classes, typically with a clear distinction between the upper and lower classes. The upper class often included rulers, priests, and wealthy individuals, while the lower class consisted of farmers, artisans, and laborers.
- **Arts and Architecture:** Art and architecture reflected the talents, beliefs, and values of the people. This included monumental structures like pyramids and temples.

Ancient Civilizations of Africa

Ancient Egypt

Importance of the Nile: Ancient Egypt thrived along the Nile River, which provided fertile soil and water. The annual flooding of the Nile was crucial for agriculture, and the river also served as a transportation and trade route.

Political Unity: The Nile facilitated the unification of Egypt. Around 3100 B.C., King Menes unified Upper and Lower Egypt, establishing the first capital at Memphis.

Historical Periods: Egyptian history is divided into three main periods:

1. **Old Kingdom (c. 2686-2181 B.C.):** Known for the construction of pyramids.
2. **Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1730 B.C.):** Marked by stability and prosperity.
3. **New Kingdom (c. 1550-1070 B.C.):** Characterized by expansion and powerful rulers like Hatshepsut and Thutmose III.

Social Structure: Society was hierarchical, with the Pharaoh at the top, followed by officials, priests, merchants, scribes, artisans, and peasants. Women enjoyed relatively high status and could own property and engage in various professions.

Religion: Egyptians practiced polytheism, worshipping gods like Amon-Re, Osiris, and Isis. The belief in the afterlife influenced their funerary practices, including the construction of pyramids.

Decline: Egypt's power waned after 1100 B.C. due to invasions and internal strife. It eventually fell to the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

Kush-Meroe

Geography: Nubia, south of Egypt, was a region rich in resources like ivory, gold, and timber. Kush, a major kingdom in Nubia, rose to power around the 700s B.C.

Influence and Conquest: Kushite rulers, including Piankhi, conquered Egypt and established the 25th Dynasty. The capital moved from Napata to Meroe around 590 B.C., a city known for its iron production and trade.

Decline: Meroe declined due to the rise of the Aksumite Empire, which eventually led to its conquest in the 4th century A.D.

Civilizations in Asia

Mesopotamia

Location: Mesopotamia, meaning "between rivers," is located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq.

City-States: Early Mesopotamian societies were organized into city-states with kings ruling on behalf of gods. Key cities included Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria.

Contributions: The Sumerians developed cuneiform writing, advanced astronomy, and mathematics. Babylon was known for Hammurabi's Code, one of the earliest legal systems.

Assyrian Empire: The Assyrians established a large empire through military conquest, known for their organization and iron weaponry. The empire eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians.

New Babylonian Empire: Under Nebuchadnezzar II, Babylon became a major cultural and architectural center, famous for the Hanging Gardens and the Tower of Babel.

Persian Empire: Founded by Cyrus the Great, the Persian Empire was known for its administrative efficiency and the Zoroastrian religion introduced by Zoroaster.

Ancient Civilizations: India, China, Greece, and Rome

2.2.2. India

Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500 - 1500 BC)

The Indus Valley Civilization, one of the earliest in the world, emerged around 2500 BC in the Indus River Valley, covering parts of modern-day Pakistan and northwest India. Major cities like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa showcase advanced urban planning, including grid-pattern streets and sophisticated drainage systems. The buildings, made from baked bricks, indicate a well-organized society.

Decline of the Indus Valley Civilization

Several factors contributed to the decline of this civilization: environmental degradation from deforestation, disease outbreaks like malaria, changes in the Indus River's course, and climatic shifts.

Post-Indus Developments

Following the decline, Indo-Aryan people migrated into northern India. They

established new states and displaced the Dravidians who primarily occupied southern India. The Indo-Aryans developed Hinduism, which introduced concepts like reincarnation and spiritual salvation through various paths, including asceticism and enlightenment guided by a guru.

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama, known as Buddha, founded Buddhism around the 5th century BC. Buddhism proposed the "middle way" between asceticism and materialism and spread across Asia, influencing regions like Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.

Scientific Contributions

Indian scholars made significant advancements in science and mathematics. They introduced concepts like the decimal system, zero, and Arabic numerals (initially developed in India and later adopted by Arabs). They also made progress in medicine, chemistry, and metallurgy.

2.2.3. China

Early Chinese Civilization

Chinese civilization began in the northern region of China. The Shang Dynasty (c. 1700 - 1122 BC) marked the earliest recorded Chinese state, known for its bronze artifacts, horse-drawn chariots, and early writing system.

Chinese Writing

Early Chinese script evolved from pictographs to a logographic system with thousands of characters. By the time of the Zhou Dynasty (1122 - 256 BC), the writing system had become more abstract, with significant philosophical and literary developments during the "warring states period."

Confucianism and Philosophy

Confucius (551-479 BC) was a key philosopher who emphasized moral integrity and the importance of proper relationships in society. His teachings, compiled by his disciples in the "Analects," became a central part of Chinese ideology. Mencius (372-289 BC) further developed Confucian thought, focusing on the inherent goodness of people.

Qin Dynasty and Legalism

In 221 BC, Qin Shi Huang established the Qin Dynasty, promoting Legalism, which emphasized strict laws and centralized authority. This approach, combined with Confucian values, helped maintain stability in China for over 2000 years.

Chinese Innovations

The Chinese were pioneers in many areas: they began using coal, invented porcelain, and created the wheelbarrow. They also invented paper, printing technology, and gunpowder, which had lasting impacts on both China and the world.

2.3.1. Ancient Greece

City-States and Governance

Ancient Greece was characterized by independent city-states (poleis) like Athens and Sparta. Each city-state was a self-governing entity with its own political and cultural systems. Athens is known for its early form of democracy, where citizens (excluding women and slaves) participated directly in decision-making.

Greek Contributions

Greek civilization made enduring contributions in various fields:

- **Philosophy:** Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle explored fundamental questions of existence, ethics, and knowledge.
- **Science and Arts:** Greek architects and sculptors built iconic structures like the Parthenon. Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote influential plays. Historians like Herodotus and Thucydides set the foundation for historical writing, and Hippocrates is considered the father of medicine.

Decline and Conquest

The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) weakened Athens and other city-states. Macedonia, under Philip II and later Alexander the Great, conquered Greece and expanded its influence into Asia, blending Greek culture with other regions in the Hellenistic Age.

2.3.2. Ancient Rome

Early Rome and Etruscan Influence

Rome's early history is linked to the legendary founding by Romulus and Remus around 753 BC. The Etruscans, who controlled Rome from the 7th century BC, left a lasting impact on Roman infrastructure and governance.

Roman Republic

In 509 BC, Rome transitioned from monarchy to a Republic, characterized by a Senate that wielded significant power. Roman society was hierarchical, with patricians (nobles), equites (wealthy non-nobles), and plebeians (commoners).

Expansion and Conflict

Rome expanded its influence over Italy and beyond, defeating Carthage in the Punic Wars and conquering territories around the Mediterranean. Internal conflicts, including the power struggle between Julius Caesar and his successors, eventually led to the establishment of the Roman Empire.

Pax Romana and Legacy

The reign of Augustus marked the beginning of the Pax Romana (Roman Peace), a period of stability and prosperity. Rome excelled in law, engineering, and architecture, creating enduring legacies such as Latin literature, civil engineering marvels, and the Latin alphabet.

Fall of the Western Roman Empire

In 395 AD, the Roman Empire split into the Western and Eastern (Byzantine) Empires. The Western Roman Empire declined, culminating in its collapse in 476 AD. The Byzantine Empire continued until 1453 AD when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks.

Civilizations in Latin America

Introduction

The Americas consist of North and South America, with Mesoamerica being a significant cultural and civilizational hub within these regions. Mesoamerica, including Mexico and Central America, was a center for early civilization development. People first arrived in the Americas from Siberia and Alaska through the Bering Strait land bridge around 12,000 to 10,000 years ago. The domestication of plants and animals was crucial for adapting to this new continent. This process began around 8500 B.C. and continued until 2000 B.C. In Mesoamerica, people cultivated crops like beans, sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, squash, and maize (corn). In South America, crops included maize and cassava, with llamas domesticated for their wool. By 3000 B.C. in South America and 1500 B.C. in Mesoamerica, farming villages developed into the early cities of the Americas.

The Maya

The Maya were the earliest to establish large cities by 300 B.C. in present-day Guatemala. By 250 A.D., the Maya entered their Golden Age, or Classic Period, with city-states flourishing from the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico through much of Central America.

- **Farming Techniques:** Maya adapted to the tropical environment with methods like clearing forests for farming and building raised fields along riverbanks to protect crops from floods.
- **City-States:** Maya cities, such as Tikal and Calakmul, were independent city-states with frequent conflicts and trade relations. Trade included everyday items like honey and salt, and prestigious goods like feathers and precious stones.
- **Society:** Maya society had a distinct hierarchy. Each city-state was ruled by a male leader, though women occasionally ruled. The social structure included nobles, scribes, painters, sculptors, merchants, and farmers. Slavery was also present.
- **Culture:** The Maya made significant advances in learning, arts, and developed a complex polytheistic religion. They built impressive stone temples and palaces, developed a hieroglyphic writing system, and created an accurate 365-day solar calendar. They also invented a numbering system including zero.
- **Decline:** By 900 A.D., Maya cities ceased to grow, and their civilization began to decline. The reasons remain unclear but may include overpopulation, disease, drought, or internal revolt.

The Aztecs

As Maya civilization weakened, other groups like the Zapotec and Toltec rose to prominence. By the 1200s A.D., the Aztecs entered the Valley of Mexico.

- **Empire Building:** In 1325 A.D., the Aztecs founded their capital, Tenochtitlán. They conquered neighboring areas, demanding tribute in the form of food, gold, cotton, and slaves. The empire expanded significantly under Montezuma II.
- **City and Infrastructure:** Tenochtitlán was a bustling city with about 100,000 inhabitants, featuring large pyramid temples and the emperor's palace. Engineers expanded the island capital and created floating gardens for agriculture.
- **Culture and Religion:** Aztecs worshipped many gods and used a 365-day calendar similar to the Maya's. They practiced human sacrifices, particularly of prisoners of war, to appease their gods.

- **Technology and Medicine:** Aztecs made advancements in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. They used herbs for treatment, set broken bones, and prescribed steam baths.

The Incas

Founded around 1450 A.D., the Inca Empire was the last major civilization in Latin America, extending from Ecuador to Argentina.

- **Government and Society:** The Inca emperor, viewed as the son of the sun god Inti, ruled with absolute power. The empire was divided into provinces governed by appointed nobles. The government took censuses and supported the aged, sick, and poor.
- **Technology:** The Incas excelled in agriculture and construction, building terraced farms and impressive stone structures that withstood earthquakes. They diverted rivers for gold mining and developed a measurement system.
- **Medicine:** Incas performed successful brain surgery and used quinine for malaria long before Europeans recognized its value.
- **Record Keeping:** Although they lacked a writing system, Incas used oral traditions and recorded data through knotted strings known as quipus.
- **Decline:** By the early 1500s, internal conflicts weakened the Inca Empire, making it vulnerable to Spanish conquest.

These civilizations contributed significantly to human progress through their innovations in agriculture, architecture, and governance. Their rich cultural and technological legacies continue to be studied and admired.