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# World Hist- ory

Volume 1  
to 1500



# **World History, Volume 1: to 1500**

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# Preface

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## About *World History*

*World History* is designed to support both semesters of the world history course offered at both two-year and four-year institutions. Serving a student base of both majors and non-majors in the field, as well as an institutional variation in requirements of one or two semesters depending on the plan of study, the course introduces students to a global perspective of history conveyed within an engaging narrative. Concepts and assessments are presented in ways to help students think critically about the issues they encounter so they can broaden their perspective of global history and how the topics studied apply to their current life as citizens of the world.

The text shows how historical content and the ways in which history is studied are relevant to modern-day needs and situations. The narrative shows readers the *why* of historical events and people, providing context and import to engage students. A primary goal of the book is to include content, scholarship, and activities that explore a variety of perspectives, including those traditionally underrepresented in this canon.

Being able to thoughtfully achieve a global approach requires explicit discussions about the challenge historians face in their work. Each instructor and student enters the classroom with a construct that informs their existing understanding as well as their ability to understand and to appreciate novel perspectives. *World History* works to present an honest and authentic view of history for students to explore. The authors and reviewers achieve balance by introducing and juxtaposing people's experiences of history for a rich and nuanced discussion. New resources and new voices are integrated into the text in a deep and meaningful manner. Primary source material represents the cultures being discussed from a firsthand perspective whenever possible, showing a variety of experiences and voices that stress the interconnected nature of people and societies throughout history. Moreover, the work of diverse and underrepresented scholars and scholarship bolsters the text's ability to embrace diversity of thought and interpretation while spotlighting parts of history and places that often receive less coverage in history textbooks. Students will be challenged to use empathy to understand others' ways of thinking in order to better understand, analyze, and evaluate today's changes in the world.

## Pedagogical Foundation

### Learning Objectives

Every module begins with a set of clear and concise learning objectives that have been designed to be both measurable and meaningful. These objectives closely align with current teaching practice and aim to help the instructor decide what content to include or assign, and to guide student expectations of learning. After completing the module and end-of-module exercises, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives.

### Key Features

Various features throughout each chapter engage students with the content while having them practice some of the most essential skills in the study of history, such as the examination of primary sources, the analysis of multiple accounts of an event or period, the study of non-textual artifacts, and the exploration of how specific historical topics connect to today's world.

- **In Their Own Words:** Students are presented with a textual primary source for review and/or analysis, with discussion/reflection questions included. This feature bolsters the foundational importance of using primary sources in historical studies.
- **Dueling Voices:** Learners are given either a historiographical debate, or a side-by-side primary source reading that offers two different interpretations of the same event. Sometimes these are directly contrasting, and sometimes they help elucidate different perspectives. Discussion questions are included. This feature highlights that history is an interpretive discipline and that historians must regularly grapple with conflicting and at times contradictory information and approaches.
- **Beyond the Book:** Non-textual sources—such as art, physical objects, or architecture—are presented for study with the goal of helping students understand the value of these kinds of sources in historical work. Discussion questions open up conversations about how to understand these important artifacts.
- **The Past Meets the Present:** Students explore how an aspect of chapter content speaks to an issue in the present day, and have the opportunity to engage further in the topic with reflection/discussion questions.
- **Link to Learning:** This feature provides a very brief introduction to online resources—videos, interactives, collections, maps, and other engaging resources—that are pertinent to students' exploration of the topic at hand.

## Section Summaries

Section summaries distill the information in each section for both students and instructors down to key, concise points addressed in the section.

## Key Terms

Key terms are bold and are followed by a definition in context. Definitions of key terms are also listed in each end-of-chapter Glossary, as well as a book-level Glossary appendix.

## Assessments

A variety of assessments allow instructors to confirm core conceptual understanding, elicit brief explanations that demonstrate student understanding, and offer more in-depth assignments that enable learners to dive more deeply into a topic or history-study skill.

- **Review Questions** test for conceptual apprehension of key concepts.
- **Check Your Understanding Questions** require students to explain concepts in words.
- **Application and Reflection Questions** dive deeply into the material to support longer reflection, group discussion, or written assignments.

## Answers to Questions in the Book

The end-of-chapter Review, Check Your Understanding, and Reflection Questions are intended for homework assignments or classroom discussion; thus, student-facing answers are not provided in the book. Answers and sample answers are provided in the Instructor Answer Guide, for instructors to share with students at their discretion, as is standard for such resources.

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## Additional Resources

### Student and Instructor Resources

We've compiled additional resources for both students and instructors, including Getting Started Guides, an instructor's answer guide, test bank, and image slides. Instructor resources require a verified instructor account, which you can apply for when you log in or create your account on OpenStax.org. Take advantage of these resources to supplement your OpenStax book.

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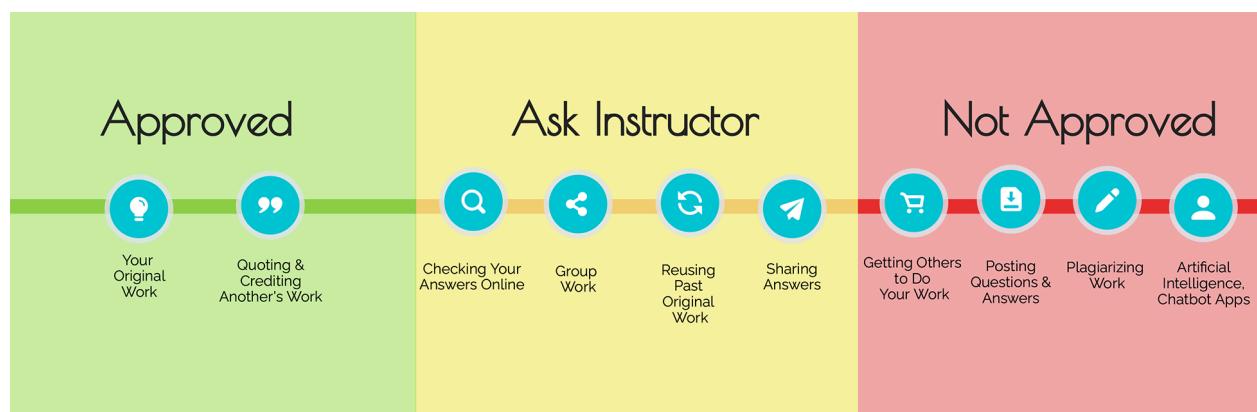
**Test bank.** With nearly 1,300 assessments across both *World History* volumes, instructors can customize tests to support a variety of course objectives. The test bank includes review questions (multiple-choice, identification, fill-in-the-blank, true/false), short answer questions, and long answer questions to assess students on a variety of levels. The test bank is available in Word format.

**PowerPoint lecture slides.** The PowerPoint slides provide learning objectives, images and descriptions, feature focuses, and discussion questions as a starting place for instructors to build their lectures.

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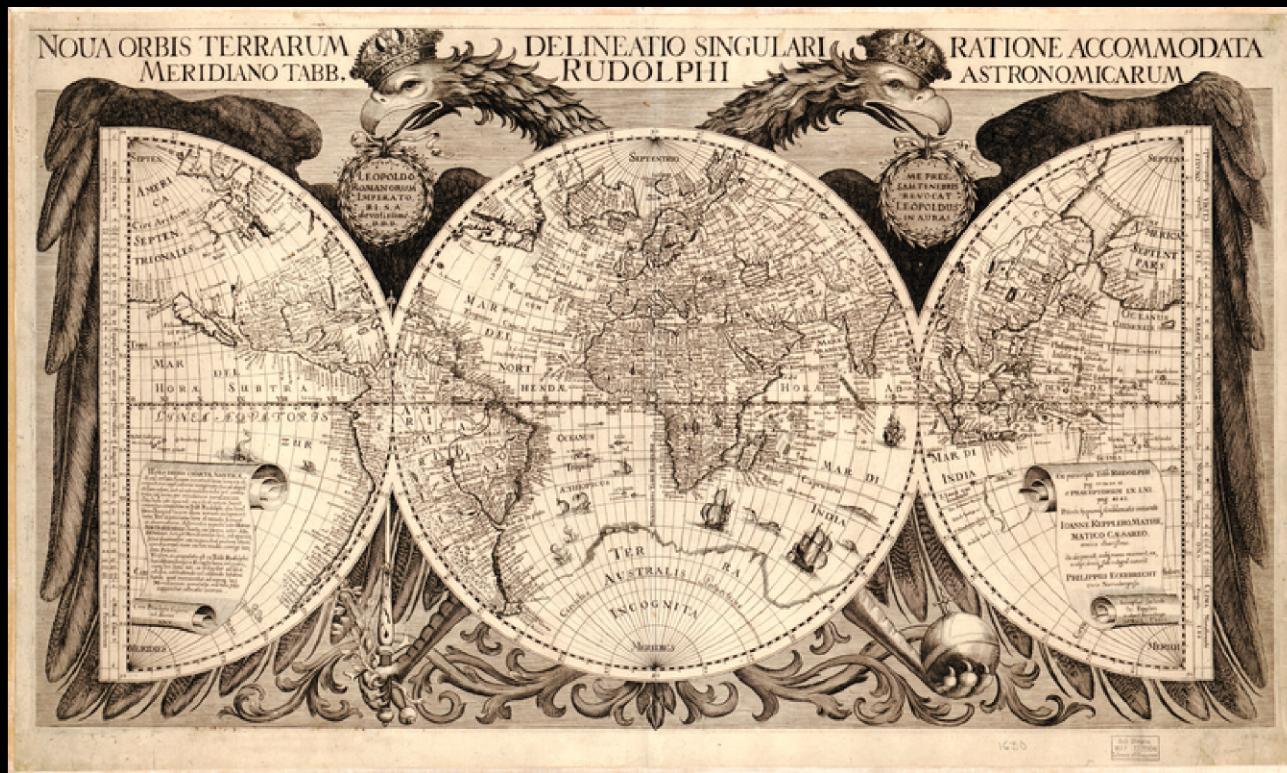
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**FIGURE 1.1 The Whole World.** This seventeenth-century projection map of the world, prepared by cartographer Philip Eckebrecht for the noted German astronomer Johannes Kepler, gives a sense of the breadth of territory this text will cover. As we see later in this chapter, maps often reflect the maker's perception of geographical realities. (credit: modification of work "A Modern Depiction of the World" by Library of Congress/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### 1.1 Developing a Global Perspective

### 1.2 Primary Sources

### 1.3 Causation and Interpretation in History

**INTRODUCTION** What is history? Is it simply a record of things people have done? Is it what writer Maya Angelou suggested—a way to meet the pain of the past and overcome it? Or is it, as Winston Churchill said, a chronicle by the victors, an interpretation by those who write it? History is all this and more. Above all else, it is a path to knowing why we are the way we are—all our greatness, all our faults—and therefore a means for us to understand ourselves and change for the better.

But history serves this function only if it is a true reflection of the past. It cannot be a way to mask the darker parts of human nature, nor a way to justify acts of previous generations. It is the historian's task to paint as clear a picture as sources will allow.

Will history ever be a perfect telling of the human tale? No. There are voices we may never hear. Yet each new history book written and each new source uncovered reveal an ever more precise record of events around the world ([Figure 1.1](#)). You are about to take a journey into human history.

## 1.1 Developing a Global Perspective

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the role history plays in higher education
- Discuss the ways in which the study of history can build skills for lifelong learning and success
- Explain how the features of this text will optimize your learning experience

From the legends of Troy heralded by Homer to the contents of digital archives accessed by modern students, the human story has fascinated and instructed those who have tried to understand its complexities. Knowing the past has long been considered a mark of civilization, and its study has never been more important. We have all heard the philosopher George Santayana's observation, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Yet because history is an ever-changing collection of events influenced and shaped by a variety of causes and outcomes, it never truly repeats at all.

Santayana's comment rings true, however, in that we can discern patterns of human behavior by careful study of the past. To know history is to know ourselves, and understanding history's nuances opens our imaginations to the possibilities each new situation creates. It is this knowledge of possibilities that allows the student of history to see the present with more clarity and prescience.

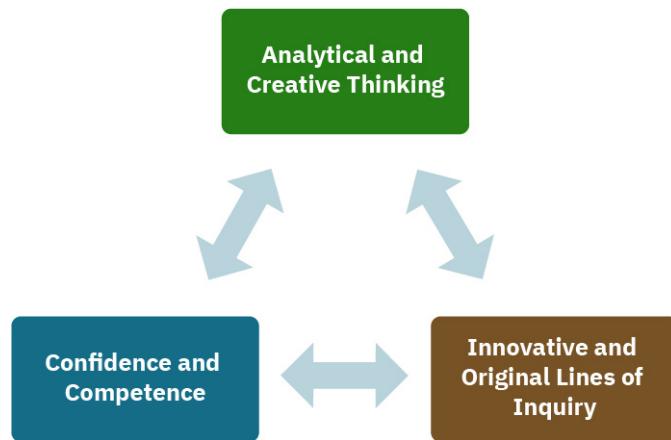
### World History as Preparation for Life after College

History is more than a series of names and dates; those are simply its building blocks, the pieces necessary for completing the whole picture. History is a story, the human story, that connects us both to each other and to the generations that lived before us. And today we study history in a way that grounds students in this shared past while also preparing them for their futures. The liberal arts are intended to help students find fulfillment, to better themselves and their communities through meaningful self-reflection and development. But they have also always prepared students to enter the workplace by honing career skills. To say that a world history class prepares students for the workplace is simply to acknowledge what has always been true.

This world history text has several key features that will help you understand the past in ways that are relevant to the present. Perhaps most important is its recognition that the study of world history prepares us to meet modern challenges. To cover the history of the whole world is daunting, perhaps, but a student must be prepared to engage with the globalization processes that have dominated history for the past few centuries. People around the globe are more integrated than ever by social and economic forces that transcend national boundaries. Both your private and public lives will require knowledge of the world and its people.

Understanding the diversity of peoples and ideas and possessing cultural empathy and awareness will allow you to meet global complexities with competence.

The study of history will also enhance your critical-thinking and analytical ability, both of which consistently appear among the top ten skills desired by employers ([Figure 1.2](#)). Other skills that have become increasingly important include adaptive thinking, social intelligence, cross-cultural competency, and media literacy. This final skill is critical to modern workplaces. History teaches students how to assess and analyze the material they are reading, as well as how to develop and present content in a meaningful and persuasive way. It also hones a creative mindset that is flexible and open to interpretations and ideas outside our own worldview.



**FIGURE 1.2** Do You Have These Skills? The top skills employers will value in 2025, according to the World Economic Forum, include innovative inquiry and creative thinking. You will develop and practice many of these skills in this course. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Without question, skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and creativity are developed best through the study of history. Historians must be truly multidisciplinary in the sense that they observe and gather as much information as they can and then interpret that data with the aim of drawing conclusions. The historian also must be a creative thinker because the source material—the data—is human, making it the most complex data imaginable. Historical data is as diverse as the people who make it, and it might be everything from the edicts of kings to the tunes played by street musicians. Historians must also be effective communicators. Who cares about a story nobody reads or a product nobody buys? What company in the world could not use and value someone who can think critically and creatively and then explain and communicate effectively? Historical thinking also provides students with a stronger sense of self, with avenues to explore human existence, and with the skills necessary to navigate the complexity of their world and future workplaces.

This text and its assessment questions will encourage you to analyze large amounts of information, to understand a myriad of concepts, and to make connections across topics. Developing cultural awareness and empathy is also critically important, and studying world history is a way to ensure you have this necessary skill. The influential job site Indeed.com says, “In our workplaces, in our world, we are a diverse people. Cultural competence is increasingly important as our means of communication and collaboration in working environments evolve. Learning how to respect, communicate and collaborate with an increasingly diverse work culture is crucial to optimizing a company’s efficiency and productivity.”

### World History and Global Citizenship

The study of world history recognizes the integrated nature of modern life and prepares students for diverse, global workplaces. Knowing about the world will prepare you to be a **global citizen**, someone who may reside in only one nation but who self-identifies as part of the larger world community. Issues in need of solutions, like climate change, social justice, and human rights, are global in scale. You must know the world to be the change it needs. How do you fit in the global environment? What is your story, and how is it linked to that of others?

In many ways, the idea of global citizenship emerged from the human wreckage of the two world wars. Beginning in 1948, the United Nations (UN) established a series of universal declarations that conceived of all people as deserving of human rights and dignity (Figure 1.3). Three such declarations further affirmed the rights of women (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, also known as CEDAW, 1979), of children (The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1959), and of people with disabilities (The Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, 1975). The UN regularly requires that member nations report on progress in these areas. Words and declarations help to create an ethos, a set of guiding principles. So, in addition to participating in global economies that transcend lines on a map, many in our world recognize

that we have also agreed to a series of rights and obligations that do the same.



**FIGURE 1.3** Human Rights, Codified. Eleanor Roosevelt is shown holding a poster of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in November 1949. Roosevelt, the former First Lady of the United States, chaired the committee that drafted the declaration. (credit: “Eleanor Roosevelt UDHR” by FDR Presidential Library & Museum/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

A BBC poll in 2015–2016 surveyed eighteen countries and found that more than half the respondents believed themselves to be “global citizens.” It also found that in times of prosperity, sentiments favoring a world community grow, while in times of strife, people tend to revert to more local, national identities. Though no one can see the future, it is difficult to imagine turning the clock back on the processes of globalization. Whether you would like to be a global citizen of the world or not, understanding the world is essential.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

What does it mean to be a citizen of the world? Watch this [TED Talk by Hugh Evans](https://openstax.org/l/77HughEvansA) (<https://openstax.org/l/77HughEvansA>) and think about the ways this concept resonates with you. Do you see yourself as connected to the world? Is that a positive attribute? Why or why not?

### **Features of This Textbook**

This text is a great place to begin your journey into the world’s past. It has several features that will help you understand the history of world civilizations from the earliest time to the modern era. For clarity, it adopts a traditional **chronological approach**, proceeding from ancient to modern times. Each chapter features maps prominently and will help you frame world cultures in their geographic and historical context. You will engage with firsthand accounts of key people and events—including instances in which people’s recollections of the same events might differ. And the text will highlight links between the past and the present to emphasize how earlier knowledge applies to our world.

Of particular note are the feature boxes within each chapter. These present documents and images from the eras you are studying. Sometimes you will be guided outside the text—such as in the Link to Learning boxes—to

explore other digital resources that clarify content, expand on ideas, and highlight interesting new work happening in the field. Finally, where appropriate, the text will offer material relevant to your current experiences, to help you understand the links between the past and the present. Following is a quick reference to these features.

### In Their Own Words

In Their Own Words feature boxes present a source composed in the period the chapter covers and allow you to examine it in context, learning how to critically analyze source material. A short series of questions will help to guide your analysis.

### Dueling Voices

Dueling Voices feature boxes present either an ongoing historical debate or conflicting reports of the same event or idea that were written around the time it occurred or emerged.

### Beyond the Book

In Beyond the Book feature boxes, you can explore the value of art, architecture, music, film, and other physical objects as sources in interpreting history. The goal is to demonstrate that the human story resides in a great deal more than just the written word itself. You may also have the opportunity to do some experiential learning.

### The Past Meets the Present

The Past Meets the Present feature boxes ask you to understand the connections between the material in the chapter and the present. They will prompt you to think about the relevance of a particular historical issue in today's world.

Because this is a global history, we tried to be true to the essence of world cultures by presenting people's names in forms as close as possible to their language of origin. These spelling choices have been made by experts in their field based on current research. For example, the text uses the pinyin system of transliteration for writing Chinese names, as opposed to the older Wade-Giles system, because pinyin is the system adopted by the People's Republic of China and more closely approximates the sounds of Mandarin Chinese. In languages using the Latin alphabet, accents have been retained on all personal names (Hernán Cortés, Napoléon Bonaparte); however, in transliterated languages such as Chinese and Arabic, we have avoided accents and apostrophes whenever possible, unless they are necessary to aid pronunciation and enhance readability. In naming events, places, and other items of historical interest, we have generally chosen the most commonly encountered English variants. Finally, dates are given using the Gregorian calendar, the international standard for civil calendars, with "BCE" to indicate developments occurring before the Common Era and "CE" to mark events in our own era.

The study of world history also requires a strong understanding of geography. You might assume that maps are fairly cut and dried. After all, we can clearly demonstrate where things are, can't we? For most of history, however, this was not actually the case. Maps are some of the most contested pieces of historical evidence we have because they were almost always made from the perspective of the one making the map, not as an objective practice. Most civilizations put themselves at the center of their known world, for instance. Maps have also been used to aid in the conquest and suppression of peoples. During the Age of Exploration, the Pope arbitrarily divided inhabited territory that was new to Europeans and granted it to Spain and Portugal. Centuries later in Berlin, Germany, European diplomats drew lines on a map of Africa to apportion territory among colonial powers. Think of how written history might change if our surviving maps were indigenous in origin. Even when humanity acquired knowledge of the size and space of things, maps remained inaccurate, often showing Europe as larger than it is and regions of the Global South—Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia and Oceania—as smaller than their actual size.

Maps also present challenges because some territories are claimed by more than one political entity. There are

many examples in the distant past, and even today, of contested regions, such as Crimea and Taiwan, that can make presenting regional geographies difficult. Crimea is claimed by both Russia and Ukraine, and Taiwan claims independence while China considers Taiwan part of its territory. The text will highlight these regions as they arise in the human story so you can explore geography's complexities.

## LINK TO LEARNING

For a perspective on how Google Earth reflects the globalization of society, read "[World Maps and the Dawn of Globalisation](https://openstax.org/l/77GoogleEarthA)" (<https://openstax.org/l/77GoogleEarthA>) by Jerry Brotton, a cultural historian and author of *The History of the World in Twelve Maps*. This brief blog post comments on the precision of GPS map technology as used by Google Earth. As you read it, consider the possibilities and dangers of such technology.

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## 1.2 Primary Sources

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify different types of primary sources
- Analyze primary sources in a historical context
- Interpret primary sources effectively

Historians develop interpretations of the past based on source material, and we do the same in this book. From ancient hieroglyphs to works of art to blog posts, from histories and biographies written by later scholars to Google Maps, sources help us build our interpretations of the human story.

### Learning to Evaluate Documents and Images

There are two main kinds of historical sources, primary and secondary. A **primary source** is a gateway to the past because it is an object or document that comes directly from the time period to which it refers. Primary sources might be government documents, menus from restaurants, diaries, letters, musical instruments, photographs, portraits drawn from life, songs, and so on. If a historian is looking at Ancient Egypt, a statue of a pharaoh is a primary source for that time period, as are hieroglyphs that tell of the pharaoh's reign. Primary sources, when we have them, are considered more valuable than other sources because they are as close in time as we can get to the events being studied. Think, for example, of a court trial: The ideal is to have the trial quickly so that witness testimony is fresher and therefore more reliable. With the passage of time, people can forget, they might subconsciously add or take away parts of a memory, and they may be influenced to interpret events differently.

A **secondary source** is one written or created after the fact. A twentieth-century biography of an Egyptian pharaoh is a secondary source, as are a map drawn in the 1960s to identify the battle sites of World War II (1939–1945) and a museum curator's blog post about the artistic achievements of the Ming (1368–1644). These types of scholarly sources are critical for the evolution of historical knowledge and are often the place students begin to form an understanding of past events. Secondary sources are useful for setting context and placing a topic in relationship to others of the same era. They also provide access to scholarly research based on primary sources for students whose access might be limited by language or geography. Good research requires both types of sources and some attention to **historiography**, which is the study of how other historians have already interpreted and written about the past.

All primary sources are not equal. History technically begins with the advent of writing, when humans began to deliberately make records and, after that, to develop the idea that preserving the past was a worthwhile endeavor. This is not to say that there isn't anything valuable to be found in the oral histories of preliterate societies, or in prehistoric cave paintings and archaeological artifacts. For historians, however, the written word is more accurate evidence for building narratives of the past. For example, imagine a modern magazine with a rock or pop star on the front, dressed for performance in a vibrant or provocative style. If that were the

only piece of evidence that existed five hundred years from now, how would historians interpret our era? Without context, interpretation of the past is quite difficult. Studying artifacts is certainly worthwhile, but text offers us greater clarity. Even if the cover of the magazine bore only a caption, like “Pop star rising to the top of the charts,” future historians would have significantly more information than from the photo alone. However, even textual sources must be met with a critical eye. “Fake news” is not new, but the speed at which it travels today is unprecedented. We must investigate the full context of any source and look for corroboration.

It takes time to develop the skills necessary to interpret primary sources. As an example, consider the act of reading a poem. You can read the surface of a poem, the literal meaning of the words presented. But that seldom reflects the true meaning the poet meant to convey. You must also look for nuances, hidden meanings, or repeated metaphors. We approach a primary source in a similar way.

There are four key areas to consider when interpreting sources: the author, the audience, the intent, and the context. Here are some key questions to ask yourself when exploring a new source:

1. What kind of source is it? Government documents have a different purpose than personal diaries. A former president commenting on a political issue has a different view from a comedian doing the same.
2. Who authored the source and why? Is the author responsible for simply recording the information, or was the author involved in the event? Is the author reliable, or does the author have an agenda?
3. What is the historical context? How does the source relate to the events covered in the chapter?

None of the answers disqualify a source from adding value, but precisely what that source brings to the overall picture depends heavily on those answers.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

This is a [presentation on working with primary sources](https://openstax.org/l/77PrimarySA) (<https://openstax.org/l/77PrimarySA>) produced by the Smithsonian. Pay particular attention to section 2, “Documents.” Read through it and take note of the kinds of questions to ask as you critically assess primary sources. You may want to write them down or have them on hand for reference as you work your way through this text.

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In a world where many sources are available in digital format, searching online, as many students do, is a convenient way of doing research. But the internet has just as much misinformation as it has legitimate sources. Historians evaluate the strength of both primary and secondary sources, especially online. How do we decide what a good source is? Some clues are more obvious than others. For example, it is unlikely any truly scholarly material will be found on the first page of a Google search, unless the search terms include key phrases or use targeted search engines such as Google Scholar. Online encyclopedias may be a good place to start your research, but they should be only a springboard to more refined study.

Your work is only as strong as the sources you use. Whether you are writing a paper, a discussion post online, or even a creative writing piece, the better your sources, the more persuasive will be your writing. Sites like Wikipedia and Encyclopedia.com offer a quick view of content, but they will not give enough depth to allow for the critical thinking necessary to produce quality work. However, they are useful for introducing a topic with which you might not be familiar. And if you start with encyclopedic sources, you can often find pathways to better sources. They might spark new lines of inquiry, for instance, or have bibliographic information that can lead you to higher-quality material.

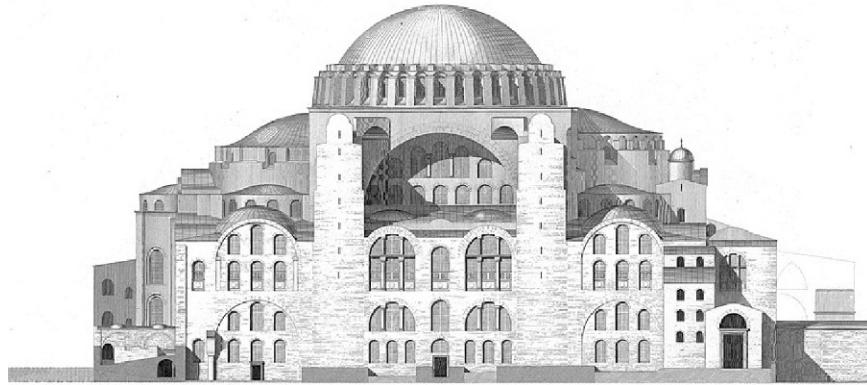
Always make sure you can tell who is producing the website. Is it a scholar, a museum, or a research organization? If so, there is a good chance the material is sound. Is the information cited? In other words, does the source tell you where it got the information? Are those sources in turn objective and reliable? Can you corroborate the site’s information? This means doing some fact checking. You should see whether other sources present similar data and whether your source fits into the narrative developed by other scholars. Does your school library list the site as a resource? Finally, if you are not sure, ask. Librarians work in online spaces

too, and you can generally reach out to these experts with any questions.

As you explore world history via this text, you will be asked many times to read and interpret primary sources. These will normally be set off as feature boxes, as noted earlier. Let's work through a few examples. The goal is to become more familiar with the types of questions you should ask of sources, as well as the variety of sources you will work with throughout the text.

First, an image exercise. The following images are exterior and interior views of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a wonder of the late antique world whose name means "Holy Wisdom" in Greek. Buildings and other material objects change as they are affected by historical events. Images of them can tell us much about those events and the people who enter or interact with them.

The first set of images ([Figure 1.4](#) and [Figure 1.5](#)) provide a likeness of the famous church at the time it was built, during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (483–565 CE). The domed structure was unique for its engineering and stunning in its effect. Decorated with Greek **iconography**, the visual images and symbols used in a work of art, the basilica stood as an emblem of Justinian's power, the awesome nature of the Christian God, and the surviving wealth and stability of the East. Churches at the time were meant to inspire awe; because most people could not read, stories of religious figures and events were told through highly decorative and symbolic images, and obedience and a desire to join a religious community could be motivated by the buildings' grandeur. As you study the renderings, reflect on the following questions: What are the key features of the building? What does it make you think about? What does it tell you about the period in which it was built? What would you think about it if you were a poor sixth-century farmer, an urban merchant of some wealth, or a foreign leader?



**FIGURE 1.4** Exterior of Hagia Sophia. Note the domes and archways in this drawing of the exterior of the Hagia Sophia. Such architectural features were particularly hard to build during the sixth century and often collapsed because the engineering was flawed. Thanks to their durability, those of Hagia Sophia were a marvel at the time it was built. (credit: "Saint Sophia, Constantinopolis" by ETH Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 1.5** Interior of Hagia Sophia. The Greek Christian iconography found in the interior of the Hagia Sophia includes halos on the figures, signifying holiness. Also note the lavish use of precious gold in this tenth-century mosaic of Mary, the child Jesus, and the emperors (left) Justinian and (right) Constantine. (credit: “Hagia Sophia Southwestern entrance mosaics 2” by “Myrabella”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

In 1453, nearly a thousand years after the reign of Justinian, the city of Constantinople (now called Istanbul in present-day Turkey) was conquered by Muslim Turks. According to contemporary accounts of the conquest, when the Ottoman leader Sultan Mehmed II came to the Hagia Sophia, he recognized its beauty and saved it from destruction. To Muslims, the Christian God and the Muslim God are the same, so Mehmed made the church a mosque—following a long tradition in the Middle East of continuing the use of sacred spaces. Minarets, towers from which the Muslim call to prayer is issued, were added at the four corners of the building, and Arabic writing was placed beside the ancient Greek iconography.

The second set of images ([Figure 1.6](#) and [Figure 1.7](#)) show the Hagia Sophia as it stands today, having also been a museum and now serving as a mosque once again. The building tells a tale spanning hundreds of years and highlights many fascinating aspects of the region’s history. But without the context, its meaning would be far less clear.



**FIGURE 1.6** Hagia Sophia's Minarets. Hagia Sophia has four tall minarets, which were added a thousand years after its initial construction. Minarets are towers from which the Muslim call to prayer goes out multiple times a day.  
(credit: "Hagia Sophia (Istanbul)" by Frank Mago/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)



**FIGURE 1.7** Hagia Sophia's Many Influences. Muslims consider themselves the heirs of Judaism and Christianity, and until recently, you could still see the early Greek iconography in the interior of Hagia Sophia. Now it is covered during prayer times by large medallions bearing Arabic writing. (credit: "Hagia Sophia Istanbul 2013 13" by Karelj/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### Documentary Sources: Competing Narratives

Textual, or written, primary sources are considered the best possible resource for historians. They tend to offer both far more context and far more information than other types of sources, and sometimes clues about the writer's intent. But even they must be approached with method and scrutiny. We must evaluate the author, audience, intent, and context in order to accurately interpret a primary source document. Some questions you

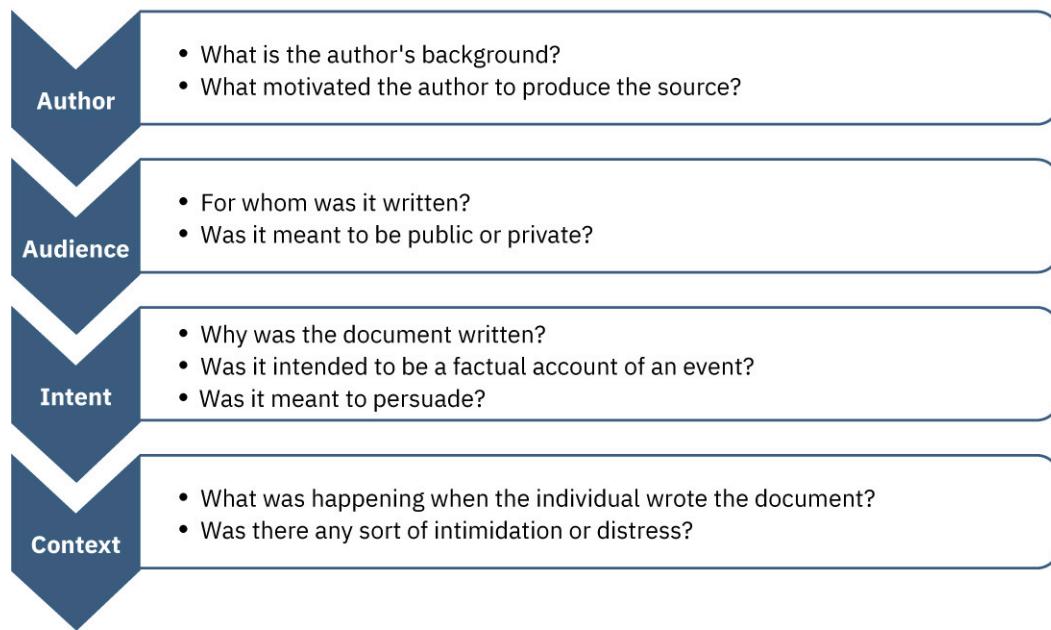
might ask about the author include the following: Who wrote the piece and what is their background? What was important to the author? Why might the author have written what they did? In some cases, the answers will be fairly obvious. In others, a deeper inspection might reveal hidden motives.

You must also take into account the planned audience for a document: For whom was it written? Was it meant to be public or private? Is it a letter to a friend or an essay submitted for publication? For a modern example, is it a text to a friend or to a mother? Texts will one day be a source for historians to use, but knowing who sent them, and to whom, will be essential to interpreting them correctly. (For fun, search online using the term “misinterpreted texts.”)

In addition to considering the audience, you should think about the intent: Why was the document written? Was it intended to be a factual account of an event? Was it meant to persuade? Is it a complete falsification? Often people write things that present them in the best light rather than reveal weaknesses.

Finally, you should reflect on the circumstances of the document’s creation. Some questions you may want to ask include the following: What is the general time period of the document, and what was that time like? What was happening when the individual wrote the document? Was there any sort of intimidation or distress? Is it a time of war or peace? Is there religious conflict? Is there an economic crisis? A health crisis? A natural disaster? Could the writer have been fending off an attack or lobbying for one? Are we missing other perspectives or voices we would like to hear?

The answers to these questions will shape your interpretation of the primary source and bring you closer to its true meaning. Most text-based sources have meanings beyond the obvious, and it is the historian’s job to uncover these. Be sure to keep these questions in mind throughout this course and whenever you undertake historical research or are considering the accuracy of information you encounter ([Figure 1.8](#)).



**FIGURE 1.8** Evaluating Primary Sources. These key questions to ask about primary sources help us evaluate the author, audience, intent, and context. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

To gain experience using these questions, consider the two accounts in [The Spanish Arrival in the Aztec Capital](#), written relatively close to each other in time and dealing with similar subjects from different perspectives. According to the first account, written in 1519 by Hernán Cortés, Indigenous people in the Americas were thrilled to become subjects of Spain when European colonizers arrived. The Aztec, telling of their encounter with the Spanish, relate that the Spaniards killed even the unarmed, which seemed barbaric to the author. What should historians do with such widely competing texts? How do they decide what each one

adds to the true story of the conquest of Mexico? As you read, keep these questions in mind.

## DUELING VOICES

### The Spanish Arrival in the Aztec Capital

Hernán Cortés was a Spanish conquistador who conquered the Aztec Empire in what is now central Mexico in 1521. An ambitious but brutal young man seeking fame and fortune, Cortés wrote a series of letters to Charles V describing his exploits in the hope of raising himself in the king's esteem. In the following letter, written in 1519, Cortés recounts his conquest of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, and describes the Indigenous people he encountered. The letter is followed by an Aztec account of the conquest that describes an event known as the Massacre in the Great Temple, an attack on nobles and warriors who had gathered in Tenochtitlán to celebrate a religious festival. The attack was conducted by Pedro de Alvarado, who had been left in charge while Cortés was absent from the city. At the time of the massacre, Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler, was under house arrest, having previously greeted Cortés on his arrival and invited him into the sacred city.

In my former despatch [sic], Most Excellent Prince, I gave a list of the cities and towns that had to that time voluntarily submitted to your authority, together with those I had reduced by conquest. I also mentioned having received information from the natives of a certain great Lord, called MUTEZUMA, who, according to their computation of distances, dwelt ninety or a hundred leagues from the coast and the port where I had disembarked; and that, trusting in the greatness of God, and the confidence inspired by the royal name of your Highness, I proposed to go and see him wherever he might be. I also recollect having [...] assured your Highness that he should be taken either dead or alive, or become a subject to the royal throne of your Majesty. With this determination I departed from the city of Cempoal, to which I gave the name of Sevilla, on the 16th of August, with fifteen horse and three hundred infantry, all in the best condition for war in which I was able, or the time permitted me to render them. [...] I also left the whole province of Cempoal, and all the mountainous region adjacent to the town, containing fifty thousand warriors, and fifty towns and fortresses, in peace and security, and firm in their allegiance to your Majesty, as they have remained to the present time. Although they were subjects of Muteczuma, yet according to the information I received, they had been reduced to that condition by force, within a short period; and when they had obtained through me some knowledge of your Highness, and of your great regal power, they declared their desire to become vassals of your Majesty, and to form an alliance with me. They also begged me to protect them against that mighty Lord, who used violent and tyrannical measures to keep them in subjection, and took from them their sons to be slain and offered as sacrifices to his idols; with many other complaints against him, in order to avoid whose tyranny they embraced the service of your Majesty.

—Hernán Cortés, *Second Letter to Charles V*

During this time, the people asked Motecuhzoma how they should celebrate their god's fiesta. He said: "Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments."

During this same time, The Sun commanded that Motecuhzoma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan named Nezahualquetzin. They also murdered the king of Nauhtla, Cohualpopocatzin, by wounding him with arrows and then burning him alive.

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. [...] But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli [the god of sun and war]. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to

death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. [...]

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

The king Motecuhzoma [...] protested: “Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or macanas. Our lords, they are completely unarmed!”

The Sun had treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the captain left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

—Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*

- To whom is each author writing?
- How do the authors’ different intentions affect what they wrote?
- One author was on the side of the victorious and one among the vanquished. How does this context affect the tone of the writing?

## Textual Sources: The Importance of Language

The different types of language used in a source are clues to its interpretation. Linguists call the use of language **rhetoric**. Rhetorical choices, decisions about the way words are used and put together, are often deliberate and intended to achieve a certain outcome. For example, think about the way you talk to a professor versus the way you talk to a friend. We must closely examine the rhetorical choices in any primary document to correctly interpret it. To practice this skill, consider President Roosevelt’s famous speech in [Roosevelt’s “Day of Infamy” Speech](#) and the guiding questions that follow.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Roosevelt’s “Day of Infamy” Speech

The United States entered World War II in 1941 after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor ([Figure 1.9](#)), the naval base where the U.S. Pacific fleet moored most of its vessels. It was a surprise attack that killed hundreds, devastated the base, and shocked the country. President Franklin D. Roosevelt went to Congress and asked for a declaration of war against Japan. The speech he gave, however, was about more than this request. Roosevelt used certain words to highlight that the attack was secret and calculated. He also suggested that God was on the side of the United States. As you read, pay special attention to the words Roosevelt uses. Can you pick out a few key rhetorical choices?



**FIGURE 1.9** Pearl Harbor under Attack. This photograph of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was taken from a Japanese plane on December 7, 1941, shortly after the beginning of the torpedo attack on the U.S. fleet anchored there. (credit: “Attack on Pearl Harbor Japanese planes view” by Naval History and Heritage Command/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate and of the House of Representatives: Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific. Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American Island of Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our secretary of state a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the army and navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Day of Infamy”

- What message was Roosevelt conveying to the nation’s people and to the world?
- What word choices did he make to convey this message?

## LINK TO LEARNING

In his “Day of Infamy” speech, Roosevelt uses a rhythmic cadence to give the impression of imminent danger as Japan attacks other targets. Listen to [an audio recording of the speech](https://openstax.org/l/77Infamy) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Infamy>) from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

## Hidden in History

Historians begin their work with a research question and seek to find the sources necessary to build an authentic narrative that answers it. One challenge is that written sources are undeniably valuable but often leave out important details. For example, many speak only of the lives of elites. It is not terribly difficult to find information about kings, queens, and other rulers of the past, but what of their families? Their servants? What of the ordinary people who lived under their rule?

Some groups of people remain hidden in our account of history because few records talk about their lives and experiences. Historians of the 1960s began to revolutionize the discipline by studying history “from the bottom up.” In other words, they began to focus on just those groups that had long been ignored. They used sources like church records, newspapers, and court hearings to illuminate the lives of the poor and illiterate. Court hearings were one venue in which the words of people from all backgrounds were recorded as they served as witnesses and as accused. Mothers and fathers also sought out those who could write letters for them to get pardons for loved ones convicted of crimes. These kinds of sources shed light on those whose voices

were rarely heard, either while they lived or after they died. Great strides have been made in the field of social history, which looks beyond politics to the everyday aspects of life in the past. But it remains difficult, lacking records, to represent women, the poor, and minority communities on an equal footing with those who have traditionally held power.

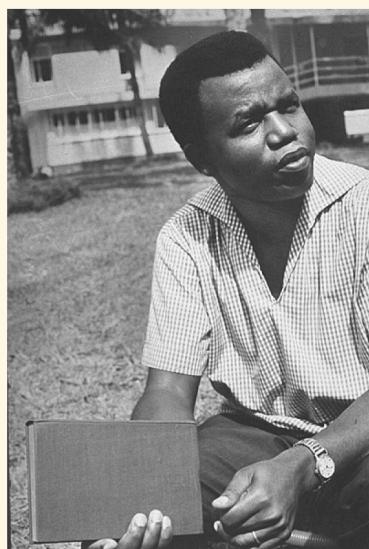
These kinds of limitations can also apply to regions of the world. Civilizations with long-standing and abundant historical documents often have more complete histories than others. Much is known, for example, about European history and Chinese history, both of which have deep roots in the written word. Europe, after all, had Herodotus, and China had Sima Qian. Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE, is called the father of history in the West; he wrote the history of the Greco-Persian wars. Sima Qian, born in the middle of the second century BCE, is referred to in China as the father of history for his work *Records of the Grand Historian*, a sweeping history of the Han dynasty. The Middle East and India also have rich textual histories. In Africa and Latin America, the historical record is less full.

In the case of Latin America, the historical record was significantly altered when the Europeans arrived. Believing that much of the writing of Indigenous people that they found spoke of a religion and culture they meant to replace, the conquerors deliberately destroyed it. Writing Africa's history is complicated by both its size and its diversity, as well as its colonial past. Due to the extremes of climate, surviving written documents and even archaeological evidence are not easily found, and what exists of written history is often tainted by the bias of the colonial observers who wrote it. New scholarship is emerging in both regions, generated by historians who look with fresh eyes and seek to understand history as it was. To gain some insight into the way history is relevant to the present, read [Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History](#) and consider the questions posed.

## THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

### **Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History**

The following is an interview with the noted Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) in *The Atlantic*. Achebe, author of several important books including *Things Fall Apart*, which explores the impact of British missionary work in Nigeria, speaks to both the historic legacy of colonialism—the practice of controlling another people or area, usually for economic gain—and the need to first see ourselves independently and then in relation to others ([Figure 1.10](#)).



**FIGURE 1.10** Chinua Achebe. This is a photo of the young Chinua Achebe in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1966. (credit: “Chinua Achebe, 1966” by The New York Times/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

But, of course, something doesn't continue to surprise you every day. After a while I began to understand why the book [*Things Fall Apart*] had resonance. I began to understand my history even better. It wasn't as if when I wrote it I was an expert in the history of the world. I was a very young man. I knew I had a story, but how it fit into the story of the world—I really had no sense of that. Its meaning for my Igbo people was clear to me, but I didn't know how other people elsewhere would respond to it. Did it have any meaning or resonance for them? I realized that it did when, to give you just one example, the whole class of a girls' college in South Korea wrote to me, and each one expressed an opinion about the book. And then I learned something, which was that they had a history that was similar to the story of *Things Fall Apart*—the history of colonization. This I didn't know before. Their colonizer was Japan. So these people across the waters were able to relate to the story of dispossession in Africa. People from different parts of the world can respond to the same story, if it says something to them about their own history and their own experience.

—Chinua Achebe in Katie Bacon, “An African Voice,” *The Atlantic*

- Try to sum up Chinua Achebe's words in one sentence.
- In what ways do you think colonialism has influenced the writing of history?

## 1.3 Causation and Interpretation in History

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe causation as it is used in the study of history
- Identify the levels of causation
- Analyze the role of interpretation in producing an accurate historical record

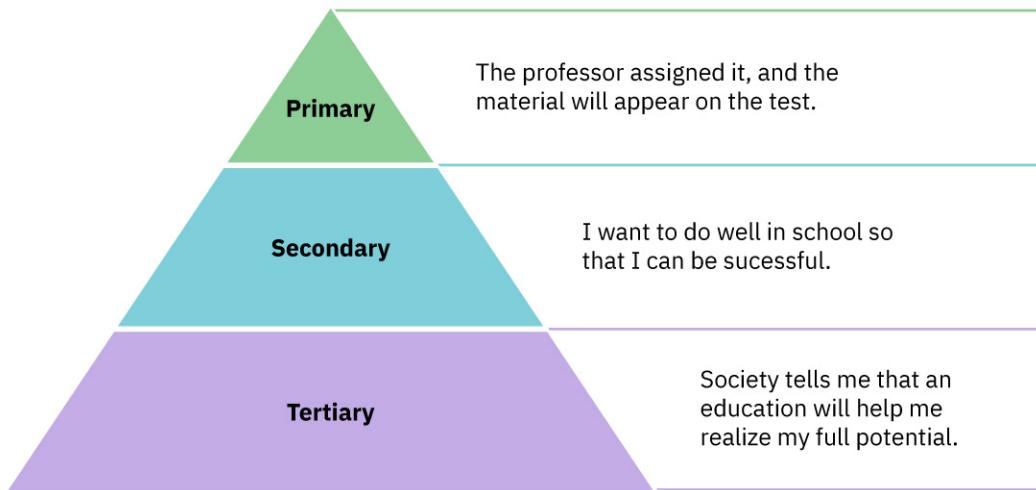
The study of history has always been about more than giving a recounting of past events. It is about remembering our shared past, making human connections that traverse centuries, and helping us know more about ourselves. Once we know how to muster as many facts as we can, we must consider the next step—understanding causation. Causation is the *why* behind events; understanding it is the way historians get at the heart of the matter. The powerful and public forces that change society and government are also present when individuals make choices about their lives. What, then, are the forces that shape history, that shift it one way or another, that move people to change on both an individual and a societal level?

All of us see these historical causes through the lens of our own experiences, circumstances, and value systems. Historians, particularly those trained in recent times, work to eliminate as much bias as they can, but we cannot wholly disconnect ourselves from our environment and beliefs. Bias can even sometimes act as a positive force, allowing us to look at the past in new ways. For example, historians in the 1960s and 1970s began to question their discipline's traditional focus on elites and sought out new sources that highlight the lives of more ordinary people. Driven by a bias in favor of the counterculture and politics of the era, they wanted to know more about what *all* people experienced.

### Levels of Causation

In their quest for the why of an event, historians look at both the immediate and the long-term circumstances of that event. Not all causes are equally significant; we need to rank them in importance. Let us begin with a thought exercise. At this moment in your history, you are reading this textbook. Why? Perhaps you would say, “Because the instructor told me to, and it will be on the test.” Certainly that is a valid reason. But if you think a bit more deeply, you might also say, “I want to do well in my education so I can be successful.” And at an even deeper level, “Society tells me that education is necessary to realize my full potential, find fulfillment, and participate in the community.”

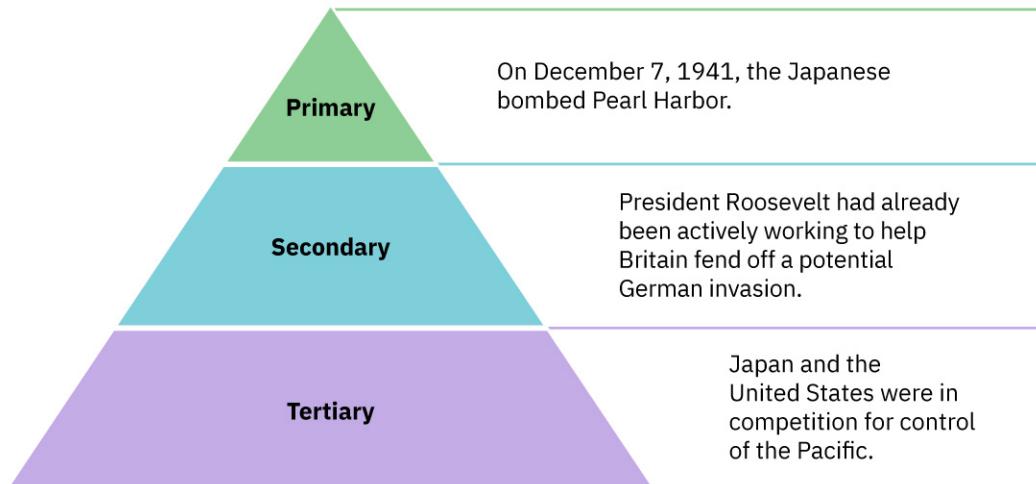
Think of all the other things that caused you to be here in this moment. There are no wrong answers; just explore the levels of causation behind your reading right now. Now rank them in order of importance. Which causes had the most influence on you, and which were more remote? Your response might look something like a pyramid ([Figure 1.11](#)). The **primary cause** is the most immediate. It is the spark. The secondary cause is once removed. The tertiary cause offers the broader context.



**FIGURE 1.11 Causation Explained.** This causation chart answers the question, “Why are you reading?” on three levels. The primary level is the most immediate. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

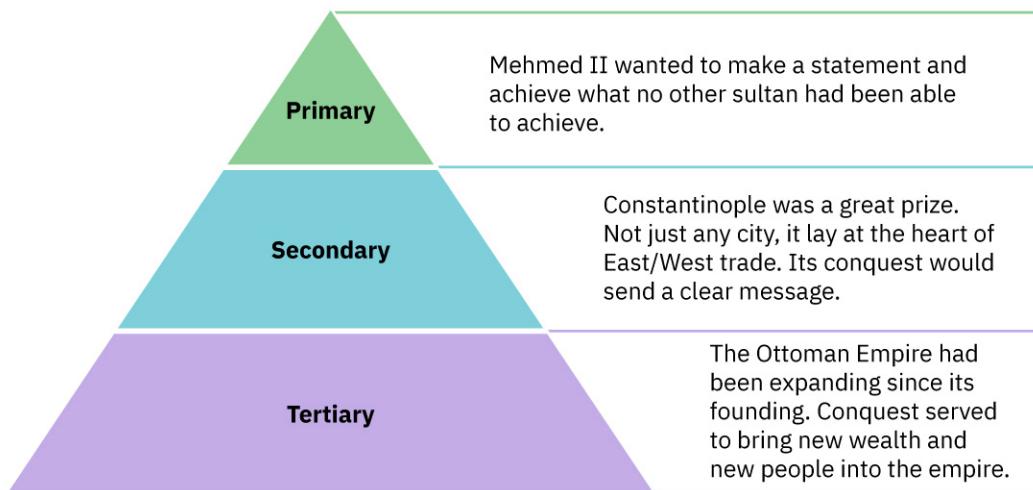
To reach a true understanding of why you are reading your text, you needed to know yourself well, understand the connection between education and career, and assess how social factors, such as the value employers place on education, influence your decision-making. The more aspects of causation historians can find, the closer they can get to the true nature of the event.

Let’s try another example, this one from history. Why did the United States enter World War II in 1941? In this case, the immediate cause was Japan’s attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, but hostilities had been brewing for some time. The president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, had been looking for ways to help the British fend off a potential German invasion, and Japan and the United States had long-standing issues over the use of power in the Pacific ([Figure 1.12](#)).



**FIGURE 1.12 Causation Applied to World War II.** This causation chart identifies and ranks the reasons for the entry of the United States into World War II. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Here is one more example. In 1453, Mehmed II laid siege to the city of Constantinople. Why? Mehmed II was the leader of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan. He had been badly treated by his father, and when he ascended the throne, he felt he had something to prove. The Ottomans had tried several times to take Constantinople because it lay at the crossroads of many civilizations. Conquest had long been a reliable mechanism for bringing new people and wealth into the Ottoman Empire and for keeping its economy prosperous. All these factors played a role in the siege undertaken by Mehmed II. Can you order them by importance? This is the point where historians usually disagree, even about events for which most of the facts are clear. A historian who believes powerful leaders are the most influential factor driving events would rank Mehmed's personal goals first (Figure 1.13). Base your ranking on the strongest arguments you can make.



**FIGURE 1.13** Causation Applied to the Conquest of Constantinople. This causation chart ranks the reasons for Mehmed II's 1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

There can be more than three causes to any event, of course, and because human choice always plays a role, we sometimes cannot separate events on the big stage from the smallest of personal moments in history. The context of the Ottoman Empire's continuous expansion set the scene in this example, and Mehmed II's desire to prove his ability was the spark.

Before moving on, try one more example on your own. Pick a moment in history with which you are familiar and follow the same process.

### Interpretation in History

Hand in hand with bringing causation to light is discovering what informed the choices people made in the past. What makes people act as they do? For much of history, we found the answer in the actions of elites—tsars, sultans, kings, and queens. The first historians largely concerned themselves with the study of wars and rulers, in accordance with the **great man theory** of history that credits leaders and heroes with triggering history's pivotal events. Although these historians gave some attention to historical detail, there was also an equal measure of bravado, exaggeration, and political spin in their work. This seemed reasonable in a world where the king's choice became everyone's choice and where sources rarely spoke about anyone other than noble lords and ladies. That this type of history remained the norm for so long was also a function of who was writing it.

In the West, Thomas Carlyle, a nineteenth-century Scottish historian, considered the study of the lives of “big men” enough to understand all of history. Higher education was the privilege of only the rich; it must have seemed quite natural to believe that only the elites could move history. These ideas began to change, however, if slowly. In the early nineteenth century, a new school of thought called Romanticism emerged. The Romantics believed there was greatness in everyday life. Even a small flower was worthy of a poem, and the plight of a

lowly squire was as important as the worries of the great lord of the manor, for both were essential actors in the human experience. The advent of Romantic art, poetry, music, and novels paved the way for a broad reexamination of what was worth knowing and studying. Writing a little later, in 1860, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy argued that there is more to history than the actions of one person. In his novel *War and Peace*, he contended that the “general mass of men” who participate in history are the ones who truly cause events.

## DUELING VOICES

### Great Men, or Everyone?

In an 1840 lecture on heroes, Thomas Carlyle coined the term “Great Men” to describe the kind of history he considered worthy, the study of elite men in positions of power. In his novel *War and Peace*, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy argued that there is far more to history than the actions of one person. In the following excerpts, consider the viewpoint of each writer.

As I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. [ . . . ]

We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them.

—Thomas Carlyle, “Lecture on Heroes”

In historical events (where the actions of men are the subject of observation) the first and most primitive approximation to present itself was the will of the gods and, after that, the will of those who stood in the most prominent position—the heroes of history. But we need only penetrate to the essence of any historic event—which lies in the activity of the general mass of men who take part in it—to be convinced that the will of the historic hero does not control the actions of the mass but is itself continually controlled. It may seem to be a matter of indifference whether we understand the meaning of historical events this way or that; yet there is the same difference between a man who says that the people of the West moved on the East because Napoleon wished it and a man who says that this happened because it had to happen, as there is between those who declared that the earth was stationary and that the planets moved round it and those who admitted that they did not know what upheld the earth, but knew there were laws directing its movement and that of the other planets. There is, and can be, no cause of an historical event except the one cause of all causes. But there are laws directing events, and some of these laws are known to us while we are conscious of others we cannot comprehend. The discovery of these laws is only possible when we have quite abandoned the attempt to find the cause in the will of some one man, just as the discovery of the laws of the motion of the planets was possible only when men abandoned the conception of the fixity of the earth.

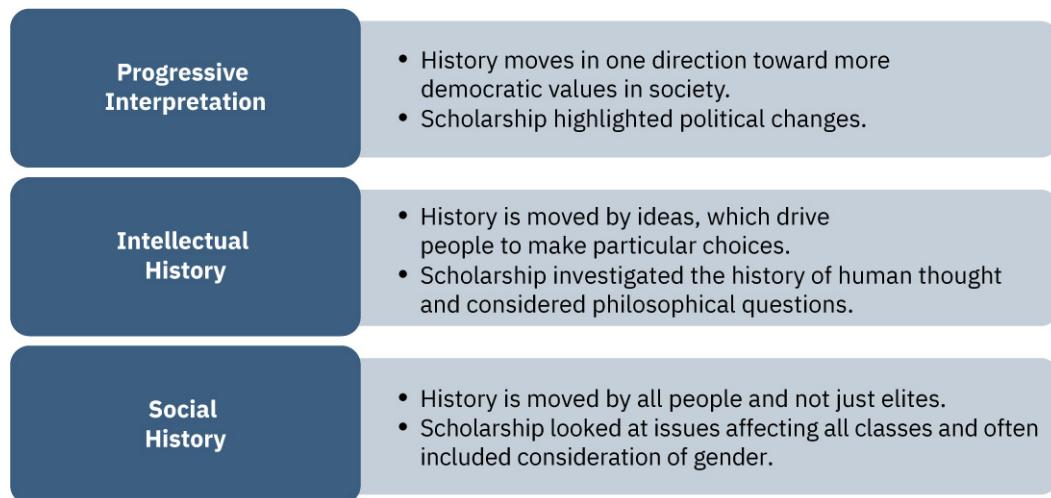
—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

- 
- Which kind of history do you prefer, the “great man” kind or what we might call the “everyone” kind? Why?
  - Whose argument is more convincing, Carlyle’s or Tolstoy’s? Why?

While on one hand historians began to look at people of the lower classes as more integral to the human story, history as a discipline became dominated by the same set of colonial powers that were conquering much of the globe in the nineteenth century. Therefore, two divergent streams of thought were operating simultaneously, and the picture of history both expanded in terms of class and contracted in terms of diversity. One of the early European schools of thought was **progressive history**, which viewed history as a straight line to a specific destination. Historians with this “progressive” view believed societies were becoming more democratic over time and that the advance of republican governments was inevitable. Their perspective might also be considered a form of *teleological* history, which proposes that history is moving to a particular end, a culmination of the human experience. Progressive historians believed in the betterment of people and of society, so long as it occurred on a European model. Progress looked only one way: the Western way. Consider what Chinua Achebe (quoted in [Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History](#)) would have said about European democracy and republicanism.

In the twentieth century, particularly after World War I, the idea of inevitable human progress seemed laughable. People grew more willing to question the authority of elites because these leaders were of little help once war began. Historians became more interested in the irrational aspects of the human condition, the psychology behind people’s choices. This is one reason for the rise of contemporary **intellectual history**, which looks at the ideas that drive people to make certain choices and focuses on philosophical questions and the history of human thought.

The counterculture of the 1960s in the West deepened people’s desire to challenge existing norms, such as the lack of rights for women and for racial minorities. The field of **social history**, guided by the concept that history is made by all people and not just elites, became much more important during this period ([Figure 1.14](#)). In this context, young historians and sociologists began to develop new ideas. In their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*, for example, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that our belief systems are informed by **social constructs**, ideas that have been created and accepted by the people in a society, such as the concepts of class distinction and gender. Social constructs influence the ways people think and behave.



**FIGURE 1.14 Trends in Historical Thought.** Historians’ thinking has led from the progressive school of interpretation to the more contemporary fields of intellectual and social history. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

To understand history, you must understand the social construction of reality, which is the way people define roles and perceive themselves within a social context. Consider our earlier thought exercise. You believe education is important. Why? Who has said that to you in the past? How did you come to believe it? In other words, what is your social construction of education, and where did it come from?

Social constructs exist everywhere and inform many decisions we make, often on a subconscious level. For example, consider the following questions:

1. What do you buy a five-year-old girl for her birthday? What do you buy for a boy the same age? What influenced your decision?
2. What would you wear to a job interview? What would you wear to a party? Why?
3. To which person standing at the front of a classroom would you give more respect: a woman dressed in a tailored suit, or a man wearing jeans and a t-shirt? Why?

In addition to examining reality as socially constructed, twentieth-century historians made interpretations through the lenses of Marxism, which considers history to be driven by class struggle, women's history (now usually referred to in the context of gender history), which sees history as driven by power differences between men and women, and postcolonialism, which focuses on the history of places formerly occupied by colonial powers. In the process we call **revisionism**, each additional lens revised the great man story of history, adding new key players and viewpoints.

Let us look at one more example. How would each school of historical thought approach the story of colonial Latin America between the Spanish conquest that began in 1493 and the independence movements of the 1820s? The progressive historian might explore the growth of democratic legal systems or people's increased interest in republican forms of government. The intellectual historian might consider the Indigenous literature and philosophy of the period. The social historian would look at what conquered people ate, how they worked, and what they looked for in marriage partners. A Marxist historian would examine unfair labor practices and moments of class conflict like rebellion or riot. The gender historian would focus on the role that social constructs of gender played in the lives of people in the past. And the postcolonialist would highlight why aspects of colonialism, such as racism and poverty, remain influential after independence. All these interpretative elements help us weave a more complete picture of the past.

The variety of interpretations open to historians also helps us put in the final piece, which is the practice of **historical empathy**, the ability to meet the past on its own terms and without judgment or the imposition of our own modern-day attitudes. To fully embrace the study of the past, the student of history must be able to set aside the assumptions of the modern era. Everyone has a set of biases, generated by the people who influence our lives and the experiences that shape who we become. Historians must spend the time necessary to investigate these biases and understand how they affect their interpretations. It is not the historian's job to pass judgment on the past, but to present it as clearly as possible and to preserve that clarity for future generations. This may mean reflecting impartially on historical positions, attitudes, or decisions we might find abhorrent as viewed from today's world. However, the more strands of history we can investigate and bring together, the more accurate the picture will be. And there is still much work to be done. For example, recent and ongoing research into LGBTQ+ studies, Indigenous studies, and the history of the Global South will continue to sharpen our image of the past.

The bottom line is that interpretation plays a central role in the field of history. And changes in our interpretation increase the number of ways we can get a clearer picture of those who lived before us. The danger lies in using only one lens. Yes, historians choose some causes as more important than others, but only after considering all the information available.

## Key Terms

**chronological approach** an approach to history that follows a timeline from ancient to modern

**global citizen** a person who sees themselves as responsible to a world community rather than only a national one

**great man theory** the view that it is enough to study the deeds and impact of important leaders to paint an accurate picture of the past

**historical empathy** the ability to see the past on its own terms, without judgment or the imposition of our own modern-day attitudes

**historiography** the study of how historians have already interpreted the past

**iconography** the use of images and symbols in art

**intellectual history** the history of ideas, which looks at the philosophies that drive people to make certain choices

**primary cause** the most immediate reason an event occurred

**primary source** a document, object, or other source material from the time period under study

**progressive history** a school of thought that views history as a straight line to a specific and more democratic destination

**revisionism** the process of altering our interpretation of historical events by adding new elements and perspectives

**rhetoric** the way words are used and put together in speaking or writing

**secondary source** a document, object, or other source material written or created after the time period under study

**social constructs** ideas such as class and gender created and accepted by the people in a society that influence the way they think and behave

**social history** a field of history that looks at all classes and categories of people, not just elites

## Section Summary

### 1.1 Developing a Global Perspective

Knowing the past, the human story, has long been considered a mark of civilization, and its study has never been more important. The study of world history provides the skills necessary to meet global workforce needs while at the same time developing a sense of self and place in our global community. You will gain critical-thinking and analysis skills that will help you fulfill the role of a global citizen in our interconnected world. This text will help you approach history with an open mind, and it will engage you in meaningful ways, often highlighting content that remains relevant in today's society.

### 1.2 Primary Sources

Primary sources are the first-hand evidence with which historians form a foundation of knowledge of the past. Interpreting them requires attention to four key areas: the author, the audience, the intent, and the context. Secondary sources offer valuable starting points for inquiry and context, but students must be aware of any bias they contain. Despite the efforts of generations of historians, there are still people and regions we do not know much about. We must hope that new generations of historians will continue to hone our interpretation of the past.

### 1.3 Causation and Interpretation in History

The historian's main job is to discover why history happened as it did. What caused the events that have shaped our shared human past? To answer this question, historians apply rigorous interpretative methodology rooted in the search for causation. They study events for both immediate causation and contributing factors, while avoiding judgment and remaining open to revision. You now have the tools you need to fully engage with the material in this text and begin your journey into the human past.

## Assessments

### Review Questions

1. What is an example of a primary source?
  - a. a diary entry by a person who lived in the period under discussion
  - b. a modern biography of a person in the period under discussion
  - c. an account of a nineteenth-century battle in a twenty-first century textbook
  - d. an article in an academic journal
  
2. Whom do the Chinese view as the Father of History?
  - a. Homer
  - b. Santayana
  - c. Herodotus
  - d. Sima Qian
  
3. What interpretation of history assumes that history can be viewed primarily through the lives and choices of leaders?
  - a. great man theory
  - b. progressive interpretation
  - c. gender interpretation
  - d. Marxist interpretation
  
4. The belief that history is moved primarily by class struggle is the \_\_\_\_\_ of history.
  - a. social interpretation theory
  - b. revisionist view
  - c. progressive interpretation
  - d. Marxist interpretation
  
5. What is the most immediate motivator of a historical event?
  - a. the tertiary cause
  - b. the primary cause
  - c. the action of a great man
  - d. the social construct
  
6. Our perspectives are deeply rooted in \_\_\_\_\_, which we learn from our upbringing and environment.
  - a. education
  - b. social constructs
  - c. historical empathy
  - d. causation

### Check Your Understanding Questions

1. What does it mean to be a global citizen?
2. What are the features of this textbook, and how will they enhance your learning experience?
3. What is a primary source, and what are some examples of primary sources?
4. What are the four types of questions we should ask about textual sources and why?
5. Define causation as it is used in the study of history.
6. Describe the process you would go through to establish the primary, secondary, and tertiary causes of a

historical event.

### Application and Reflection Questions

1. How do you see your knowledge of world history helping you achieve life goals? What do you hope to learn from this text?
2. Why is it important to consider competing sources about the same topic?
3. What primary source materials do you think you will leave behind for later generations? How would you want them to be interpreted?
4. If you could suggest a revisionist addition to the history you have been taught so far, what would it be? Why?
5. Provide three examples of social constructs that affect the way you view the world and explain why.
6. Which historical interpretation interests you most? Why?
7. Choose a recent event you have followed in the news or on social media and establish a history of that event. In a few short paragraphs, tell the story and rank the causes in order of importance. Then write the history again, using one of the major interpretive theories in the chapter (progressive, intellectual, gender, etc.). Your goal is to produce a different viewpoint on the same story.





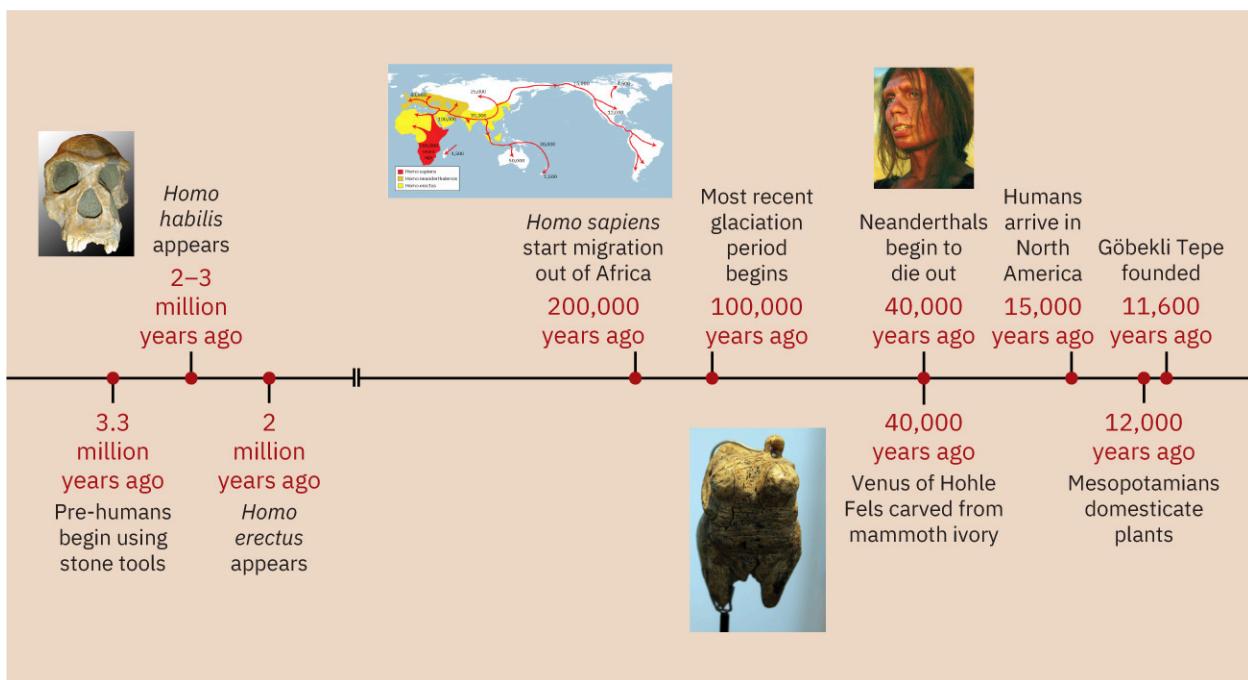
**FIGURE 2.1 The Landscape of Evolution.** Millions of years ago, our early evolutionary ancestors roamed around today's Ethiopia, living off the land. (credit: modification of work "Blue Nile Falls at Tis Issat near Bahir Dar, Ethiopia" by A.Savin/Wikimedia Commons, Licence Art Libre/Copyleft)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 2.1** Early Human Evolution and Migration
- 2.2** People in the Paleolithic Age
- 2.3** The Neolithic Revolution

**INTRODUCTION** In 1974, while on a mapping expedition in Ethiopia (Figure 2.2), an American paleoanthropologist named Donald Johanson and a colleague stumbled upon a skeletal forearm and skull in a gully. Upon closer inspection, they not only found more bones but also realized that all of them had belonged to some type of early human. After careful work, Johanson's team was able to recover about 40 percent of the skeleton, which they named Lucy after the popular Beatles song, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

We now know that, though small, Lucy was an adult when she died about 3.2 million years ago. Scholars have learned a great deal since her discovery, about her but also about many of our other evolutionary ancestors. In the millions of years since Lucy walked the Earth, a number of early human species have come and gone. Some migrated out of Africa and populated portions of Asia, Europe, Australia, and the Americas. These different species developed new tools, learned to control fire, mastered language, and produced stunning works of art. Then, about twelve thousand years ago, some of our own species adopted agriculture. With this innovation, many early human groups began to end their hunting and gathering ways and establish settled communities.



**FIGURE 2.2 Timeline: Early Humans.** (credit “2–3 million years ago”: modification of work “Skull of *Homo Habilis* (Replica)” by “Luna04”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit “200,000 years ago”: modification of work “Spreading of *Homo sapiens*” by “NordNordWest”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “40,000 years ago” top: modification of work “Reconstruction of Neanderthal woman (makeup by Morten Jacobsen)” by Public Library of Science/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit “40,000 years ago” bottom: modification of work “Venus”-pendant, mammoth ivory, Alb-Donau Region, on loan from the National Archaeological Museum in Baden-Württemberg, shown at the Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart, Germany” by “Anagoria”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

## 2.1 Early Human Evolution and Migration

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the process of human evolution in a biological and anthropological context
- Explain how and why Paleolithic humans migrated
- Describe the tools and technologies used in the Paleolithic Age

Millions of years ago, our distant ancestors descended from the trees, took to walking upright on the land, and gradually evolved into the species we are today. Their evolution was influenced by many variables, including changes in climate, diet, and survival strategies. Over time, humans developed new skills and tools to meet the challenges of endurance and sought better prospects for themselves through cooperation and migration.

Understanding these changes and the long-ago origins of our species has required careful research by archaeologists, anthropologists, genetic scientists, historians, sociologists, and many others. Through painstaking reconstructions and study, these specialists have used a relatively small number of archaeological finds and material remnants of our distant ancestors to paint a striking picture of our prehistoric past, going back millions of years. The nature of this work, however, requires using some extrapolation, educated speculation, and outright guesswork to piece together the bits of unearthed evidence into an intelligible story. This means that even as we have had to discard old theories when new information has emerged, there remain plenty of things we'll simply never know for sure.

## Human Evolution

The concept of evolution over time is one we are all likely familiar with. Consider, for example, how technology has evolved. The first true smartphones appeared on the market at the beginning of this century, but these complicated devices didn't spring all at once from the minds of ambitious engineers. Rather, these engineers built on technology that had evolved and improved over many decades. In the mid-1800s, telegraph technology first demonstrated that electricity could be used for long-distance communication. That technology paved the way for the first telephones, which were basic and expensive but over many decades became more sophisticated, more common, and cheaper. By the early 1980s, electronics companies had begun selling telephones that used radio technology to communicate wirelessly. Over time these devices were made faster and smaller, and companies added features like cameras, microprocessors, and eventually internet access. With these evolutionary transformations, the smartphone was born.

### LINK TO LEARNING

Use this [guided activity from the Evolution Lab to explore how we study biological relationships between species using phylogenetics](https://openstax.org/l/77Phylogenetics) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Phylogenetics>) to learn more. Try to create your own “Tree of Life.”

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Modern humans are not smartphones, and in human history, chance biological adaptations to a changing environment drove the evolutionary process rather than the minds of inventors conceiving of technical innovations. But the evolutionary process that eventually gave birth to our species resembles the technological evolution of smartphones and other devices in some important ways. Just like we can trace the evolution of the smartphone back to the telegraph, so can we trace our own evolution back to a very distant ancestor called ***Australopithecus***, who lived in eastern and southern Africa between 2.5 and 4 million years ago. Lucy, previously mentioned, was of the genus *Australopithecus* (Figure 2.3). A **genus** is a taxonomic rank that includes several similar and related species within it. Like us, members of Lucy's species *afarensis* (named for the Afar region of East Africa where she was found) were capable of walking upright and likely used tools. Beyond that, however, they were very different from us. They had plenty of hair like chimpanzees, fingers and arms well suited for climbing trees, and brains about one-third the size of ours. Despite these differences, scholars have concluded that the genus *Homo* (“human”) evolved from *Australopithecus* somewhere around two to three million years ago.



**FIGURE 2.3 Lucy.** Despite the incomplete state of the remains of Lucy, a member of the ancient genus *Australopithecus*, the similarities between her and modern humans of the genus *Homo* are striking. This image is a photoshopped reproduction of her skeleton. (credit: modification of work “Reconstruction of the fossil skeleton of ‘Lucy’ the *Australopithecus afarensis*” by “120”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Possibly the earliest member of the genus *Homo* was ***Homo habilis*** (Figure 2.4). This species appears in the archaeological record about two to three million years ago. *Habilis* means “handy”; it was thought at one time that this was the first species to have created stone tools. We now know that stone tools predate *Homo habilis*,

but the name has stuck. *Homo habilis* resembles us in many ways, with a large brain similar to ours as well as small teeth and a face we might recognize as human. But members of the species also had many ape-like characteristics, such as long arms, hairy bodies, and adult heights of only three or four feet.



**FIGURE 2.4** *Homo Habilis*. Partially restored remains, like the skull represented by this replica, are some of the most important evidence we have of the human ancestor *Homo habilis*. (credit: “Skull of Homo Habilis (Replica)” by “Luna04”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Around two million years ago, a species even more similar to us, *Homo erectus*, emerged in East Africa. It likely evolved from *Homo habilis*. As the name *erectus* for “upright” suggests, this species lived entirely on the ground and walked—even ran—exclusively in an upright position. The consequences of this evolutionary shift were huge. Being upright meant that the body’s digestive organs were pulled down lower and into a smaller space. That in turn necessitated a change in diet, away from tough plants and toward easier-to-digest items like nuts, fruits, tubers, honey, and even meat. Living on the ground was also more dangerous because it made eluding predators more difficult. However, the upright position left *Homo erectus*’s hands free to use tools. This advantage likely led to further evolutions that made human hands more dexterous over time, prompting the wider adoption of ever more sophisticated tools.

Members of *Homo erectus* shared other close similarities with modern humans. They were about the same height as we are, sometimes reaching just over six feet. They made and used relatively sophisticated stone tools and relied on fire for both warmth and cooking food. They likely constructed huts of wood and fur in which to live and worked cooperatively with each other to hunt and forage. The position of the larynx in the throat also suggests that *Homo erectus* may have had some capacity to communicate vocally, which would have aided in cooperative endeavors. Finally, archaeologists have uncovered strong evidence that *Homo erectus* cared for the sick and elderly. This evidence includes the discovery of the remains of individuals who suffered from debilitating diseases yet lived a long time, indicating that assistance was both necessary and provided by others. Together these characteristics made the species highly adaptable to changing climates and environments, helping explain why its members survived for so long. *Homo erectus* populations lived until as

recently as about 100,000 years ago.

Sometime between 1.8 and 1.5 million years ago, *Homo erectus* started migrating into other parts of Africa and beyond, reaching North Africa, the Near East, Europe, and East and South Asia over hundreds of thousands of years. The reasons for this extensive migration are still debated, but they likely included climate change and the desire to follow certain types of prey. *Homo erectus* appears to have stayed close to rivers and lakes during migration, hunting and eating animals like rhinoceroses, bears, pigs, and crocodiles, as discoveries in the Near East have confirmed. Populations evolved to adapt to the different environmental conditions into which they moved. Over time this led to a diversity of human species, including *Homo heidelbergensis*; *Homo neanderthalensis*, or **Neanderthals**; Denisovans; and modern humans, or ***Homo sapiens*** (*sapiens* means “wise”). Some of these species, like Denisovans and Neanderthals, emerged outside Africa. Others, like *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo sapiens*, emerged in Africa first and later migrated to other areas.

The extent to which these different human species interacted with each other remains unclear. DNA evidence from a bone found in Siberia has shown that a girl (who died at age thirteen) was born there of a Denisovan father and a Neanderthal mother. Another recent study demonstrated that modern European and Middle Eastern populations have between 1 and 4 percent Neanderthal DNA. This appears to suggest that mating between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals was quite common. The careful work of archaeologists and other scholars has also made clear that some species evolved from others. For example, both Neanderthals and Denisovans appear to have evolved from populations of *Homo heidelbergensis*.

At some point between forty thousand and fifteen thousand years ago, the diversity of human species declined and only *Homo sapiens* remained. Two models attempt to explain why. The first and most commonly accepted is the “out of Africa” model. This theory suggests that modern humans emerged first in Africa approximately 200,000 years ago and then, approximately 100,000 years ago, expanded out of Africa and replaced all other human species. The second model is often called the “multiregional evolution model” and proposes that *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus* in several places around the same time. This model emerged as an explanation for the great diversity of modern human traits in different populations around the world. But it relies primarily on the study of fossils and archaeological records rather than on genetic data.

These theories about human evolution are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the real answer to the puzzle may be a combination of the two. For example, it’s entirely possible that modern humans or a common ancestor did emerge first in Africa. Then, as this species expanded around the world, it mixed its genetic information with that of other human species. The DNA evidence collected in recent years certainly suggests a more complicated picture, and the debate has not yet been settled. The tools of both archaeology and molecular genetics continue to reveal new insights into the puzzle of human evolution and the rise of *Homo sapiens*. And the conclusions we can draw about our distant past will continue to change as we learn more.

## DUELING VOICES

### What Happened to Neanderthals in Europe?

For tens of thousands of years before *Homo sapiens* arrived in Europe, the continent was home to Neanderthals ([Figure 2.5](#)). Then, about forty thousand years ago, right around the time modern humans entered Europe, the species *neanderthalensis* began to rapidly die out. For more than a century and a half, scholars have been trying to understand why.



**FIGURE 2.5 An Imagined Neanderthal Woman.** This modern reconstruction of what a Neanderthal woman may have looked like demonstrates a striking resemblance to modern humans. (credit: “Reconstruction of Neanderthal woman (makeup by Morten Jacobsen)” by Public Library of Science/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

One theory is that modern humans replaced the Neanderthals in Europe through violent competition, including a type of warfare between the two groups. Another model argues that the competition was less about violence and more about resources. This theory posits that modern humans were simply better tool makers, had better survival strategies, and possibly experienced lower mortality rates and higher birth rates. Neanderthals simply couldn't keep up, and their small population dwindled and then disappeared entirely.

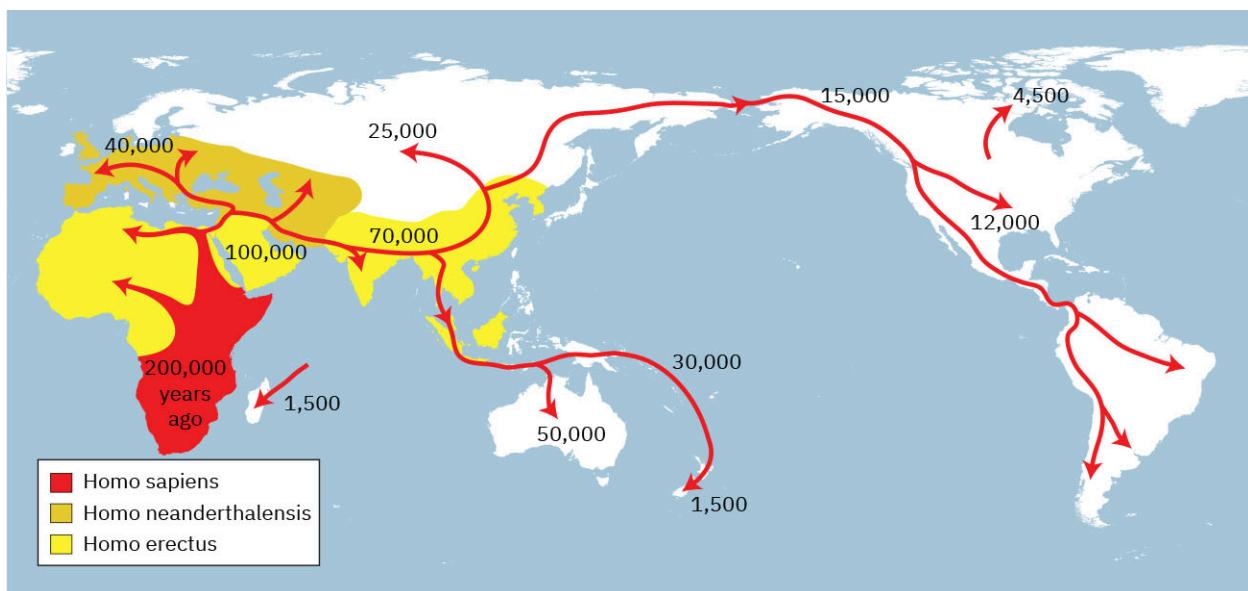
Modern DNA analysis has opened the door for a new theory, that mating occurred between the two species and that the population of Neanderthals was simply absorbed by modern humans. The presence of small amounts of Neanderthal DNA in modern human populations lends some credibility to this idea, but it seems unlikely to explain the total disappearance of Neanderthals.

Finally, analysis of climate change in Europe has revealed some variations that could have weakened Neanderthal populations and led to their disappearance in some areas. As of now, no one theory can account for everything. It seems possible that several factors were at play rather than a single primary cause, so the debate goes on.

- How might more than one of these reasons, or all of them, have contributed to the decline of Neanderthals in Europe?
- Can you think of any other explanations for the extinction of Neanderthals?

### Why Did Humans Move and Where Did They Go?

Archeological evidence indicates that *Homo sapiens* began migrating out of eastern and southern Africa as early as 200,000 years ago. This expansion took early humans deeper south, west, and north as far as the Mediterranean Sea. Approximately 100,000 years ago, groups of *Homo sapiens* left the African continent and began a global migration that lasted for tens of thousands of years (Figure 2.6). After crossing the Sinai into southwest Asia, early migrants out of Africa likely followed the coasts of Asia, and by about seventy thousand years ago, they had made their way into India and China.



**FIGURE 2.6** Migration of the Earliest Humans. *Homo sapiens* first expanded around south and eastern Africa before embarking on migrations that eventually took them around the world. (credit: modification of work “Spreading of *Homo sapiens*” by “NordNordWest”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Some groups continued moving south through Malaysia, into Indonesia and beyond. In places like Papua New Guinea and Australia, there is evidence of settlements at least forty-five thousand years old. Others groups making their way into southwest Asia from northern Africa entered Europe around forty thousand years ago, moving either along the Mediterranean coast or by way of Turkey into the Danube valley. By twenty-five thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* had reached Siberia and other parts of northern Asia. And approximately fifteen thousand years ago, some groups in Asia crossed into North America, eventually reaching the tip of South America and settling at various locations in between.

This timeline has been pieced together based on the analysis of several archaeological finds. But our knowledge is still limited, and new discoveries frequently require adjustments to the proposed dates and patterns of global human migration. For example, we now know that because the Earth was in its most recent ice age during this period, areas currently covered by water were then dry land. This is true for large portions of maritime Southeast Asia as well as the Bering Strait between Asia and North America. Humans were able to walk as far south as Java and from Asia into Alaska.

Yet they also roamed as far as Australia, which was not connected by land to Asia in this period. This means they must have used rafts of some type, probably by crossing short distances between islands. Likewise, discoveries of human habitation dating from fourteen thousand years ago in South America suggest that rafts or boats of some kind may also have been used to skirt the North and South American coasts. No crafts have been or may ever be found, but we must assume they existed.

More interesting still, analysis of the remains of the eight-thousand-year-old Kennewick Man discovered in 1996 in Washington State reveals anatomical features more consistent with Southeast Asian populations than with those traditionally assumed to have populated the Americas. This discovery complicates the version of human migration we think we know, and if anything, it suggests there is much about the process that we may never fully understand.

But what triggered this migration in the first place? Despite the uncertainties, we can draw some speculative conclusions. We know that around the same time *Homo sapiens* began leaving Africa, the climate there was becoming increasingly dry. Drier conditions meant fewer of the plants and animals humans needed to survive were available. Modern humans were **hunter-gatherers** like their evolutionary ancestors, meaning they survived by employing the strategies of hunting animals and gathering wild plants rather than by planting

crops and raising livestock. As hunter-gathering societies regularly forage over a large area, any scarcity of resources in some places or abundance in others encourages movement. In the lifetime of a single individual, a large-scale migration would have been barely perceptible, if at all. But over tens of thousands of years, human populations traversed an enormous portion of the globe. Nor did they go in a single direction or all at once. Groups likely moved back and forth over areas, responding to the climatic conditions and availability of resources. There were long periods of relative stasis punctuated by movement, creating waves of migration in various directions.

As humans moved into new environments, they adjusted their strategies to be successful under new conditions. This meant learning to gather different types of plants and hunt different types of animals they came into contact with, including mastodons, woolly mammoths and rhinos, various types of grazing animals, and giant sloths and beavers. The arrival of humans who were highly effective at survival occasionally accompanied major transformations in their new environments. Scientists who study now-extinct animals have recognized for some time that human hunting likely contributed to the decline of a number of these species. Before humans arrived approximately forty-five thousand years ago, for example, Australia was home to a number of large reptiles, a marsupial lion (which carried its young in a pouch), and huge wombats and kangaroos (Figure 2.7). These species began to vanish around the same time humans reached Australia and well before the climatic warming that led to the extinction of large animals in other places.



**FIGURE 2.7 A Marsupial Lion.** Tens of thousands of years ago, Australia was home to many large marsupials, such as this marsupial lion. Its fossilized skeleton is shown here in the Victoria Fossil Cave where it was found. (credit: “A skeleton of a Marsupial Lion (*Thylacoleo carnifex*) in the Victoria Fossil Cave, Naracoorte Caves National Park” by “Karora”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### Early Human Technologies

To understand how early humans lived hundreds of thousands and even millions of years ago, scholars use the tools of archaeology to analyze the objects left behind. Many were made of materials like wood, animal skin, and earth, which rarely endure in the archaeological record. Bone items are somewhat more durable and have occasionally survived. But our window into the distant past is quite small. Stone items are the most likely to have lasted long enough for us to study them today. Beginning possibly as early as 3.3 million years ago, our distant pre-human ancestors began using stone tools for a variety of purposes. This event marks the start of the **Paleolithic Age** (*lithos* means “stone”), which lasted until nearly twelve thousand years ago.

The earliest known human-made stone tools date from about 2.6 million years ago. They were likely first created by *Homo habilis*, by smashing smooth rocks together to create crudely sharpened edges. The resulting implements are often described as **Oldowan tools**, and their use continued until about 1.7 million years ago. While a seemingly simple adaptation from our perspective, the development of Oldowan tools in fact represents a huge leap in human engineering ability. These sharpened stones served a variety of cutting, scraping, and chopping purposes. They were highly efficient tools for killing animals, butchering meat, smashing bones to access marrow, and a host of similar tasks.

Beginning around 1.7 million years ago, some ancient humans began to develop a new and more sophisticated style of stone tool by carefully chipping away smaller flakes of the stone core to create a teardrop-shaped implement often described as a hand-axe. Far thinner and sharper than the Oldowan tools, hand-axes were even better at the cutting, scraping, and chopping tasks for which they were designed. They were such an improvement over earlier tools that archaeologists have given them their own name. They are called **Acheulean tools** (pronounced *ah-SHOOL-ee-an*), after Saint-Acheul, the site in France where they were first found in the nineteenth century CE. Since then, more Acheulean tools have been uncovered in Africa, the Middle East, and India and scattered in parts of East Asia ([Figure 2.8](#)).



**FIGURE 2.8** Early Paleolithic Stone Tools. Acheulean hand-axes (a) were far more sophisticated and required more skill to create than the earlier Oldowan variety (b). (credit a: modification of work “Handaxe in quartzite, from the bed TG-10 of Galería in Atapuerca (Burgos, Spain)” by “Locutus Borg”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Canto tallado de tradición Olduvayense procedente de la región del Sáhara atlántico Guelmim-Es Semara (Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Madrid)” by “Locutus Borg”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Far superior to the Oldowan variety, Acheulean tools remained the dominant style of stone tool until as recently as about 250,000 years ago. At that time a new type of utensil emerged in Europe, North Africa, and southwestern Asia. Called **Mousterian tools**, these implements were smaller hand-axes and tools made from stone flakes rather than cores. In older traditions, the flakes had been removed in order to shape the core as desired, such as into a hand-axe. But in the Mousterian tradition, sometimes the flakes were chipped off in such a way that they themselves could be used as small knives for cutting meat, scraping leather, and serving as spearheads attached to shafts ([Figure 2.9](#)). Advances to the Mousterian techniques later led to other tool traditions. By around forty-five thousand years ago, humans were making a great diversity of specialized tools from stone flakes. These included a variety of scrapers as well as engraving tools for carving and carefully reshaping softer materials like bone and antler into either tools or works of art.



**FIGURE 2.9 The Next Generation of Paleolithic Tools.** Mousterian stone tools, like these found in Israel, were used as scrapers for more careful butchering of animals between 250,000 and 50,000 years ago. (credit: modification of work “Stone Scrapers for Cleaning & Working Leather, Mousterian Culture” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Another important tool of our human ancestors was fire. When exactly humans began controlling fire remains a topic of debate. There is evidence that earlier ancestors like *Homo erectus* used it, but we don't know whether they were able to start fires or merely used and perpetuated those that naturally occurred. It's clear, however, that by at least about 125,000 years ago, if not much earlier, modern humans had learned to start and control fires.

Controlled fires were useful for staying warm in cold climates, scaring off predators, and cooking meat to make it easier to consume and digest. Archaeological finds also suggest that controlled fires aided in the manufacture of certain tools. Wooden spears could be hardened in the flame, making them more effective hunting implements. Some types of stone could be treated with heat to make them easier to chip and mold. Fire also played an important social function. Gathering around the heat and light likely aided in bonding and helped build the social connections vital for cooperative activities and group survival.

Sitting around a fire may also have been an occasion for early humans to display one of their most powerful tools, the unique ability to use sounds as language. There is some speculation that earlier human ancestors like *Homo erectus* were able to make sound and possibly had a type of language. We'll never know for sure. But we do know that modern humans are capable of making a great variety of different sounds. Biologists calculate that we can produce fifty different phonemes, or distinctive sounds. When strung together in a sophisticated manner, these phonemes can produce many tens of thousands of words to describe what we see, feel, do, and imagine. Beginning at least 100,000 years ago, modern humans began using language in this fashion, gaining a major advantage over competing animals. With language, they could coordinate daily tasks, work much more efficiently in groups, communicate abstract ideas, and pass important information to successive generations. Few tools aided modern humans more than their ability to communicate with complex languages.

While they left no record of their discussions, early humans did leave a number of impressive artistic depictions. The work that has survived includes small animal and human sculptures, usually made of carved bone or stone. The human-shaped items are often of large, possibly pregnant, women and might have served as symbols of fertility. There are also preserved hand prints, created by placing a hand on stone and blowing pigment around it to preserve the image of its shape.

Some of the most stunning prehistoric art still in existence today consists of cave paintings dating as far back as forty thousand years. Many painted caves have been discovered in Spain and France, but there are also examples in England, Italy, Germany, Russia, and Indonesia. The paintings in the Cave of Altamira in northern

Spain are prime examples of this type of art. Within the cave, and dating to about thirty-six thousand years ago, are more than two dozen large images of animals including bison, bulls, horses, deer, and boars. Each is painted in impressive detail using combinations of charcoal and ochre (a pigment made from clay) to produce bold reds, yellows, browns, and blacks. In many instances, the artists incorporated features of the cave walls as part of their designs, giving three-dimensional shape and definition to the animals they drew ([Figure 2.10](#)).



(a)

(b)

**FIGURE 2.10 Paleolithic Art.** The Paleolithic artist who painted this (a) bison in Altamira Cave (in what is now Spain) used protruding features of the cave's surface to create a three-dimensional effect, such as at the bison's shoulders. (b) Other examples of three-dimensionality in the art of Altamira are apparent in a Czech museum's model of the cave's ceiling. (credit a: modification of work "Cave Paintings" by Graeme Churchard/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work "A model of the ceiling of Altamira from right, in the Brno museum Anthropos" by "HTO"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## BEYOND THE BOOK

### Interpreting Artistic Expression in the Paleolithic Age

We often think of visual art as a relatively modern gesture consisting of works like oil paintings, sculptures, and even computer-designed images. But artistic expression among our species is quite ancient. We may never know how much art was produced tens of thousands of years ago; many examples have probably been lost. But what we do have is fascinating to behold, though interpreting it is much like trying to reconstruct an entire puzzle from just a few pieces.

Some of the most interesting and perplexing artistic works include a number of female images sometimes called Venus figurines. These are relatively small statuettes (one to sixteen inches in height) that were carved from stone, ivory, bone, or clay to resemble women. The tiny Venus of Hohle Fels, discovered in Germany, is the oldest such object found to date ([Figure 2.11](#)). Carved from mammoth ivory, it dates to about forty thousand years ago, and what remains of it depicts a woman with large exaggerated breasts. This feature has led some anthropologists to conclude that it was intended to represent sex, reproduction, or fertility.



**FIGURE 2.11** Venus of Hohle Fels. The Venus of Hohle Fels, found in Germany, was created from mammoth ivory approximately forty thousand years ago and is just under two and a half inches in height. (credit: “Venus”-pendant, mammoth ivory, Alb-Donau Region, on loan from the National Archaeological Museum in Baden-Württemberg, shown at the Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart, Germany” by “Anagoria”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Similar to the Venus of Hohle Fels and also discovered in Germany is the Venus of Willendorf ([Figure 2.12](#)). This female figurine, less than five inches tall, may be as much as thirty-three thousand years old. Like other such images, it shows a woman with exaggerated breasts and a stylized head with no facial features. Analysis of it has produced a number of interpretations, from the traditional representation of fertility to a type of self-portrait.



**FIGURE 2.12** Venus of Willendorf. Those who suggest the Venus of Willendorf may be a self-portrait note that it could be showing how a woman would have seen herself if she were looking down instead of at her reflection.

(credit: “Venus von Willendorf; Kopie” by “Thirunavukkarasye-Raveendran”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Unlike the preceding examples, the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, discovered in the modern Czech Republic, is made of ceramic ([Figure 2.13](#)). It stands just under four and a half inches tall and may be as much as twenty-nine thousand years old.



**FIGURE 2.13** Venus of Dolní Věstonice. The small Venus of Dolní Věstonice is an early example of a fired-clay sculpture. (credit: modification of work “Dolní Věstonice Venus - Fossils in the Arpeanum” by “Daderot”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Various other female figurines have been found as far from Europe as central Russia, and while individually unique, all have the same characteristics. They are small and were likely intended to be portable. They have exaggerated breasts and often show reproductive organs. They have large bellies that may reflect pregnancy. But without some record from the people who created them, their true symbolism and use will likely remain a mystery.

- 
- Why do you think these figurines are often interpreted as being related to fertility? Do you think that interpretation is plausible? Why or why not?
  - What interpretation of these figurines would you suggest, based on the information you’ve read and seen here?

The significance that cave paintings held for the people who created them may never be fully understood. It was once believed the images were designed to be popularly admired as interesting decorations, not unlike the

ornaments we put in our homes today. But given that they are often deep in the dark interiors of the caves, where sunlight could not reach, this interpretation has mostly been abandoned.

With limited insight into the minds of the artists, scholars have concluded that the art likely served some unknown religious purpose. Many speculate that the caves could have been used by shamans—men and women thought to have a special knowledge of the spiritual world—who might have crawled deep into the interior to commune in ceremonies with a type of spiritual force. Such interpretations remain little more than educated guesses. What is indisputable is that the art demonstrates that even tens of thousands of years ago humans had the unique ability to reproduce the world around them in complex, symbolic fashion, through images we can immediately recognize today.

## 2.2 People in the Paleolithic Age

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how the environment shaped the way people lived in the Paleolithic Age
- Describe the day-to-day life of people in the Paleolithic Age
- Discuss Paleolithic Age peoples and their likely attitudes toward the environment, gender, religion, and social hierarchy

Living in an age when global temperatures are gradually rising, we are well equipped to recognize the impact of climate on daily life. For much of their existence, however, Earth's early peoples lived in an ice age, when temperatures were colder and ice covered areas that are now forested or farmed. Hostile climates tend to create a scarcity of key resources and require that people spend more time securing those necessities. Early humans thus relied on one another and their communities for basic survival, forming small tight-knit groups that migrated to ensure their access to edible plants, water, and game. In regions where food was more secure, such as in lush environments with ample water supply, settlements were more permanent and people had more time for artistic and social endeavors.

But survival was generally difficult and cooperation vital. This is one reason egalitarianism was common among prehistoric hunter-gatherers, as it still is among the few remaining groups that pursue this survival strategy today. However, men and women in early human groups often had different responsibilities. For example, women tended to gather while men hunted. Across the planet, groups relied heavily on existing resources harvested from their natural surroundings, and any change or challenge could spell disaster. Yet people proved to be resilient and innovative.

### LINK TO LEARNING

We know that our Paleolithic ancestors communicated with each other through language and that this exchange was vital for cooperation. But did they also have a type of written communication? Some researchers think it's possible that seemingly abstract signs preserved in caves represent just that. Watch [this short video about fascinating scholarship around these intriguing cave signs](https://openstax.org/l/77CaveSigns) (<https://openstax.org/l/77CaveSigns>) to learn more.

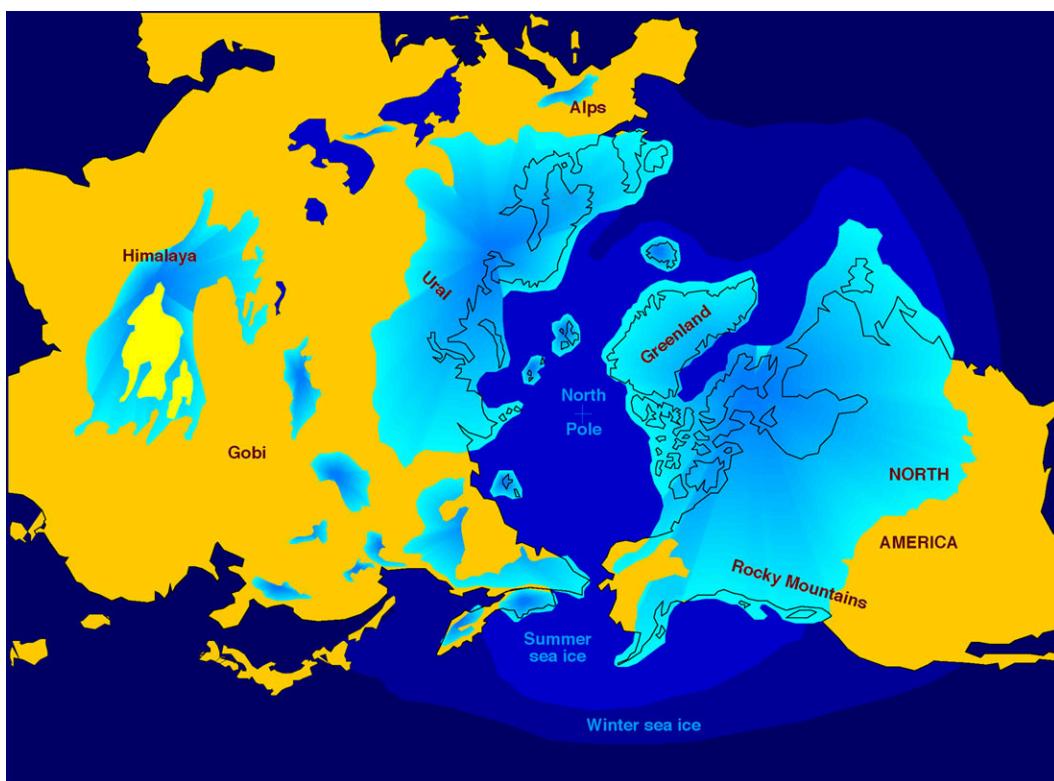
### Ice, Ice, and More Ice

Scientists who study the changes that have occurred on Earth over billions of years have identified at least five significant periods of cooling on the planet. These are often called ice ages, and each has included multiple *glaciation* periods during which glaciers grew on the land.

A few factors can trigger an ice age, but generally such climate changes occur when insufficient sunlight is able to reach the planet's surface. Then temperatures drop in northern latitudes, resulting in the accumulation of ice. As the glacial ice sheets grow and spread across the land, water is pulled from the oceans, causing sea

levels to decline. Even areas closer to the equator, where ice is unlikely to develop, can experience dramatic climate change during these cooling periods. Otherwise-tropical areas can experience drying, causing rivers to disappear, lakes to turn into swamps, jungles into savannahs, and grasslands into deserts. These changes have a huge effect on plants and animals, leading to evolutionary adaptations in some and extinction in others. These are all natural processes, and each recorded ice age in our planet's history has eventually come to an end when more sunlight reaches the Earth and causes the temperature to rise and ice to melt.

The most recent glaciation period began a little over 100,000 years ago and reached its peak about eighteen thousand years ago (Figure 2.14). The ice age of which this glaciation period was a part ended approximately twelve thousand years ago. At peak glaciation, ice sheets sometimes two miles thick covered the land around the North Pole and extended outward over much of present-day Russia, Scandinavia, the British Isles, Greenland, Canada, and the northern reaches of the United States.



**FIGURE 2.14 The Most Recent Glaciation Period.** During the most recent glaciation period, eighteen thousand to one million years ago, ice sheets covered large portions of the northern hemisphere, and Earth's sea levels were far lower than they are today. (credit: modification of work "Northern Hemisphere glaciation during the last ice ages" by "Hannes Grobe/AWI"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

The consequences of these climatic transformations for modern humans have been huge. It is probably not a coincidence that at approximately the same time Earth entered its last glaciation period, humans began their global expansion. Climate changes in Africa were likely a decisive factor in encouraging and enabling them to move into other parts of the world. Low sea levels allowed modern humans to expand into maritime Southeast Asia and Japan and reach Australia. And not long after Earth reached peak glaciation, the first human migrants entered North America from Siberia, by way of a strip of land exposed by low sea levels.

Modern humans who moved into colder conditions had to adjust to their harsh environments. For example, they created new forms of clothing, unnecessary in warmer climates but vital now, by removing the hides from hunted animals with various types of rock tools and scraping them clean. The earliest clothing must have been simple and likely functioned as blankets draped over the body to keep warm. However, by around thirty thousand years ago, modern humans had developed the earliest known sewing needles, making them of bone,

wood, and ivory. Like their modern counterparts, these needles had sharp points at one end and a hole in the other. With thread made from animal remains or wild flax, humans could now piece together bits of soft animal hide from foxes, rabbits, and deer to produce far more sophisticated and tight-fitting clothing.

The five-thousand-year-old remains of a man discovered in the alpine region between Austria and Italy in 1991 and dubbed Ötzi provide us with some indication of the type of clothing that could be created ([Figure 2.15](#)). Ötzi was dressed in a heavy coat made of goat and sheep hides stitched together. He also wore tight-fitting leggings of similar materials, a bearskin cap with a chin strap, and shoes constructed from woven grass, tree fibers, and deer hide. This type of clothing was far more functional than earlier designs and would have allowed populations to survive in frigid areas.



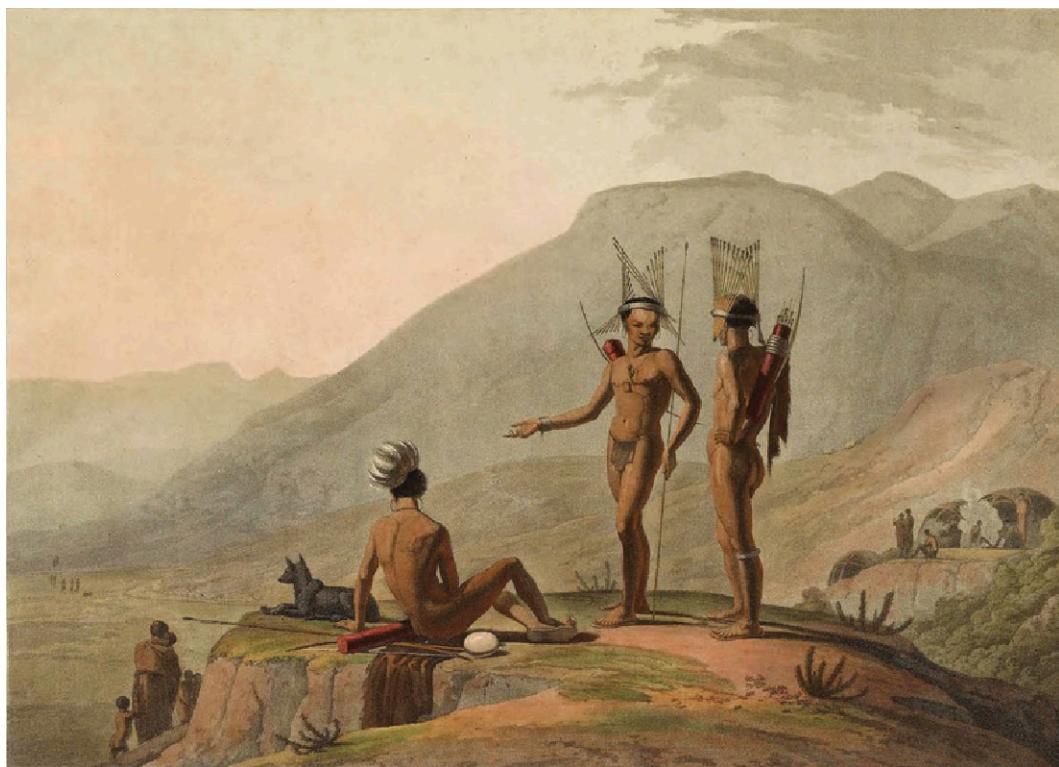
**FIGURE 2.15 An Ancient Shoe.** This reproduction of one of Ötzi's shoes shows how deerskin and bearskin lined with bark and twine were fashioned to protect his feet in the cold climate in which he lived thousands of years ago. (credit: modification of work “Ötzi shoe (replica), bearskin with deerskin upper, internal cage of twined linden bark, padded grass insulation - Bata Shoe Museum” by “Daderot”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The warming of Earth and retreat of the glaciers that began around seventeen thousand years ago submerged continental shelves around the world and created new lakes and rivers. These changes in turn created opportunities for exploiting fresh- and saltwater marine life in the new waterways and the warmer shallow waters along the coasts. Many human groups were now exposed to a greater variety of animals that they could use to supplement their diets. As other animals like reindeer adapted to life in cold environments and moved north, the human populations that hunted them moved north as well. The higher water levels also helped to isolate some groups, however. Those that had migrated into maritime Southeast Asia and Australia found themselves more secluded on islands in the south Pacific. Those that had crossed into the Americas from Asia were cut off from populations in the eastern hemisphere as sea waters rose in the Bering Strait. The civilizations they created in North and South America remained largely separated from the rest of the world until the fifteenth century CE.

### Life in the Paleolithic Age

Until as recently as twelve thousand years ago, human populations around the world remained very small and relied on subsistence hunting and gathering for survival. A typical group of early humans could be as small as fifteen people and perhaps as large as only forty ([Figure 2.16](#)). These groups were further subdivided into family units. Their small size should not be surprising, since they had only the naturally occurring resources around them to depend upon. But it also contributed to the development of close relationships between members of the group, an advantage in a world where cooperation could mean the difference between life and death. Groups much larger than forty or so would have struggled to live on the scarce resources of an area and

found cooperation difficult to achieve. Any groups that became too large would by necessity have split up and found other areas and other resources.



**FIGURE 2.16 Early Hunter-Gatherers.** This 1804 sketch of a hunter-gatherer people known as the San was made by Samuel Daniell of England, during his appointment as artist for a British expedition traveling throughout southern Africa. For hunter-gatherers such as the San and our early ancestors, living in small groups of no more than about forty was necessary to survive, given scarce resources. (credit: "Bushmen Hottentots armed for an expedition" by Samuel Daniell in *African Scenery and Animals*/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Diets for humans in this period consisted of nuts, fruits, berries, wild grains and honey, fish, birds, shellfish, insects, and other animals. What people ate depended heavily on the environments in which they lived. Those in lush, warm environments had access to a variety of edible plants and animals. In more frigid and icier environments, they depended more on animals and fish. Fishing strategies likely included the use of spears but also nets and even hooks made of bone. Land animals eaten for food were either scavenged from remains left behind by other predators or hunted by humans themselves. Most hunting likely focused on smaller animals.

But large-game hunts did occur. Archaeological remains and cave paintings indicate that humans hunted deer, horses, gazelle, bison, and even very large animals like woolly mammoths. We know from archaeological work done in the Americas that as early as twelve thousand years ago, modern humans occasionally drove bison herds over cliffs to their deaths in order to process their meat and hides. Similar methods were likely used in other places to hunt various species of herding animals around this time or even earlier. Hunting woolly mammoths tens of thousands of years ago would have required a lot of group cooperation and the use of sophisticated tools like spears. It would also have been very dangerous, and scholars debate how common it really was. But killing a mammoth would have been highly desirable; a typical animal weighed around six tons, and harvesting it would provide a good supply of meat, hide, and bone for a small group.

For shelter, early humans commonly used both built structures and naturally occurring refuges like caves. Archaeologists around the world have unearthed evidence suggesting that some populations occupied a single cave for tens of thousands of years. The Panga ya Saidi cave in Kenya, for example, may have been home to

humans for as long as seventy-eight thousand years. When caves weren't available or when populations needed to be more mobile, humans designed their own shelters using wood, bone, animal skins, and other items gathered from the surrounding area. Evidence of shelters constructed of mammoth bones and covered with animal hides has been uncovered in several locations in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, Poland, and the Czech Republic. These encampments may have been used as long as twenty-five thousand years ago.

There are strong indications that modern humans living even tens of thousands of years ago had developed some form of spirituality, perhaps even a kind of religion. As they are today, spirituality and belief in the supernatural were a way of making sense of the world. Natural occurrences like sunsets, earthquakes, comets, lighting, volcanoes, and many events for which we have ready scientific answers may have held supernatural significance for our Paleolithic ancestors. If modern practices are any guide, Paleolithic humans likely had religious traditions similar to **animism**—the idea that a degree of spirituality exists not only in people but also in plants, inanimate objects, and even natural phenomena like fires. The detailed cave paintings of bison, deer, and other animals left behind by these distant ancestors may be some of the few surviving traces of their ideas about the supernatural. It is even possible they recognized some members as religious figures. Such shaman men and women would have provided some connection between this world and another less understood world beyond.

We do know that modern humans and even Neanderthals buried their dead, and they frequently placed common household items in the grave when they did. A few rare burial sites found in eastern and southern Europe and dating back thirty thousand years were particularly ornate. Some included ivory spears and discs, along with bodies carefully covered in red ochre and beads made of both mammoth ivory and fox teeth. But most burials discovered so far were fairly simple. While it's tempting to draw conclusions about a belief in the afterlife from such finds, it's impossible to know for sure what significance these burials had for the people who performed them.

By studying archaeology and observing modern hunter-gatherers, many have concluded that ancient hunter-gatherer societies were very egalitarian. The small size of the groups, the lack of wealth, and the nomadic lifestyle were likely the reasons. But it is difficult to know exactly how egalitarian early human societies were. There was clearly some degree of differentiation within them. Just like today, within even a small group there would have been varying degrees of physical ability, intelligence, charisma, and other traits. Group members would surely have recognized these differences and used them to their advantage.

Older interpretations of social organization suggested that men did most of the hunting while women did the cooking or stayed home to nurse children. More recently, some have suggested that Paleolithic men and women both made a number of contributions to society. Meat, likely hunted mostly by men, would have been highly prized, but plants and other foods gathered mostly by women may have contributed as many if not more valued calories to the group. It is also likely that if men were away hunting, then by necessity women would have taken care of everything else. This meant protecting homes from attack, repairing shelters, and making tools.

### Diverse Paleolithic Peoples

Our window into Paleolithic life is small and opaque. Scholars have thus had to rely mostly on observing hunter-gatherer societies that exist today and extrapolating from their experiences. Relatively few such populations still survive, and they are found in only a few places around the world where producing food simply isn't practicable or desirable. These include the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, the forests of equatorial Africa, the far Arctic, Tanzania, parts of western Australia, and a few other places.

The San people of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa have often been studied ([Figure 2.17](#)). They live today in parts of Botswana, Namibia, and Angola, and those who still practice a traditional lifestyle do so in groups of up to sixty people that include members of several related families. The San survive by foraging on wild vegetables, nuts, fruit, and insects. They also rely on hunting wild game like antelope with throwing sticks,

spears, and small bows that shoot poison-dipped arrows. Their groups are largely leaderless, though in certain instances respected hunters or older men might wield some authority.



**FIGURE 2.17 The San People of Africa.** Some of the San people who live in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa still follow a hunter-gatherer lifestyle today, living in relatively small and generally egalitarian family groups. (credit: “Tribu d’indigènes” by “hbieser”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Despite this egalitarianism, the San do maintain some important divisions of labor based on sex. For example, men are expected to create fires for cooking and warmth, which they do by rubbing sticks together to create heat and adding a bit of dry grass so that it ignites. Men are also the primary hunters for the group, though women sometimes participate. Women’s responsibilities include gathering, as well as building traditional shelters from tree branches covered in long grass. These shelters are light and can be built quickly to allow the group to move regularly when necessary. Water is a constant concern in the very arid Kalahari environment, and the San can live on relatively little of it. They collect it from certain plants and special watering holes, frequently using hollowed-out ostrich eggs to collect and store it for later use.

In the Arctic region of northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, where conditions are very different from those in the Kalahari, the Inuit people practice a form of hunter-gatherer lifestyle suitable to that environment. Like other hunter-gatherer groups, they live in relatively small bands made of multiple families and are generally much more egalitarian than settled societies that depend on agriculture. There are few plants to gather but an abundance of birds and animals to hunt and fish, including caribou, walrus, bowhead whale, seal, polar bear, muskox, and fox. In addition to providing meat and fuel, these animals have hides the Inuit use to make ocean-going vessels and thick clothing to protect them from the harsh cold ([Figure 2.18](#)). The plants that can be gathered in some warmer regions include grasses, roots, and seaweed.



**FIGURE 2.18** The Inuit People of Alaska. Making carefully constructed fur clothing allows modern Inuit people to survive the cold conditions of their environment. This photograph of an Inuit family was made in 1929 and has been digitally restored. (credit: “Inupiat Family from Noatak, Alaska, 1929” by Edward S. Curtis in *The North American Indian*/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As is common among hunter-gatherer groups, men tend to do the hunting and fishing while women care for the children, maintain the home, and process the food that is hunted or gathered. The relatively limited supply of plants in relation to animals has exerted a strong influence on Inuit society. Since by far the largest part of the diet is produced by hunting and fishing, the emphasis on these male-dominated activities is strong. Hunting and fishing are also very dangerous occupations in which death and serious injury are common. The result is that women have traditionally outnumbered men in Inuit bands. In the past this ratio has led to higher rates of polygamy and even infanticide. The accumulation of numerous wives by some men has also sparked jealousy and violent rivalries among kin.

Both the San and the Inuit have had considerable exposure to the settled agricultural societies around them, and modern technology has influenced the way they live. For example, the Inuit today often use firearms to hunt in ways they could not have done several centuries ago. But one hunter-gatherer society that has still had only limited exposure to agricultural societies is the Awá people of the Brazilian rainforest. The known behaviors of the Awá thus provide scholars a picture of hunter-gatherer societies that may be closer to that of our distant ancestors.

Unlike the San and the Inuit, who live in environments where many resources are scarce, the Awá inhabit a very plentiful and lush environment. There are relatively few of them, only about three hundred and fifty, and their semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle is not a vestige of ancient practices. Rather, it is believed that as recently as the nineteenth century CE they abandoned previously settled communities and moved deep into the Amazon River basin to live as they currently do. Despite their relatively late adoption of this lifestyle, the Awá display many of the societal characteristics common among other hunter-gatherer groups. They are highly egalitarian. They own relatively few material objects. They live in small groups of up to thirty. And they survive by hunting animals and gathering edible plants from the surrounding environment. A traditional and highly valued gathered plant is the fruit of the babassu palm. In addition to relying on this oily and protein-rich fruit, Awá groups also survive on the abundant fish in the wet rainforest and hunt numerous other animals using bows and arrows.

The different environments in which the world's remaining hunter-gatherers live have inspired very different understandings of the supernatural. The Inuit have a rich mythology that includes stories of fantastic hunts and incredible creatures that inhabit the world. The northern lights, a natural celestial display common in very high latitudes, is seen as a feature of the supernatural that can be both comforting and terrifying.

Many San religious beliefs revolve around a sometimes helpful and sometimes foolish being called Kaggen. Kaggen can take the form of numerous animals, including certain insects. The San also practice numerous types of rituals for important life events, such as a young boy's first kill and marriage. They recognize certain members of their group as shamans with a special connection to the supernatural world.

The Awá perform unique religious ceremonies during special times, such as evenings with a full moon. They also practice rituals that take them to a spirit world where they can request special intervention on Earth.

## 2.3 The Neolithic Revolution

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the Neolithic Age
- Explain the consequences of the Neolithic Revolution
- Describe Neolithic settlements around the world and their significance

From the time *Homo sapiens* emerged and for tens of thousands of years afterward, members of the species lived a life of hunting and gathering, much as their distant ancestors had. Then, about twelve thousand years ago and for reasons that remain imperfectly understood, some modern human populations adopted agriculture. This means they transitioned away from existing on merely the sustenance nature provided. Instead, they began actively promoting the growth and eventual transformation of crops, and later the domestication of animals, to provide themselves with the resources they needed. This shift in strategy inaugurated the **Neolithic Age**.

The birth of agriculture triggered a host of additional changes in the way humans understood land, the way they organized socially, the amount and forms of wealth they could acquire, and even the religious traditions they practiced. Not everyone made the leap to farming, however. Plenty of hunter-gatherer societies avoided transitioning into a settled agricultural life, either because the new strategy wasn't practicable in their environment or because for them the costs outweighed the benefits. Yet those groups that did become agriculturalists experienced a degree of population growth and labor specialization that ultimately allowed for the establishment of a number of sophisticated Neolithic settlements.

### The Development of Agriculture

Possibly the most important transformation in the history of modern humans was the shift from hunting and gathering to a life based primarily on agriculture. We call this shift the **Neolithic Revolution**. But the revolution didn't happen in just one place or at one time. Instead, it occurred independently at different times and in several different areas, including the Near East, China, sub-Saharan Africa, Mesoamerica, and South America.

Each region domesticated different types of plants. In the Near East it was grains like wheat and barley. In Mesoamerica it was squash and later maize, or corn, and in China millet and rice. These plants grew naturally in those areas and were gathered in their wild form for many thousands of years before they were cultivated deliberately. The shift to agriculture brought enormous transformations to human populations around the world. It made it possible to feed much larger groups, necessitated the abandonment of hunter-gatherer-style egalitarianism, prompted the domestication of animals, and ultimately made way for human civilization as we understand it.

The reason some human populations undertook this important evolution remains imperfectly understood. However, it's likely not a coincidence that the earliest known adoptions of agriculture occurred not long after the end of the last ice age, about twelve thousand years ago. This climatic shift altered animal migration

patterns and probably brought much drier conditions to places like the Near East, where we find the earliest evidence of plant domestication. Climate conditions may have put a strain on food resources and prompted a shift in survival strategy. For example, humans might have attempted to help edible plants grow by moving them to places where they didn't grow before or had stopped growing. Populations already settled in one area might have begun to notice that seeds from the plants they were gathering would grow where they were left. Further observations likely prompted additional human interventions in order to produce more.

## BEYOND THE BOOK

### Göbekli Tepe

The archaeological site of Göbekli Tepe is located in what is now southeast Turkey near the Syrian border. It includes a number of large circular and rectangular structures, large T-shaped stone pillars, and numerous pieces of stone art depicting boars, snakes, birds, foxes, and other animals, made with both skill and care ([Figure 2.19](#)). It has been known for several decades, but it was only in the 1990s that German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt began conducting extensive excavations and studies.



**FIGURE 2.19** Göbekli Tepe. This aerial photograph of Göbekli Tepe shows four of the large circular features of the site, the largest of which is almost one hundred feet in diameter, as well as several rectangular structures nearby. (credit: modification of work “The archaeological site of Göbekli Tepe - main excavation area” by German Archaeological Institute, E. Küçük/PLoS ONE/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

One of the most fascinating characteristics of Göbekli Tepe is that some of its earliest structures, built about 11,600 years ago, predate the domestication of agriculture. Indeed, the earliest evidence we have for agriculture

at the site dates to about one thousand years later. Until this discovery was made, scholars assumed that agricultural production was a necessary prerequisite for megalithic architecture like that at Göbekli Tepe. The evidence here, however, led to an important reevaluation of our understanding of the Neolithic Revolution: What if settled communities and megalithic architecture led to agriculture, rather than the other way around?

Schmidt concluded that the site was a temple of sorts, where hunter-gatherer peoples from surrounding areas assembled at times to practice their religion and cooperate in building a stone site suitable for their religious purposes. Rather than religion and temple building emerging from agriculture, as had been commonly believed, Schmidt concluded that religion emerged first, and agriculture and the domestication of animals came later.

Since Schmidt published his findings, others working at the site have developed new and even more interesting conclusions. Discovering that Göbekli Tepe was actually a year-round settlement, archaeologist Lee Clare suggested that rather than bringing about agriculture, the people who built it may have been resisting it. The many carvings of animals at the site, he argued, might represent narrative connections to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle to which they were trying to cling as the world around them was embracing farming.

Both these conclusions challenge our earlier understanding of the Neolithic Revolution. And neither is likely to be the last word on what was happening at Göbekli Tepe.

- 
- Which theory about Göbekli Tepe sounds more plausible to you? Why?
  - Why might hunter-gatherer people take time to build a religious site? What does this suggest about the importance of religion for them?

Not all regions of the world had the right conditions in place to encourage a shift from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture. Among those regions that did, and where agriculture first flourished, were Mesopotamia, southern Turkey, and Israel. On a map, these places take the shape of a large crescent bending through the Near East. For this reason, the area is often referred to as the **Fertile Crescent**.

It was here that about twelve thousand years ago people began domesticating edible wild grasses to create what we know today as wheat and barley. Later, other species of plants were domesticated: peas, lentils, carrots, olives, and dates. Around ten thousand years ago, Asian peoples living on the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers began farming crops like rice, millet, and soybeans. In sub-Saharan Africa, likely around modern Sudan, people began actively cultivating sorghum, possibly as early as six thousand years ago. Over time they added crops like peanuts and sesame. Around the same time, groups living in central Mexico began cultivating maize (corn). Later they added crops like beans, squash, and peppers. Farther south, in the Andean region, around five thousand years ago people began to grow potatoes.

Each instance of the independent emergence of agriculture was followed by the expansion of these techniques to other areas. Wheat cultivation spread from the Fertile Crescent across the Mediterranean region and into northern Europe. Rice farming was adopted across large parts of eastern Asia where the crop would grow. Maize eventually expanded across Mesoamerica; in time, it reached as far north as the modern United States and as far south as the Andean region.

The key change brought by the rise of agriculture was not only that humans began to grow their own plants rather than just finding them where they grew naturally. It was also that humans, rather than their environment, became the deciding factor in determining which plants would grow. Since humans were selecting plants for their edible properties, their intervention led to gradual but important transformations in the plants themselves. For example, ancient wild varieties of wheat and barley had heavy husks around their edible seeds. These husks protected the seeds so that they could survive over the winter and sprout in the summer. But humans were primarily interested in the seeds, not the inedible husks. By selecting wheat and barley plants with thinner husks and more seeds year over year, humans transformed the plants over time into varieties of wheat and barley more suitable for their purposes. This domestication process occurred with

numerous types of plants in different areas around the world.

The rise of agriculture also led to the domestication of numerous types of animals, often selected for characteristics that were beneficial to humans, such as docility, strength, ability to feed on readily available foods, and rapid growth and reproduction so the animals could be slaughtered for food. Some of the many animals domesticated in the Neolithic Age were sheep and goats in the Near East around ten thousand years ago, chickens in south Asia around eight thousand years ago, horses in central Asia around six thousand years ago, and llamas in Peru about the same time ([Figure 2.20](#)).



**FIGURE 2.20** Peruvian Llamas. Domesticated llamas in Peru provided early peoples there with meat, animal power, dung for fertilizer, and fiber for clothing. (credit: “Llamas in Peru” by “NIAID”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

While the advantages of plant and animal domestication seem obvious to us today, some groups either could not or simply did not adopt these practices. The Indigenous peoples of Australia, for example, lived in environments that would have supported agriculture, and some of them were in contact with groups from New Guinea that did farm crops like taro and yams. Yet the early Australians continued to practice a mostly hunter-gatherer lifestyle until Europeans arrived about two hundred and fifty years ago. They apparently consciously determined that hunting and gathering were more suitable and practical given their own needs and the environment in which they lived. This is just one example of a people choosing a means of survival apart from the Neolithic Revolution.

### How Farming Changed the Human Experience

As the example of the Indigenous people of Australia proves, agriculture was not readily adopted by everyone exposed to it. This may seem strange to us, living in a world made possible by agriculture. But we’re largely removed from the sometimes-painful transition many of our distant ancestors made. Consider, for example, the loss in leisure time. Scholars who study modern hunter-gatherers have found that the time required to acquire enough food to live amounts to about twenty hours per week. However, comparable agricultural societies spend thirty or more hours engaged in farming. That means less time for resting, sharing knowledge, and undertaking activities that bring more joy than hard work does. These same studies have also noted that the greatest loss in leisure hours was borne by women, who spent far more time engaged in laborious tasks outside the home than hunter-gatherer women in similar environments.

Large groups living in agricultural communities were also more vulnerable to epidemic diseases, which became common in areas that collected large amounts of human and animal waste. They were far more dependent on the weather as well; their crops needed to receive the water they required but no more. Unlike hunter-gatherers, agriculturalists couldn’t easily migrate to areas with more suitable weather conditions.

Farmers also had a less-diverse diet than hunter-gatherers, made up mostly of one or two staple crops, usually starchy carbohydrates. While domesticated animals were available to farmers, meat consumption among Neolithic communities was significantly lower than among hunter-gatherers. Relying on a limited variety of food sources could result in mineral and vitamin deficiencies. But the advantages are also plain to see. Agriculture allowed for much larger populations. That meant more workers producing more food and more people to defend the settlement. When functioning well, agriculture created a constant supply of food and even a surplus that could be stored.

As early humans left their hunter-gatherer existence behind beginning around twelve thousand years ago, they also drifted away from the egalitarianism it fostered because agriculture required labor specialization in a way that hunting and gathering did not. Farming a field of wheat, for example, required a family to devote their energy to that process and associated chores, leaving little time for the diversity of tasks common among hunter-gatherers. And as agriculture became more sophisticated, such as by incorporating plows and domesticated animals to pull them, some successful farmers were able to produce surpluses that allowed them to accumulate wealth in the form of material property and land. This wealth, and the higher social status that went with it, were left for their descendants to inherit, strengthening social divisions between the well-off and others. For example, if food was plentiful, not everyone needed to farm, allowing some to become artisans or traders, who generated more wealth.

Some people were able to specialize in ways that freed them entirely from the need to focus on food production. They became traders, stoneworkers, religious leaders, and other types of elites. Those who acquired considerable wealth became leaders with the authority to command armies and create rules for society. Those without wealth could expect a life of difficult toil if they were lucky, and a life of bondage if they were not. Within the social tiers made possible by the spread of agriculture, new divisions defined by sex emerged. Among hunter-gatherer societies, women commonly gathered while men commonly hunted. But in agricultural societies, it was the men who typically worked among the crops in the fields. The need for strength to control the plow was likely one of the factors that contributed to this development. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere and spent their time preparing food, making pottery, and weaving cloth. Being less tied to the home, men had opportunities for leadership in society that women did not. They also thus had responsibilities women did not, including dangerous duties like fighting and dying to defend the settlement.

At home, women undertook the difficult and time-consuming work of milling grains. Originally done simply with mortars and pestles, this task evolved along with the rise in agricultural production to include the use of larger stone tools. Operating these mills required many long hours kneeling on the ground and bending over the millstones. It was also in the home that wool sheared from domesticated sheep was spun into thread and woven into cloth. Such chores were in addition to the labor of giving birth, rearing children, and preparing food.

Agriculture also had a huge effect on religious practices. The division of labor and the increased specialization it brought allowed for the emergence of highly defined priestly classes in many places. These religious elites derived their authority from their ability to interpret the intentions of the supernatural world, a quality that was highly prized. As a result, they could control material and human resources, which were put to work constructing sometimes elaborate monuments and performing highly choreographed rituals. Religions themselves became more intricate as well as qualitatively different. Pre-agricultural societies had tended to practice varieties of animism, seeing elements of spirituality in a great many ordinary things and animals. They had a keen interest in communing with the supernatural, often through shamanic and other rituals. Communities that experienced the Neolithic Revolution, however, developed a focus on agricultural fertility and on deities who could intervene for humanity's benefit by encouraging this fertility and perpetuating the important cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

**THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT****Domesticating Humans?**

The process of plant and animal domestication is often seen as a one-way street, with humans orchestrating the process while staying relatively unchanged. But it may also be the case that humans transformed, or domesticated, themselves in order to develop populations most suitable for the agricultural lifestyle. Some have argued that the adoption of agriculture encouraged humans to select and reproduce traits that would produce the most advantages, such as docility and cooperativeness. The fact that modern humans are far less aggressive and more cooperative than we were tens of thousands of years ago appears to support the conclusion that we adapted ourselves.

And as some such as historian Yuval Noah Harari have suggested, edible plants themselves exerted pressures on us we didn't quite recognize. Just over twelve thousand years ago, for example, wheat was merely one wild edible plant among many found in the Near East. Today it is grown around the world ([Figure 2.21](#)). This incredible success was made possible by humans, who labored to remove rocks from the fields, bring water, remove insects, and work from dawn to dusk to ensure wheat's survival and success. These costs borne by humans have redounded to the great benefit of wheat. Did we domesticate wheat, or did it domesticate us?



**FIGURE 2.21** Did Wheat Domesticate Humans? Human labor helped make wheat one of the most successful plants in the world. Did agriculture in turn encourage humans to select for advantageous traits like cooperativeness? (credit: Sunset over the wheat field featured" by "Dreamy Pixel"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

- How does the theory of human domestication affect your understanding of our relationship with agriculture?
- In what other ways do you think agriculture may have brought about human domestication?

**Neolithic Peoples**

By around nine thousand years ago, groups in a few different areas around the world were not only practicing agriculture but also beginning to establish large and complex permanent settlements. A number of these Neolithic settlements emerged in Europe, the Near East, China, Pakistan, and beyond. One of the largest to be excavated today is in southeastern Turkey, at a site known as Çatalhöyük (pronounced *cha-tal-HOY-ook*). Evidence indicates this site was occupied for about twelve hundred years, roughly between 7200 and 6000 BCE. It covers more than thirty acres, and at its height it may have been home to as many as six thousand people.

Houses at Çatalhöyük were made with mud brick and were clustered together without roads or passages between them. This design required that residents enter their homes from the roof, but it provided them with protection from the outside world. Thanks to extensive excavation at the site, we can tell that the people who built and lived in Çatalhöyük included farmers, hunters, and skilled craftspeople with complex religious ideas. Their rooms include many examples of art, such as depictions of hunts and various kinds of animals, and even what may be representations of their myths, such as a woman giving birth to a bull. Cattle imagery abounds in Çatalhöyük, including bull heads with large horns and bull horns protruding from furniture, suggesting that the people who lived there venerated the animal (Figure 2.22).



**FIGURE 2.22** Neolithic Interior at Çatalhöyük. In this reconstruction of a Neolithic Age Çatalhöyük interior, several bull heads adorn the walls. (credit: “Bull heads from Catal Hüyük in Angora Museum” by Stipich Béla/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

The people of Çatalhöyük lived a life that was neither fully agricultural nor hunter-gatherer. Instead, they combined the two strategies. They had domesticated animals like cattle; grew a variety of domesticated plants like wheat, lentils, and barley; and may even have used some form of irrigation system to increase agricultural production. Yet they also relied on hunting wild animals for meat and gathering wild edible plants like walnuts, various types of berries, pears, and crab apples. It seems clear that their wealth was derived from trade in agricultural products, woven items, clay vessels, and especially obsidian, a naturally occurring volcanic glass. Because it can be chipped to create a razor-sharp edge, obsidian would have been a highly valued trade item for people in need of effective tools for butchering and other chores. The obsidian of Çatalhöyük was obtained from a nearby volcano and traded to people as far away as Syria and Cyprus.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

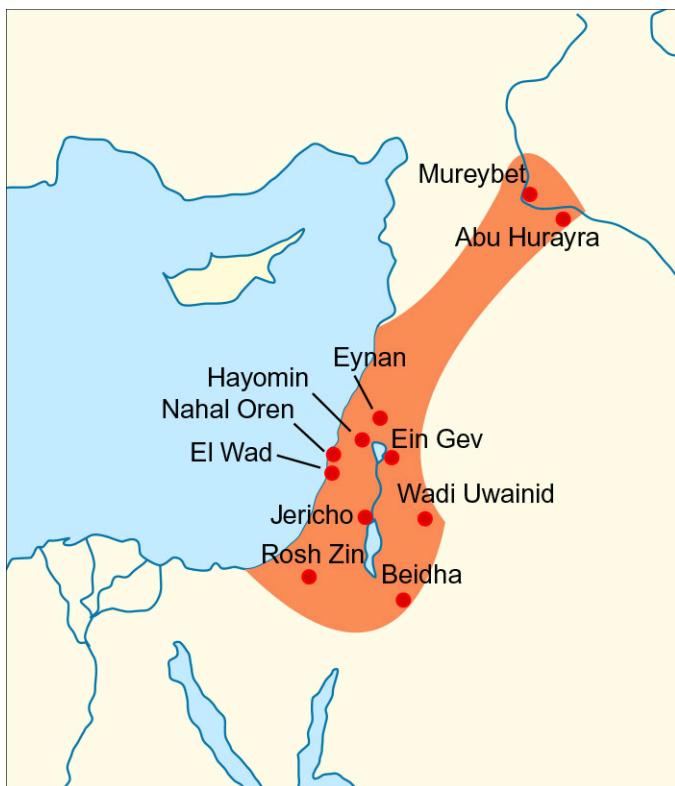
The [Çatalhöyük Research Project](https://openstax.org/l/77Catalhoyuk) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Catalhoyuk>) provides up-to-date information about excavations at the site, as well as detailed descriptions of its architecture and artifacts and the way its people may once have lived.

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Far to the south of Çatalhöyük, in the Jordan River valley east of Jerusalem, was an even older Neolithic city, Jericho. Archaeologists estimate that Jericho was occupied as early as 8300 BCE. Its construction was very different from that of Çatalhöyük. Rather than being composed of homes with adjoining walls for protection,

Jericho was protected by a large ditch and a thick stone wall that encircled the settlement. Within the settlement there was also a large stone tower, the purpose of which remains unclear. Nearby were similar Neolithic settlements at Ain Ghazal and Nahal Hemar. And far to the north on the Euphrates River was Abu Hureyra.

Archaeologists have determined that all these sites and others were part of a culture often described as Natufian ([Figure 2.23](#)). The founding of most of them predates agriculture, and while their environments are very dry today, many thousands of years ago they were rich in wild edible plants and animals. It was likely the wealth of these resources that allowed the Natufian groups to settle there, only later adopting agriculture and building Neolithic settlements.



**FIGURE 2.23 Sites of Natufian Settlements.** Approximately twelve thousand years ago, the area where Natufian culture spread was far wetter and filled with much more abundant wildlife than today. (credit: modification of work “Extensión de la cultura Natufiense” by “Crates”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

The earliest evidence of agriculture in South Asia has been found at the Neolithic settlement of Mehrgarh, situated in modern Pakistan to the north and west of the Indus River. As early as 7000 BCE, the people of this community were farming barley and raising goats and sheep. A few thousand years later they began domesticating cotton. Barley cultivation techniques may have been brought to the area from the Near East, though they also may have been developed independently. The structures of the settlement itself were made of dried mud bricks, with homes designed in a rectangular shape and divided into four parts. The people of Mehrgarh included skilled artisans capable of using sea shells, sandstone, and the rich blue lapis lazuli. Many of these materials came from great distances away, indicating that the settlement engaged in some type of long-distance trade, as did other Neolithic settlements.

The earliest Neolithic settlements in China, from around 8000 BCE, were located along two of its major rivers, the Yellow and the Yangtze. Along the Yellow River, people mainly cultivated millet, while on the Yangtze it was rice. These were areas with an abundance of water, access to fertile grasslands, and a variety of edible plants and animals for gathering and hunting, and Neolithic settlements proliferated. The people domesticated pigs and dogs and supplemented their diets of rice and millet by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants. They

also made cord from hemp and pottery from clay.

Two of the early sites discovered there are Pengtoushan and Bashidang, both located in the Yangtze River valley in modern Hunan province. They may have been settled as early as 7500 BCE and preserve evidence of some of the earliest cultivation of wild rice. Homes were made by either digging partially into the ground or building on earth platforms with a central post to hold up the roof. A large ditch surrounds Bashidang, which may have served to channel water from the settlement and into the river. This surrounding-ditch design has been found at other locations and gradually developed into a type of moat around the settlements.

In other areas around the world, the shift to agriculture happened in similar fashion. Sites with permanent settlement, the practice of agriculture, the use of pottery, and other characteristics associated with particular Neolithic cultures have been discovered in a great number of places. The earliest known agricultural settlements in the Americas have been found in northeastern Mexico, where as early as 6500 BCE people were cultivating plants like pepper and squash. In the Andes Mountains region of South America, Neolithic settlements growing potatoes and manioc began to emerge as early as 3000 BCE. The cultivation of taro in New Guinea may have begun as early as 7000 BCE. Along the Danube River valley in Europe, Neolithic settlements began to emerge around 6000 BCE, likely having adopted cereal farming from the Near East. And in central Africa, farming of white Guinea yams began around 5000 BCE, later including crops like millet and sorghum.

## Key Terms

- Acheulean tools** stone tools made by carefully chipping away flakes of the stone core to make them into teardrop-shaped implements that replaced the cruder Oldowan hand-axes
- animism** the belief that a degree of spirituality exists not only in people but also in plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena
- Australopithecus*** a very distant ancestor of modern humans who lived in eastern and southern Africa between 2.5 and 4 million years ago
- Fertile Crescent** a crescent-shaped geographical area in the Middle East where agriculture first flourished
- genus** a taxonomic rank that includes several similar and related species
- Homo erectus*** a member of the genus *Homo* who emerged in East Africa around two million years ago, living entirely on the ground and walking exclusively in an upright position
- Homo habilis*** the earliest member of the genus *Homo*, appearing in the archaeological record about two to three million years ago
- Homo sapiens*** modern humans, members of the genus *Homo* who emerged in Africa first and later migrated to other areas
- hunter-gatherers** people who survive by employing the strategies of hunting animals and gathering wild plants rather than by planting crops and raising livestock
- Mousterian tools** stone tools and hand-axes made beginning around 250,000 years ago and consisting of flakes rather than cores
- Neanderthals** members of the genus *Homo* who evolved from *Homo erectus* and lived in Europe and western Asia between 30,000 and 200,000 years ago
- Neolithic Age** the final phase of the Paleolithic Age, beginning around twelve thousand years ago when human populations began growing crops and domesticating animals
- Neolithic Revolution** the shift from hunting and gathering to a life based primarily on agriculture
- Oldowan tools** sharpened stones used until about 1.7 million years ago for a variety of cutting, scraping, and chopping purposes
- Paleolithic Age** the period of time beginning as early as 3.3 million years ago until nearly twelve thousand years ago, when our distant pre-human ancestors began using stone tools for a variety of purposes

## Section Summary

### 2.1 Early Human Evolution and Migration

For about the last thirty thousand years, modern humans, or *Homo sapiens*, have been the only human species walking the Earth. But not only did several different human species once share the planet; they also evolved from much older and very different ancestors who began forging the path of global migration that modern humans later followed. Many tens of thousands of years or more later, *Homo sapiens* began creating sophisticated stone hand-axes from rock cores and mastered the use of fire for cooking, staying warm, guarding against predators, and creating places for social interaction. They used their keen ability to produce a variety of sounds to construct languages that allowed them to communicate complex ideas and pass important information to later generations. They created art that still speaks to us today. With all these tools, modern humans were able to migrate around the globe and create a diversity of cultures, traditions, and lifestyles.

### 2.2 People in the Paleolithic Age

Beginning perhaps as early as 100,000 years ago, modern humans began leaving Africa and migrating far and wide. That this movement occurred during the start of the most recent glaciation period suggests that climatic changes may have been a motivating factor. Over time, these migrating humans found themselves in a great variety of environments that required them to develop appropriate tools and strategies. In very frigid parts of the world, for example, they fashioned tools like sewing needles to create sophisticated clothing for keeping out the cold.

For many tens of thousands of years, these groups lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, relying on edible plants as well as meat that could be either scavenged or hunted. Their diets varied from place to place but often included foods like wild grains, berries, honey, small and large mammals, fish, and shellfish. What we know or guess about these populations comes from both archaeological work and observations of the few modern hunter-gatherer societies that remain.

### **2.3 The Neolithic Revolution**

The changes that came with the Neolithic Revolution beginning about twelve thousand years ago dramatically transformed human life. The adoption of agriculture and the domestication of animals allowed for larger populations, surpluses of food, and labor specialization, even as they reduced leisure time and restructured formerly egalitarian societies into hierarchical tiers. From the remains of Neolithic settlements we can get a sense of life at this important moment in our species' history. The remains of Çatalhöyük feature rooms decorated with art and a settlement designed for protection. The art and architecture from there and from other places like Göbekli Tepe demonstrate both skill and high degrees of cooperation. They also show modern humans in a transitional period between the hunter-gatherer world and the fully agricultural one. Over time, hunter-gatherer lifestyles were abandoned in most places as agricultural settlements grew.

## **Assessments**

### **Review Questions**

1. Which human species is likely the earliest member of the genus *Homo*?
  - a. *Homo sapiens*
  - b. *Homo erectus*
  - c. *Homo habilis*
  - d. *Homo neanderthalensis*
2. What was one of the consequences of the digestive organs moving lower and into a smaller space when members of the *Homo* genus began walking upright?
  - a. It led them to build shelters.
  - b. It led them to adopt foods that were easier to digest.
  - c. It led them to seek protection in trees.
  - d. It led them to migrate to warmer environments.
3. Which statement best describes the multiregional evolution model?
  - a. Fully evolved modern humans left Africa about 100,000 years ago.
  - b. All modern humans evolved from a population of *Homo erectus* in Asia.
  - c. Modern humans evolved in many places in a piecemeal fashion.
  - d. Fully evolved modern humans descended directly from *Australopithecus*.
4. How did migrating modern humans reach Australia?
  - a. They walked on exposed land.
  - b. They walked over frozen ice sheets.
  - c. They took rafts over open water.
  - d. They built crude bridges between islands.
5. Which phrase best describes Acheulean tools?
  - a. hand-axes made by careful chipping of stones
  - b. stone blades attached to handles
  - c. stone spearheads attached to wooden shafts
  - d. stone cores with a sharp edge for cutting

6. Human migration to which area was made possible by lower sea levels during the last ice age?
  - a. India
  - b. China
  - c. North America
  - d. The Near East
7. Why were small groups of humans better suited to survival in the Paleolithic Age?
  - a. It was hard to feed larger groups of people.
  - b. Large groups were more likely to settle.
  - c. Small groups created more sophisticated tools.
  - d. Small groups tended to get along better than larger ones.
8. Where have archaeologists uncovered evidence of Paleolithic shelters made of mammoth bones?
  - a. eastern Europe
  - b. Australia
  - c. South America
  - d. eastern Africa
9. Which hunter-gatherer group still living today tends to experience problems from having larger populations of women than men?
  - a. Awá
  - b. San
  - c. Inuit
  - d. Kalahari
10. What was an advantage of adopting agriculture?
  - a. greater mobility
  - b. a more reliable food supply
  - c. greater food variety
  - d. more leisure time
11. In which location did the Neolithic Revolution take place first?
  - a. China
  - b. North America
  - c. the Fertile Crescent
  - d. sub-Saharan Africa
12. What Neolithic settlements were the first to develop rice agriculture?
  - a. those in the Yangtze River valley
  - b. those in the Danube River valley
  - c. those in the Fertile Crescent
  - d. those in northeastern Mexico
13. Which region independently began cultivating maize about six thousand years ago?
  - a. the Yangtze River region
  - b. the Andean region
  - c. sub-Saharan Africa
  - d. central Mexico
14. What tasks were commonly done by men in agricultural communities?

- a. preparing food
- b. plowing fields
- c. making pottery
- d. weaving cloth

### Check Your Understanding Questions

1. To which genus and species do modern humans belong? What were some of the other human species and what happened to them?
2. In what ways was language a useful tool for modern humans?
3. What evidence supports the claim that Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* may have mated?
4. Why do most scholars now dismiss the idea that Paleolithic cave paintings were designed to be popularly admired by those groups that created them?
5. How would scholars describe the religious traditions of hunter-gatherer peoples, and what evidence might they use?
6. What types of tools might have helped ancient humans migrating into cold environments and why?
7. What do you imagine would have happened if a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer community grew too large for the surrounding resources to support? Why?
8. Why might some groups have decided not to adopt agriculture?
9. How did the relationship between men and women change with the advent of agriculture?
10. How did agriculture lead to the development of social hierarchies?

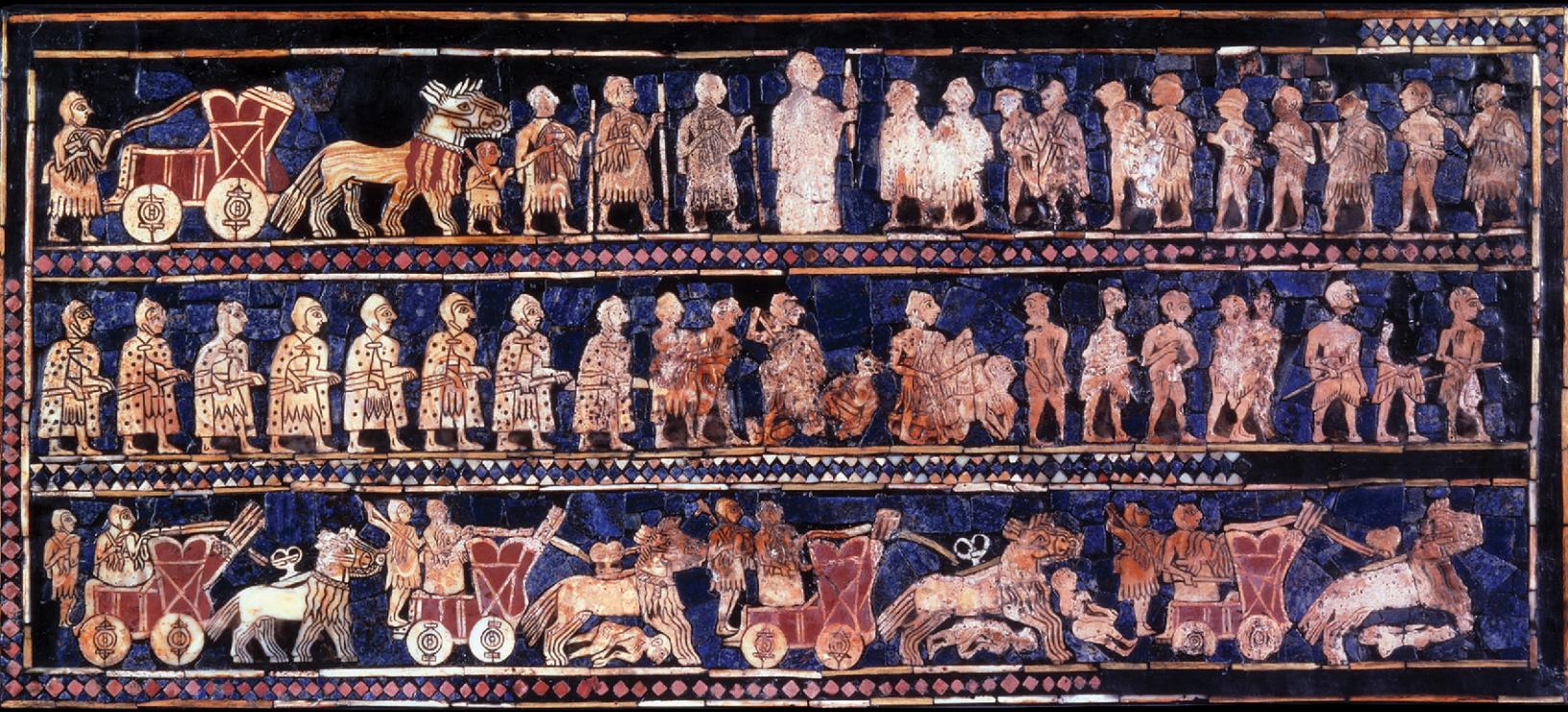
### Application and Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the reasons our distant ancestors evolved in a way that took them out of the trees?
2. What types of tools do you imagine Paleolithic humans may have developed that have not survived in the archaeological record?
3. What type of environment would you look for if you were a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer? Why?
4. Why might egalitarianism among hunter-gatherer groups be a successful social strategy?
5. Was the Neolithic Revolution an example of modern humans making progress? Why or why not?
6. How might groups living in Neolithic settlements like Jericho or Çatalhöyük have thought of hunter-gatherer communities living around them? Why?



# Early Civilizations and Urban Societies

3



**FIGURE 3.1 The Art of Ur.** This intricately ornamented box of mosaic-covered wood was found in a royal tomb in the ancient city of Ur. It dates from about 2550 BCE and exhibits several markers of this era's civilizations, such as a hierarchical society (as the scenes illustrate) and the presence of wealth, leisure, and specialized skills needed to make such an elaborate decorative object. (credit: modification of work "Standard of Ur" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

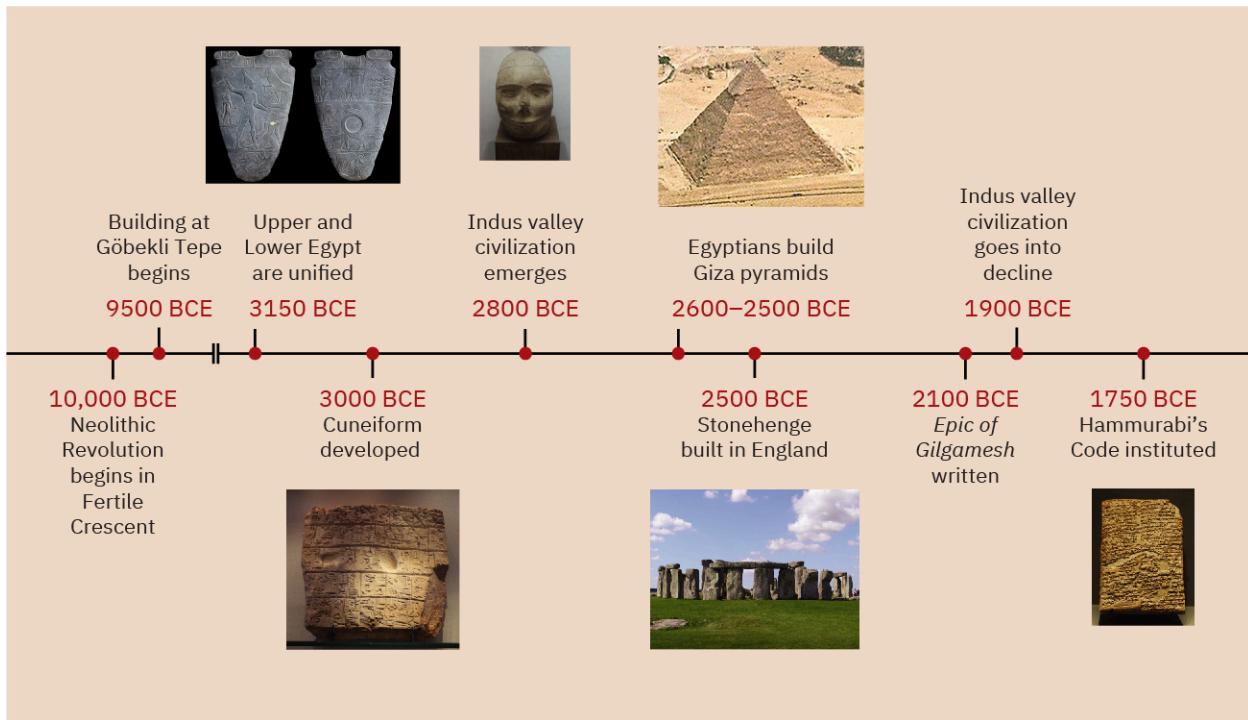
## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 3.1 Early Civilizations
- 3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia
- 3.3 Ancient Egypt
- 3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

**INTRODUCTION** The land of Sumer, in today's southern Iraq, was home to some of the largest early cities in human history. In one of these ancient settlements, Ur, a beautiful wooden box was laid in a royal tomb in about 2550 BCE ([Figure 3.1](#)). It measures roughly nine by twenty inches (a little bigger than a laptop) and is inlaid with elaborate mosaic figures and borders composed of bits of red limestone, lapis lazuli, and marine shell. This kind of specialized craftsmanship was a hallmark of societies that no longer depended on hunting and gathering for food but rather produced crops capable of sustaining large populations. In turn, they gained enough time and prosperity for some members to focus on artisanal crafts.

The box indicates at least three important things about the civilization that produced it. First, a highly skilled artisan constructed the box and created the mosaics, indicating the presence of specialization of labor. Second, the mosaics show someone who is presumably the king at the center of the top row, directing the soldiers below. These power dynamics suggest new social hierarchies. Finally, the soldiers all appear smaller in the

scene than the king, symbolically reflecting their subordinate position and telling us that social stratification had come into existence. All these developments took place gradually over time, bringing slow but enduring change to the lives of the people in Ur and those who lived nearby. Similar changes occurred in the world's other ancient cities.



**FIGURE 3.2** Timeline: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit "3000 BCE, cuneiform": modification of work "Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Dynastic Rule": "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Indus Valley": modification of work "Harappan (Indus Valley) Pottery" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "2500 BCE, Giza": "All Gizah Pyramids" by Ricardo Liberato/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit "2500 BCE, Stonehenge": "Stonehenge" by "thegarethwiscombe"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit "1750 BCE": "Prologue of the code of Hammurabi" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 3.3** Locator Map: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 3.1 Early Civilizations

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the attributes of early civilizations
- Analyze the way human relationships changed with the development of urban areas

Early civilizations, most of which arose along large rivers, were marked by an agriculturally sustained population that remained settled in one area and could number in the tens of thousands. The stability of the population allowed for the development of a discernible **culture**, which consists of all the different ways a distinct group of people interact with one another and their environment and pass these ways down from generation to generation over time. This is not to say that earlier groups of people lacked social identities. But there were important differences between them and the early civilizations that followed.

The development of early civilizations occurred between 10,000 and 8,000 BCE in just a few specific areas of the world that historians have labeled the “cradles of civilization.” In these locations—today’s Mexico, Peru, China, India/Pakistan, Iraq, and Egypt—the introduction of farming allowed larger populations to settle in one place, and the ability to produce and distribute surpluses of food enabled some people to specialize in such tasks as manufacturing handicrafts, tending to the spiritual world, and governing. The peoples of these cultures experienced radical changes in their lifestyles as well as in the ways their communities interacted with each other and their environments.

### Attributes of Early Civilizations

Even after the Neolithic Revolution, many people continued to lead a nomadic or seminomadic existence, hunting and gathering or herding domesticated animals. People produced or gathered only enough materials to meet the immediate food, shelter, and clothing needs of their family unit. Even in societies that adopted farming as a way of life, people grew only enough for their own survival. Moreover, the family unit was self-sufficient and relied on its own resources and abilities to meet its needs. No great differences in wealth existed

between families, and each person provided necessary support for the group. Group leaders relied primarily on consensus for decision-making. Order and peace were maintained by negotiations between community elders such as warriors and religious leaders. Stability also became dependent on peaceful relationships with neighboring societies, often built on trade.

Early civilizations, by contrast, arose where large numbers of people lived in a relatively small, concentrated area and worked to produce a surplus of food and other materials, which they distributed through a system of exchange. For farming communities, this food surplus meant family size grew to six or seven children and caused the global human population to skyrocket. Population growth rooted in agricultural production led to larger cities, in which the food produced by farmers in outlying rural areas was distributed among the population of the urban center, where food was not produced. This system of **specialization** was a key feature of early civilizations and what distinguished them from previous societies. Individuals performed specific tasks such as farming, writing, or performing religious rituals. People came to rely on the exchange of goods and services to obtain necessary supplies. For example, artisans specializing in craft production relied on farmers to cultivate the food they needed to thrive. In turn, farmers depended upon artisans to produce tools and clothing for them. A weaver acquired wool from a shepherd and produced cloth that might then be given to a physician in exchange for medicine or a priest as payment for conducting a religious ritual.

The system of exchange, however, created hierarchies within society. Those who could accumulate more goods became wealthy, and they passed that wealth from one generation to the next. This wealth led, in turn, to the accumulation of political and religious power, while those who continued to labor in production remained lower on the social scale. This **social stratification**, another characteristic of early civilizations, means that families and individuals could vary greatly in their wealth and status. Those who share the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata, and these strata or classes are ordered from highest to lowest based on their social standing.

The nature of government also changed as populations grew. In smaller groups, decisions about war and migration were made in concert because no individual or family was likely to survive without the others. Also, in small communities, order and peace were often enforced at the family level. If someone acted badly, the customs of the society were brought to bear on them to correct the offending behavior. For example, the San of South Africa held a ritual dance to contact their elders for advice on how to correct a difficult situation. The act of coming together was often enough for the community to heal. In larger civilizations, officials such as priests and kings possessed the authority to command the obedience of subjects, who relied on the powerful to protect them. In return for physical protection and the promise of prosperity, farmers and artisans provided food and goods and, eventually, paid taxes. This exchange served to reinforce both the developing social hierarchy and the specialization of labor.

As civilizations developed around the world in this way, they shared the features noted. Their existence did not mean the end of older ways of living, however. Nomadic and seminomadic peoples not only remained an integral part of the ancient world, they also provided crucial resources and a vehicle for the exchange of knowledge and culture. They were particularly important as a means of connecting one large city to another.

### The First Urban Societies

Around 10,000 BCE, wheat was first domesticated in what is today northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and western Iran, and also in Syria and Israel. This region is commonly called the Fertile Crescent (because of its shape). It includes Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), southern Anatolia (modern Turkey), and the Levant (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine) and has yielded the earliest evidence of agriculture ([Figure 3.4](#)). This same region saw the rise of the first urban areas in the Neolithic Age, often called Neolithic cities. Examples include Jericho (8300–6500 BCE) along the Jordan River in what is today the Palestinian Territories, and Çatalhöyük (7200–6000 BCE) in southeastern Turkey. Archaeologists have established that these early urban areas had populations as high as six thousand.



**FIGURE 3.4** The Fertile Crescent. This broad swath of land (shown in green) in what is now Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Turkey was home to the world's first cities, including Çatalhöyük and Jericho. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Hunter-gatherer cultures also built large structures, such as the monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey and at Poverty Point in Louisiana in the United States. Listen to this [TEDx Talk lecture by the archaeologist who excavated at Göbekli Tepe](https://openstax.org/l/77gobeklitepe) (<https://openstax.org/l/77gobeklitepe>) to find out more about the site. You can learn more about the Poverty Point culture by exploring the [Poverty Point website](https://openstax.org/l/77PovertyPoint) (<https://openstax.org/l/77PovertyPoint>). Look especially at “History and Artifacts.”

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Neolithic settlements depended upon the transition to agricultural production to sustain their populations. Such developments were also accompanied by increasing complexity in other areas of life, such as religion. An agricultural surplus enabled religious specialists to devote time to performing bull sacrifices at Çatalhöyük, for example, and freed artisans to hone their skills to create the frescoes that decorated the interior space where these sacrifices occurred. Some form of government must have organized the labor and materials necessary to construct the walls and tower at Jericho, which may have served as an observatory to mark the passage of the solar year. In both Jericho and Çatalhöyük, a shared belief system, or unity behind a leader, must have inspired the inhabitants to labor in the fields and distribute their agricultural surplus. At Jericho, the community may have been united by its veneration of ancestors, whose skulls were decorated and revered as idols. The people of Çatalhöyük may have offered their bull sacrifices to a mother-deity, possibly represented by small figurines of a woman that archaeologists have discovered there.

**BEYOND THE BOOK****Interpreting Evidence from Neolithic Cities**

Prehistoric peoples left no writings behind, and historians and archaeologists can only attempt to understand their beliefs and attitudes by studying the artifacts they produced. This is challenging because ancient societies had very different religious and social systems from our own. But even the most convincing interpretations may not persuade everyone. We may simply never know what certain artifacts meant to the people who created them.

Consider the famous tower of Jericho, built around 8000 BCE ([Figure 3.5](#)). Careful excavation has revealed that the tower likely took more than thirty years to build and had stairs for climbing to the top through the center. Some believe it was made for defensive purposes; others think it was a religious monument or even an observatory. Regardless of its use, it seems likely the city had some type of governing system that served to organize the labor. But that assumption too could be in error.



**FIGURE 3.5** The Tower of Jericho. Built around 8000 BCE, this twenty-eight-foot-tall tower at the Neolithic city of Jericho is one of the earliest stone monuments in the world, but its precise purpose remains unclear. (credit: "Tower of Jericho" by Reinhard Dietrich/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As another example, consider a decorated skull found in Neolithic Jericho ([Figure 3.6](#)). An ancient artisan made it by plastering over a human skull and placing pieces of shell in the eye sockets. Historians and archaeologists have speculated that the people of Jericho venerated such skulls, which may have been seen as relics of ancestors and objects of worship. But perhaps the skull meant something else entirely.



**FIGURE 3.6** Skull from Jericho. More than nine thousand years ago, an artisan at Jericho covered this human skull with plaster and placed shells in the eye sockets, possibly to celebrate a distant ancestor. (credit: "A plastered skull from the ancient city of Jericho in Palestine 7000 BCE" by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Evidence from the Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük demonstrates that its people venerated bulls. Archaeologists have discovered numerous bucranium (bull heads and horns) at the site ([Figure 3.7](#)). But what did these bull symbols mean? Popular interpretation suggests they symbolize the son and lover of an important mother-deity. Other explanations call them female symbols of life and rebirth. Still others propose different interpretations.



**FIGURE 3.7** Bull Decorations at Çatalhöyük. This reconstruction of a room at Çatalhöyük depicts several

bucranium decorating the walls. Interpretations of their meaning vary. (credit: "A reconstructed sanctuary of Catal Hüyük" by Stipich Béla/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

- What do scholars' interpretations suggest about the way these artifacts are studied?
- Do their interpretations sound convincing to you? What others can you think of, given what you have read and seen?

The Neolithic cities of Jericho and Çatalhöyük were some of the earliest to emerge. But they are not the only such sites. As early as 7000 BCE, a Neolithic settlement appeared in modern Pakistan, at a site today known as Mehrgarh, whose inhabitants engaged in long-distance trade, grew barley, and raised goats and sheep. Comparable Neolithic settlements in China emerged around 8000 BCE along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, where people cultivated millet and rice. A few thousand years later in the Americas, Neolithic settlements sprang up in both Mesoamerica and the Andes Mountains region.

Not all the Neolithic settlements endured. Çatalhöyük, for example, was ultimately abandoned around 6000 BCE and never reoccupied. Jericho, on the other hand, was abandoned and resettled a few times and is still a functioning city today. What is important about these Neolithic settlements is what they can tell us about the long transition between the emergence of agriculture and the eventual rise of early civilizations thousands of years later in places like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley.

## 3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of civilization in Ancient Mesopotamia
- Discuss the political history of Mesopotamia from the early Sumerian city-states to the rise of Old Babylon
- Describe the economy, society, and religion of Ancient Mesopotamia

In the fourth millennium BCE, the world's first great cities arose in southern Mesopotamia, or the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, then called Sumer. The ancient Sumerians were an inventive people responsible for a host of technological advances, most notably a sophisticated writing system. Even after the Sumerian language ceased to be spoken early in the second millennium BCE, Sumerian literary works survived throughout the whole of Mesopotamia and were often collected by later cities and stored in the first libraries.

### The Rise and Eclipse of Sumer

The term *Mesopotamia*, or “the land between the rivers” in Greek, likely originated with the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and has become the common name for the place between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq. The rivers flow north to south, from the Taurus Mountains of eastern Turkey to the Persian Gulf, depositing fertile soil along their banks. Melting snow and rain from the mountains carry this topsoil to the river valleys below. In antiquity, the river flow was erratic, and flooding was frequent but unpredictable. The need to control it and manage the life-giving water led to the building of cooperative irrigation projects.

Agricultural practices reached Mesopotamia by around 8000 BCE, if not earlier. However, for about two millennia afterward, populations remained quite small, typically living in small villages of between one hundred and two hundred people. Beginning around 5500 BCE, some had begun to establish settlements in southern Mesopotamia, a wetter and more forbidding environment. It was here that the Sumerian civilization emerged ([Figure 3.8](#)). By around 4500 BCE, some of the once-small farming villages had become growing urban centers, some with thousands of residents. During the course of the fourth millennium BCE (3000s

BCE), urbanization exploded in the region. By the end of the millennium, there were at least 124 villages with about one hundred residents each, twenty towns with as many as two thousand residents, another twenty small urban centers of about five thousand residents, and one large city, Uruk, with a population that may have been as high as fifty thousand. This growth helped make Sumer the earliest civilization to develop in Mesopotamia.



**FIGURE 3.8** Early Sumer. By the end of the fourth millennium BCE, urban areas of varying sizes dotted the landscape in Sumer. Uruk was the largest. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The fourth millennium BCE in Sumer was also a period of technological innovation. One important invention made after 4000 BCE was the process for manufacturing bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, which marked the beginning of the **Bronze Age** in Mesopotamia. In this period, bronze replaced stone as the premier material for tools and weapons and remained so for nearly three thousand years. The ancient Sumerians also developed the plow, the wheel, and irrigation techniques that used small channels and canals with dikes for diverting river water into fields. All these developments allowed for population growth and the continued rise of cities by expanding agricultural production and the distribution of agricultural goods. In the area of science, the Sumerians developed a sophisticated mathematical system based on the numbers sixty, ten, and one.

One of the greatest inventions of this period was writing. The Sumerians developed **cuneiform**, a script characterized by wedge-shaped symbols that evolved into a phonetic script, that is, one based on sounds, in which each symbol stood for a syllable (Figure 3.9). They wrote their laws, religious tracts, and property transactions on clay tablets, which became very durable once baked, just like the clay bricks the Sumerians used to construct their buildings. The clay tablets held records of commercial exchanges, including contracts and receipts as well as taxes and payrolls. Cuneiform also allowed rulers to record their laws and priests to

preserve their rituals and sacred stories. In these ways, it helped facilitate both economic growth and the formation of states.



**FIGURE 3.9** Sumerian Cuneiform. Cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneus* (meaning “wedge”), was created by pressing a stylus of reed into wet clay to create a meaningful arrangement of wedge shapes. This clay cone from circa 1934–1924 BCE includes a dedication to the ruler of the city of Isin in southern Mesopotamia. (credit: "Votive cone with cuneiform inscription of Lipit-Eshtar" by Anonymous Gift, 1971/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

### DUELING VOICES

#### The Invention of Writing in Sumer

Writing developed independently in several parts of the world, but the earliest known evidence of its birth has been found in Sumer, where cuneiform script emerged as a genuine writing system by around 3000 BCE, if not earlier. But questions remain about how and why ancient peoples began reproducing their spoken language in symbolic form.

Archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat argued in the 1990s that small clay representations of numbers and objects, often called “tokens,” date from thousands of years before the development of cuneiform writing and were its precursor. These tokens, she believed, were part of an accounting system, and each type represented a different good: livestock, grains, and oils. Some were found within hollow baseball-sized clay balls now called “bullae,” which were marked with pictures of the tokens inside. Schmandt-Besserat believed the pictures portray the type of transaction in which the goods represented by the tokens were exchanged, and thus they were a crucial step toward writing. Over time, she suggested, the marked bullae gave way to flat clay tablets recording the transactions, and the first truly written records emerged ([Figure 3.10](#)).



**FIGURE 3.10** Sumerian Clay Tablet. One theory holds that the antecedents of Sumerian clay tablets inscribed with writing like this one (a) were small clay tokens (b) and the pictures of them on the clay “bullae” vessels that held them. (credit a: modification of work "Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work "Clay accounting tokens Susa Louvre" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Schmandt-Besserat's linear interpretation is still one of the best-known explanations for the emergence of writing. But it is hardly the only one. One scholar who offers a different idea is the French Assyriologist Jean-Jacques Glassner. Glassner believes that rather than being an extension of accounting techniques, early writing was a purposeful attempt to render the Sumerian language in script. He equates the development of writing, which gives meaning to a symbol, to the process by which Mesopotamian priests interpreted omens for divining the future. Writing allowed people to place language, a creation of the gods, under human control. Glassner's argument is complex and relies on ancient works of literature and various theoretical approaches, including that of postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Many disagree with Glassner's conclusions, and modern scholars concede that tokens likely played an important role, but probably not in the linear way Schmandt-Besserat proposed. Uncertainty about the origin of writing in Sumer still abounds, and the scholarly debate continues.

- Why do you think Schmandt-Besserat's argument was once so appealing?
- If you lived in a society with no writing, what might prompt you to develop a way to represent your language in symbolic form?

Cuneiform was a very complex writing system, and literacy remained the monopoly of an elite group of highly trained writing specialists, the scribes. But the script was also highly flexible and could be used to symbolize a great number of sounds, allowing subsequent Mesopotamian cultures such as the Akkadians, Babylonians, and many more to adapt it to their own languages. Since historians deciphered cuneiform in the nineteenth century, they have read the thousands of clay tablets that survived over the centuries and learned much about the history, society, economy, and beliefs of the ancient Sumerians and other peoples of Mesopotamia.

The Sumerians were **polytheists**, people who revered many gods. Each Sumerian city had its own patron god, however, one with whom the city felt a special connection and whom it honored above the others. For example, the patron god of Uruk was Inanna, the goddess of fertility; the city of Nippur revered the weather god Enlil; and Ur claimed the moon god Sin. Each city possessed an immense temple complex for its special deity, which included a site where the deity was worshipped and religious rituals were performed. This site, the **ziggurat**, was a stepped tower built of mud-brick with a flat top ([Figure 3.11](#)). At its summit stood a roofed structure that

housed the sacred idol or image of the temple's deity. The temple complex also included the homes of the priests, workshops for artisans who made goods for the temple, and storage facilities to meet the needs of the temple workers.



**FIGURE 3.11** The Ziggurat of Ur. The partially reconstructed remains of the once-great ziggurat of Ur (near the modern city of Nasiriyah in Iraq) demonstrate the size of these huge temples and the enormous human resources spent on their construction. When it was completed in the twenty-first century BCE, this structure had additional tiers upon the large base shown and was about one hundred feet high. (credit: "Ziggurat of Ur" by "Tla2006"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Sumerians were clearly eager to please their gods by placing them at the center of their society. These gods could be fickle, faithless, and easily stirred to anger. If displeased with the people, they might bring famine or conquest. Making sure the gods were praised and honored was thus a way of ensuring prosperity. Praising them, however, implied different things for different social tiers in Sumer. For common people, it meant living a virtuous life and giving to the poor. For priests and priestesses, it consisted of performing the various rituals at the temple complexes. And for rulers honoring the gods, it meant ensuring that the temples were properly funded, maintained, and regularly beautified and enlarged if possible.

By the Early Dynastic Period (c. 2650 BCE–2400 BCE), powerful dynasties of kings called *lugals* had established themselves as rulers of the cities. In each city, the *lugals* rose to power primarily as warlords, since the Sumerian cities often waged war against each other for control of farmland and access to water as well as other natural resources. *Lugals* legitimized their authority through the control of the religious institutions of the city. For example, at Ur, the daughter of the reigning *lugal* always served as the high priestess of the moon god Sin, the chief deity at Ur.

The *lugals* at Ur during this period, the so-called First Dynasty of Ur, were especially wealthy, as reflected in the magnificent beehive-shaped tombs in which they were buried. In these tombs, precious goods such as jewelry and musical instruments were stored, along with the bodies of servants who were killed and placed in the tomb to accompany the rulers to the Land of the Dead. One of the more spectacular tombs belonged to a woman of Ur called Pu-Abi, who was buried wearing an elaborate headdress and might have been a queen (Figure 3.12). The most famous *lugal* in all Sumer in this early period was Gilgamesh of Uruk, whose legendary exploits were recounted later in fantastical form in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.



**FIGURE 3.12 Sumerian Gold Headdress.** The striking beauty and quality of this gold and lapis lazuli headdress from circa 2600 BCE have convinced some that the woman wearing it in the Ur tomb where it was found might have been a queen. Others believe she was simply an attendant, though an elaborately dressed one. (credit: modification of work "Headdress" by Dodge Fund, 1933/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the world's earliest examples of epic literature. To understand this ancient tale, first written down in the form we know today around 2100 BCE, read the [overview of the \*Epic of Gilgamesh\*](https://openstax.org/l/77gilgamesh) (<https://openstax.org/l/77gilgamesh>) provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has a notable collection of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts.

### **The Rise of the World's First Empire**

Around 2300 BCE, the era of the independent Sumerian **city-state**, a political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls, came to an end. Sumer and indeed all of Mesopotamia was conquered by Sargon of Akkad, who created the first-known empire, in this case, a number of regional powers under the control of one person. The word “Akkad” in his name was a reference to the Akkadians, a group that settled in central Mesopotamia, north of Sumer, around the ancient city of Kish. Over time, the Akkadians adopted Sumerian culture and adapted cuneiform to their own language, a language of the Semitic family that includes the Arabic and Hebrew spoken today. They also identified their own gods with the gods of the Sumerians and adopted Sumerian myths. For example, the Akkadians identified the fertility goddess Inanna with their own goddess Ishtar.

Sargon conquered not only Sumer but also what is today northern Iraq, Syria, and southwestern Iran. While the precise details of his origin and rise to power are not known, scholars believe the story Sargon told about himself, at least, has likely been accurately preserved in the *Legend of Sargon*, written two centuries after his death as a purported autobiography. It is a familiar story of a scrappy young hero born in humble circumstances and rising on his own merits to become a great leader. The *Legend* relates how, when Sargon was a baby, his unwed mother put him in a basket and cast it on the Euphrates River. A farmer found and raised him, and Ishtar loved Sargon and elevated him from a commoner to a great king and conqueror.

This interesting tale would have certainly been a powerful piece of propaganda justifying Sargon's rule and endearing him to the common people, and some of it may even be true. But from what historians can tell, Sargon's rise to power likely occurred during a period of turmoil as his kingdom of Kish, of which he had likely seized control, came under attack by another king named Lugalzagesi. Sargon's eventual defeat of Lugalzagesi

and conquest of all of Sumer proved to be the beginning of a larger conquest of Mesopotamia. The Akkadian Empire that Sargon created lasted for about a century and a half, officially coming to an end in the year 2193 BCE (Figure 3.13).



**FIGURE 3.13 The World's First Empire.** The Akkadian Empire reached its greatest geographic extent under its first emperor, Sargon of Akkad. At Sargon's death in 2279 BCE, it included all of Mesopotamia, and his armies were marching into Syria and Anatolia. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

One of the rivals of the Akkadian Empire was the city-state of Ebla, located in northwestern Syria. At some point, its people had adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their own language, which, like Akkadian, belonged to the Semitic family of languages, and archaeologists have discovered thousands of cuneiform tablets at the site. These tablets reveal that Ebla especially worshipped the storm god Adad, who was honored with the title “Ba’al” or lord. More than one thousand years later in the Iron Age, people in this region still worshipped Baal, who was the main rival of Yahweh for the affections of the ancient Israelites.

Other rivals of the Akkadians were the Elamites, who inhabited the region to the immediate southeast of Mesopotamia in southwest Iran and whose city of Susa arose around 4000 BCE. The art and architecture of the Elamites suggest a strong Sumerian influence. They developed their own writing system around 3000 BCE, even though they adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their language later in the third millennium BCE. The Elamites also worshipped their own distinct deities, such as Insushinak, the Lord of the Dead. Both Elam and Ebla eventually suffered defeat at the hands of the Akkadians.

In the year 2193 BCE, however, the Akkadian Empire collapsed. The precise reason is not entirely clear. However, some ancient accounts point to the incursions of the nomadic Gutis, whose original homes were located in the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran, northwest of Mesopotamia. These Gutis were originally **pastoralists**, who lived off their herds of livestock and moved from place to place to find pasture for their

animals. While the Gutis certainly did move into the Akkadian Empire toward its end, modern scholarship suggests that the empire was likely experiencing internal decline and famine before this. The Gutis appear to have exploited this weakness rather than triggering it. Regardless, for around a century, the Gutis ruled over Sumer and adopted its culture as their own. Around 2120 BCE, however, the Sumerians came together under the leadership of the cities of Uruk and Ur and expelled the Gutis from their homeland.

### **Later Empires in Mesopotamia**

While Sargon's empire lasted only a few generations, his conquests dramatically transformed politics in Mesopotamia. The era of independent city-states waned, and over the next few centuries, a string of powerful Mesopotamian rulers were able to build their own empires, often using the administrative techniques developed by Sargon as a model. For example, beginning about 2112 BCE, all Sumer was again united under the Third Dynasty of Ur as the Gutis were driven out. The rulers of this dynasty held the title of *lugal* of all Sumer and Akkad, and they were also honored as gods. They built temples in the Sumerian city of Nippur, which was sacred to the storm god Enlil, the ruler of the gods in the Sumerian pantheon. The most famous *lugal* of this dynasty was Ur-Nammu (c. 2150 BCE), renowned for his works of poetry as well as for the law code he published.

At its height, the Third Dynasty extended its control over both southern and northern Mesopotamia. But by the end of the third millennium, change was on the horizon. Foreign invaders from the north, east, and west put tremendous pressure on the empire, and its rulers increased their military preparedness and even constructed a 170-mile fortification wall to keep them out. While these strategies were somewhat effective, they appear to have only postponed the inevitable as Amorites, Elamites, and other groups eventually poured in and raided cities across the land. By about 2004 BCE, Sumer had crumbled, and even Ur was violently sacked by the invaders.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

The sack of Ur by the Elamites and others was the inspiration for a lament or song of mourning that became a classic of Sumerian literature. Read [\*The Lament for Urim\*](https://openstax.org/l/77lamentur) (<https://openstax.org/l/77lamentur>) and pay attention to the way the writer attributes the destruction to the caprice of the gods; the actual invaders are merely tools. For descriptions of the destruction itself, focus on lines 161–229.

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In the centuries after 2004 BCE, the migration of Amorites into Mesopotamia resulted in the gradual disappearance of Sumerian as a spoken language. People in the region came to speak Amorite, which belonged to the family of Semitic languages. Nonetheless, scribes continued to preserve and write works in Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform. Sumerian and Akkadian became the languages of religious rituals, hymns, and prayers, as well as classic literary works such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Consequently, the literary output of these earlier cultures was preserved and transmitted to the new settlers. When nomadic Amorite tribes settled in Mesopotamia, they eventually established new cities such as Mari, Asshur, and Babylon, and they adopted much of the culture they encountered. The ancient Sumerian cities of Larsa and Isin of this era also preserved these cultural traditions, even as they came under the rule of Amorite kings.

Hammurabi, the energetic ruler of Babylon during the first half of the eighteenth century BCE, defeated the kings of the rival cities of Mari and Larsa and created an empire that encompassed nearly all of Mesopotamia. To unify this new empire, Hammurabi initiated the construction of irrigation projects, built new temples at Nippur, and published his legal edicts throughout his realm. Hammurabi had these edicts inscribed on stone pillars erected in different places in the empire to inform his subjects about proper behavior and the laws of the land. Being especially clear, the **Code of Hammurabi** far outlived the king who created it. It also provides us with a fascinating window into how Mesopotamian society functioned at this time.

**IN THEIR OWN WORDS****The Law in Old Babylon**

Remarkable for its clarity, the Code of Hammurabi may have introduced concepts like the presumption of innocence and the use of evidence. It informed legal systems in Mesopotamia for many centuries after Hammurabi's death ([Figure 3.14](#)).



**FIGURE 3.14** The Code of Hammurabi. This stele found in Susa (modern Iran) is the most complete example of Hammurabi's code. An engraving of Hammurabi standing before the sun-god Shamash tops the column, with a statement that the code is to "bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; [and] to further the well-being of mankind." (credit: "Stele of Hammurabi" by "Rlunaro"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Code of Hammurabi promoted the principle that punishment should fit the crime, but penalties often depended on social class:

199. If [a man] put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.
202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

Many edicts concern marriage, adultery, children, and marriage property.

129. If a man's wife be surprised with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.

150. If a man give his wife a field, garden, and house and a deed therefor, if then after the death of her husband the sons raise no claim, then the mother may bequeath all to one of her sons whom she prefers, and need leave nothing to his brothers.

A good number of the code's edicts concern the settling of commercial disputes:

9. If anyone lose an article, and find it in the possession of another [who says] "A merchant sold it to me, I paid for it before witnesses," . . . The judge shall examine their testimony—both of the witnesses before whom the price was paid, and of the witnesses who identify the lost article on oath. The merchant is then proved to be a thief and shall be put to death. The owner of the lost article receives his property, and he who bought it receives the money he paid from the estate of the merchant.

48. If anyone owe a debt for a loan, and a storm prostrates the grain, or the harvest fail, or the grain does not grow for lack of water; in that year he need not give his creditor any grain, he washes his debt-tablet in water and pays no rent for this year.

—"Hammurabi's Code of Laws," c. 1780 BCE, translated by L.W. King

- What do these edicts suggest about the different social tiers in Babylonian society? How were they organized?
- Was marriage similar to or different from marriage today?
- Do the edicts for resolving economic disputes seem fair to you? Why or why not?

While Hammurabi's empire lasted a century and a half, much of the territory he conquered began falling away from Babylon's control shortly after he died. The empire continued to dwindle in size until 1595 BCE, when an army of Hittites from central Anatolia in the north (modern Turkey) sacked the city of Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Kassites from the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran conquered Babylon and southern Mesopotamia and settled there, unlike the Hittites who had returned to their Anatolian home. The Kassites established a dynasty that ruled over Babylon for nearly five hundred years, to the very end of the Bronze Age. Like the Guti and the Amorites before them, over time, the Kassite rulers adopted the culture of their Mesopotamian subjects.

### Society and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia

Thanks to the preservation of cuneiform clay tablets and the discovery and translation of law codes and works of literature, historians have at their disposal a wealth of information about Mesopotamian society. The study of these documents and the archaeological excavations carried out in Mesopotamia have allowed them to reconstruct the empire's economy.

We know now that temples and royal palaces were not merely princely residences and places for religious rituals; they also functioned as economic redistribution centers. For example, agricultural goods were collected from farmers as taxes by civic and religious officials, who then stored them to provide payments to the artisans and merchants they employed. Palaces and temples thus needed to possess massive storage facilities. Scribes kept records in cuneiform of all the goods collected and distributed by these institutions. City gates served as areas where farmers, artisans, and merchants could congregate and exchange goods. Precious metals such as gold often served as a medium of exchange, but these goods had to be weighed and measured during commercial exchanges, since coinage and money as we understand it today did not emerge until the Iron Age, a millennium later.

Society in southern Mesopotamia was highly urban. About 70 to 80 percent of the population lived in cities, but not all were employed as artisans, merchants, or other traditional urban roles. Rather, agriculture and animal husbandry accounted for a majority of a city's economic production. Much of the land was controlled by the temples, kings, or other powerful landowners and was worked by semi-free peasants who were tied to the land. The rest of the land included numerous small plots worked by the free peasants who made up about half the population. A much smaller portion was made up of enslaved people, typically prisoners of war or persons who had committed crimes or gone into debt. A man could sell his own children into slavery to cover a debt.

Much of the hard labor performed in the fields was done by men and boys, while the wives, mothers, and daughters of merchants and artisans were sometimes fully engaged in running family businesses. Cuneiform tablets tell us that women oversaw the business affairs of their families, especially when husbands were merchants who often traveled far from home. For example, cuneiform tablets from circa 1900 BCE show that merchants from Ashur in northern Mesopotamia conducted trade with central Anatolia and wrote letters to their female family members back home. Women were also engaged in the production of textiles like wool and linen. They not only produced these textiles in workshops with their own hands, but some appear to have held managerial positions within the textile industry.

Free peasant farmers, artisans, and merchants were all commoners. This put them in a higher social position than the semi-free peasants and slaves but lower than the elite nobility, who made up a very small percentage of the population and whose ranks included priests, official scribes, and military leaders. This aristocratic elite often received land in payment for their services to the kings and collected rents in kind from their peasant tenants. Social distinctions were also reflected in the law. For example, aspects of Hammurabi's law code called for punishments for causing physical harm to another to be equal to the harm inflicted. This principle is best summarized in the line "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." However, the principle applied only to victims and perpetrators of the same social class. An aristocrat convicted of the murder of a fellow noble paid with their life, while an aristocrat who harmed or murdered a commoner might be required only to pay a fine.

Men and women were not equal under the Code of Hammurabi. A man was free to have multiple wives and divorce a wife at will, whereas a woman could divorce her husband only if she could prove he had been unkind to her without reason. However, a woman from a family of means could protect her position in a marriage if her family put up a dowry, which could be land or goods. Upon marriage, the husband obtained the dowry, but if he divorced or was unkind to his wife, he had to return it to her and her family.

Cuneiform tablets have also allowed historians to read stories about the gods and heroes of Mesopotamian cultures. Mesopotamians revered many different gods associated with forces of nature. These were anthropomorphic deities who not only had divine powers but also frequently acted on very human impulses like anger, fear, annoyance, and lust. Examples include Utu, the god of the sun ([Figure 3.15](#)); Inanna (known to the Akkadians as Ishtar), the goddess of fertility; and Enlil (whose equivalent in other Mesopotamian cultures was Marduk), the god of wind and rain. The ancient Mesopotamians held that the gods were visible in the sky as heavenly bodies like stars, the moon, the sun, and the planets. This belief led them to pay close attention to these bodies, and over time, they developed a sophisticated understanding of their movement. This knowledge allowed them to predict astronomical events like eclipses and informed their development of a twelve-month calendar.



**FIGURE 3.15 The God Utu.** This limestone relief of the Mesopotamian god Utu (known as Shamash among the Akkadians) is part of the larger Tablet of Shamash created in the early ninth century BCE. Here Utu is shown seated, holding the rod-and-ring, an ancient symbol reflecting the balance of power between the palace and the temple. (credit: "Tablet of Shamash" by "Katolophyromai"/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0)

People in Mesopotamia believed human beings were created to serve the gods ([Figure 3.16](#)). They were expected to supply the gods with food through the sacrifice of sheep and cattle in religious rituals, and to honor them with temples, religious songs or hymns, and expensive gifts. People sought divine support from their gods. But they also feared that their worship might be insufficient and anger the deity. When that happened, the gods could bring death and devastation through floods and pestilence. Stories of gods wreaking great destruction, sometimes for petty reasons, are common in Mesopotamian myths. For example, in one Sumerian myth, the storm god Enlil nearly destroyed the entire human race with a flood when the noise made by humans annoyed him and kept him from sleep.



**FIGURE 3.16 A Sumerian Worshiper.** This one-foot-tall Sumerian statue of a worshiper with clasped hands from circa 2900–2600 BCE was placed in a temple to perpetually worship the god to whom it was dedicated. (credit: "Standing male worshiper" by Fletcher Fund, 1940/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The ancient Mesopotamians' belief that the gods were fickle, destructive, and easily stirred to anger is one reason many historians believe they had a generally pessimistic worldview. From the literature they left behind, we can see that while they hoped for the best, they were often resigned to accept the worst. Given the environment in which Mesopotamian civilization emerged, this pessimism is somewhat understandable. River flooding was common and could often be unpredictable and destructive. Wars between city-states and the destruction that comes with conflict were also common. Life was difficult in this unforgiving world, and the profiles of the various gods of the Mesopotamians reflect this harsh reality.

Evidence of Mesopotamians' pessimism is also present in their view of the afterlife. In their religion, after death all people spent eternity in a shadowy underworld sometimes called "the land of no return."

Descriptions of this place differ somewhat in the details, but the common understanding was that it was a gloomy and frightening place where the dead were consumed by sorrow, eating dust and clay and longing pitifully and futilely to return to the land of the living.

### 3.3 Ancient Egypt

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the unification of Ancient Egypt and the development of a distinct culture there
- Analyze the accomplishments of the pharaohs under the Old Kingdom
- Describe the changes in government and society in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom

The rich agricultural valleys historians refer to as the "Fertile Crescent," due to the shape of this region on the map, witnessed the development of an early civilization as long ago as the fourth millennium BCE. Adjacent to this region was another fertile river valley formed by the Nile in northeast Africa. Here arose another civilization that was quite unique. Unlike the city-states of Sumer, which were not organized into an empire

until the time of Sargon of Akkad, the peoples of the Nile River valley were brought together under a single ruler around 3150 BCE. Although brief intervals of disunity occurred, Egypt remained a united and powerful kingdom, the great superpower of the ancient Near East, until the end of the Bronze Age in about 1100 BCE.

### The Origins of Ancient Egypt

Aside from the Nile, Egypt and the areas around it are today part of the expansive and very arid Sahara. But around 10,000 BCE, as the Neolithic Revolution was getting underway in parts of southwestern Asia, much of North Africa including Egypt was lush, wet, and dotted with lakes. The region was highly hospitable to the many Paleolithic peoples living there and surviving on its abundant resources.

However, beginning around 6000 BCE the grasslands and lakes began to give way to sand as the once green environment was transformed into the Sahara we recognize today. As the environment became more difficult for humans to survive in, they retreated to oases and rivers on the fringes. One of these areas was the Nile River valley, a long thin area of fertility running through the deserts of eastern North Africa and made possible by the regular flooding of the Nile. The Nile is the longest river in Africa, and the second-longest in the world after the Amazon. It originates deep in central Africa and flows thousands of miles north through Egypt before it spills into the Mediterranean Sea.

It was around this same time, about 7000 to 6000 BCE, that agricultural technology and knowledge about the domestication of wheat, barley, sheep, goats, and cattle were introduced into the Nile River valley, likely through contact with the Levant. The earliest evidence for the emergence of Egyptian culture dates from this era as well. Two related but different Neolithic cultures arose: one in the Nile delta, where the river runs into the Mediterranean, and the other upriver and to the south of this location. The people of these cultures lived in crude huts, survived on fishing and agriculture, developed distinctive pottery styles, and even practiced burial rituals. Over thousands of years, they developed into two separate kingdoms, Lower Egypt or the delta region, and Upper Egypt or the area upriver ([Figure 3.17](#)).



**FIGURE 3.17** The Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt. The fertile Nile River valley became home to two different but related early Egyptian cultures, the Lower Kingdom in the north and the Upper Kingdom in the south.  
(attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

A major political and cultural shift occurred in about 3150 BCE when Upper and Lower Egypt were unified into a single powerful kingdom. Some evidence suggests this achievement belongs to a king named Narmer. More recent records attribute it to a king called Menes, but many scholars now believe Menes and Narmer are one and the same ([Figure 3.18](#)).



**FIGURE 3.18** The Narmer Palette. Often called the Narmer palette, this two-foot-high siltstone Egyptian artifact appears to depict Egypt's unification, which would place it from around 3150–3000 BCE. The large figure on one side (left image) is believed to be King Narmer wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and striking a prisoner, and the tall, left-most figure in the upper row on the other side (right image) is likely Narmer wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt in a procession. Two mythical creatures stand below, their necks artfully entwined. (credit: "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Unification gave rise to what scholars refer to as the Early Dynasty Period (about 3150 to 2613 BCE), or the era of the earliest dynasties to rule a unified Egypt. The powerful kings of these dynasties established a bureaucratic system, possibly influenced by the palace/temple redistributive economic system in place in ancient Sumer. But unlike Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt in the Bronze Age was now a single state instead of a number of warring rivals. Also unlike Mesopotamia, which was subject to periodic invasion, Egypt was protected by its geography. On both east and west, the Nile River valley was surrounded by large deserts that were difficult to cross and that made the kingdom into a kind of island in a hot, dry sea. During this time, many of the best-known cultural characteristics of ancient Egypt emerged in their earliest forms. They include the institution of the pharaoh, distinctive religious practices, and the Egyptian writing system.

### The Pharaoh

The king of the united Egypt, the pharaoh, governed a kingdom much larger than any contemporary realm. Historians estimate that the population of the Egyptian state, when first united in about 3150 BCE, numbered as many as two million people, whereas a typical Sumerian *lugal* ruled about thirty thousand subjects. The temple/palace system in Egypt therefore operated on a much vaster scale than anywhere in Mesopotamia.

The term **pharaoh** in ancient Egyptian is translated as “big house,” likely a reference to the size of the palaces along the Nile valley where the pharaoh resided and administered the lands. As in ancient Mesopotamia, the palace included large facilities for storing taxes in kind, as well as workshops for artisans who produced goods for the palace. Also, as in Mesopotamia, a large portion of the population were peasant farmers. They paid taxes in kind to support the artisans and others working in the pharaoh’s palaces and temples and living nearby, inside the city. The ruling elite included scribes, priests, and the pharaoh’s officials.

The pharaoh was not merely a political figure but also served as the high priest and was revered as a god. In the role of high priest, the pharaoh united the lands by performing religious rituals to honor the different gods worshipped up and down the Nile River valley. As a deity, the pharaoh was the human form or incarnation of Horus, the god of justice and truth. Egyptians believed the divine presence of the pharaoh as Horus

maintained justice throughout the land, which, in turn, maintained peace and prosperity, as evidenced by the welcome annual flooding of the Nile.

### Egyptian Religion

Like the people of Mesopotamia, Ancient Egyptians were polytheists and worshipped many deities who controlled the forces of nature. For example, Re was the god of the sun, and Isis was the earth goddess of fertility. Osiris was associated with the Nile. The annual flooding of the river, the central event of the Egyptian year, was explained through the myth of Osiris, who was murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the desert wind, but then resurrected by his devoted wife Isis. The Nile (Osiris) was at its lowest in the summer when the hot desert wind was blowing (Seth), but then it was “resurrected” when it flooded its banks and brought life-giving water to the earth (Isis). Horus (the pharaoh) was the child of Isis and Osiris. Since Osiris was a god who had died, he was also the lord of the underworld and the judge of the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed Osiris would reward people who had lived a righteous life with a blessed afterlife in the underworld, whereas he would punish wicked evildoers.

As these gods and myths indicate, the Nile played an important role in the development of Egyptian religion. Whereas the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Mesopotamia commonly brought destruction along with fresh alluvial deposits, the Nile’s summer flooding, predictable as clockwork, brought only welcome deposits of rich sediment. It provided Egyptians with a sense that the world was harmonious and organized around cycles. In later centuries, this notion developed into the concept of Ma’at (also personified as a goddess), which combined the ideas of order, truth, justice, and balance. In contrast to the apparently pessimistic people in Mesopotamia, Egyptians drew from their environment a feeling that their world was orderly, balanced, and geared toward a sense of cosmic justice. It was an Egyptian’s responsibility to live in harmony with this order.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Flooding, Stories, and Cosmology in Ancient Egypt and Sumer

Ancient Egypt (the first excerpt that follows) and Ancient Sumer (the second) both depended on life-giving rivers, but their reactions to periodic flooding were quite different. Note the way each discusses the flooding, those responsible, and the reasons for it.

Hymn to the flood. Hail flood!  
 emerging from the earth, arriving to bring Egypt to life,  
 hidden of form, the darkness in the day,  
 the one whose followers sing to him, as he waters the plants,  
 created by Re to make every herd live,  
 who satisfies the desert hills removed from the water,  
 for it is his due that descends from the sky  
 —he, the beloved of Geb, controller of Nepri,  
 the one who makes the crafts of Ptah verdant.  
 Lord of fish, who allows south marsh fowl,  
 without a bird falling from heat.  
 Maker of barley, grower of emmer grain,  
 creator of festivals of the temples.  
 When he delays, then noses are blocked,  
 everyone is orphaned,  
 and if the offerings of the gods are distributed,  
 then a million men perish among mankind. . . .  
 Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.

Verdant the spirit at your coming.  
 Come to Egypt,  
 make its happiness.  
 Make the Two Riverbanks verdant, . . .  
 Men and herds are brought to life by your deliveries of the fields, . . .  
 Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.

—Author unknown, *Hymn to the Nile*, 2000–1700 BCE

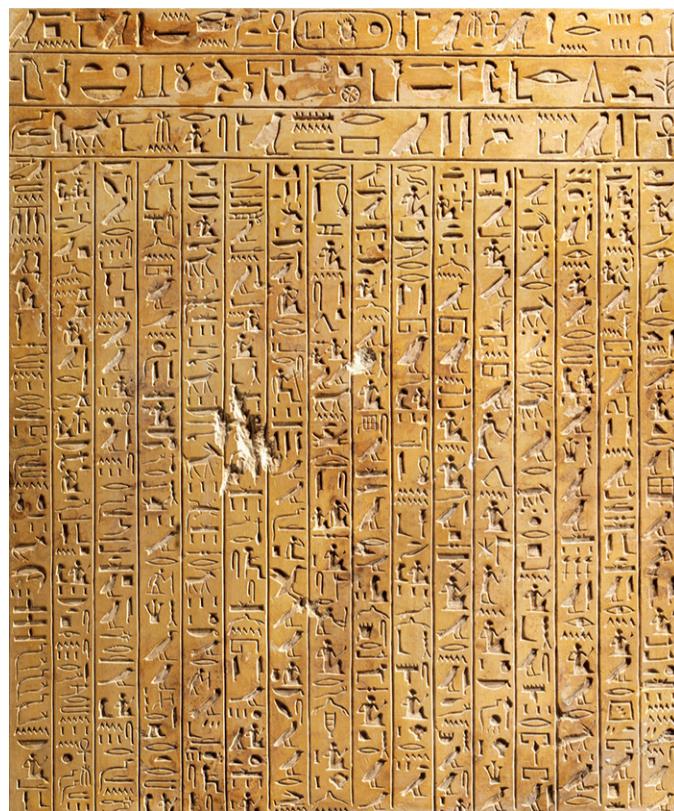
I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, the mysterious story,  
 And one of the mysteries of the gods I will tell you.  
 The city of Shurippak, a city which, as you know,  
 Is situated on the bank of the river Euphrates. The gods within it  
 Decided to bring about a flood, even the great gods,  
 As many as there were. . . .  
 I saw the approach of the storm,  
 And I was afraid to witness the storm;  
 I entered the ship and shut the door.  
 I entrusted the guidance of the ship to the boat-man,  
 Entrusted the great house, and the contents therein.  
 As soon as early dawn appeared,  
 There rose up from the horizon a black cloud,  
 Within which the weather god thundered,  
 And the king of the gods went before it. . . .  
 The storm brought on by the gods swept even up to the heavens,  
 And all light was turned into darkness. It flooded the land; it blew with violence;  
 And in one day it rose above the mountains.  
 Like an onslaught in battle it rushed in on the people.  
 Brother could not save brother.  
 The gods even were afraid of the storm;  
 They retreated and took refuge in the heaven of Anu.  
 There the gods crouched down like dogs, in heaven they sat cowering.

—Author unknown, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by R. Campbell Thompson and William Muse Arnold and compiled by Laura Getty

- What do these excerpts reveal about each people's view of their world and the supernatural?
- What do they suggest about each culture's relationship to its river(s)?

### **Egyptian Writing**

Egyptians developed their own unique writing system, known today by the Greek word **hieroglyphics** (meaning “sacred writings”), though the Egyptians called it *medu-netjer* (“the god’s words”). The roots of hieroglyphic writing can be traced to the time before the Early Dynastic Period when the first written symbols emerged. But by at least 3000 BCE, the use of these symbols had developed into a sophisticated script. It used a combination of alphabetic signs, syllabic signs, word signs, and pictures of objects. In this complicated system, then known only to highly trained professional scribes, written symbols represented both sounds and ideas ([Figure 3.19](#)). The Egyptians also developed a simplified version of this hieroglyphic script known as **hieratic**, which they often employed for more mundane purposes such as recordkeeping and issuing receipts in commercial transactions.



**FIGURE 3.19** Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics in this Egyptian stele from circa 1944 BCE are far more stylized than the Egyptian writing produced a thousand years earlier. It took many centuries for the Egyptian script to evolve into the style of writing seen here. (credit: modification of work "Stela of the Steward Mentuwoser" by Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1912/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Egyptian scribes recorded their ideas in stone inscriptions on the walls of temples and painted them on the walls of tombs, but they also used the fibers from a reed plant growing along the banks of the Nile to produce **papyrus**, a writing material like paper that could be rolled into scrolls and stored as records. Some of these papyrus rolls have survived for thousands of years because of the way the dry heat preserved them, and they proved very useful for modern historians and archaeologists after hieroglyphics were deciphered in the nineteenth century. They preserved Egyptian myths and poetry, popular stories, and lists of pharaohs, along with records of the daily life of ancient Egyptians.

### The Age of Pyramid Building

By the 2600s BCE, the power of the pharaohs and the sophistication of the state in Egypt were such that the building of large-scale stone architecture became possible. Historians in the nineteenth century believed the significance of these developments was so great that it required a different name for the period. Today we call it the Old Kingdom (2613–2181 BCE), and it is best known for the massive stone pyramids that continue to awe visitors to Egypt today, many thousands of years after they were built ([Table 3.1](#)).

6000–3150 BCE	Pre-Dynastic Egypt
3150–2613 BCE	Early Dynastic Egypt
2613–2181 BCE	Old Kingdom Period
2181–2040 BCE	First Intermediate Period
2040–1782 BCE	Middle Kingdom Period
1782–1570 BCE	Second Intermediate Period
1570–1069 BCE	New Kingdom Period
1069–525 BCE	Third Intermediate Period

**TABLE 3.1** The Ages of Egypt. These names for the different eras of ancient Egypt's history were developed by scholars in the nineteenth century. "Kingdom" describes a period of high centralized state organization. "Intermediate" describes a time of weak centralized state organization. While flawed in some ways, the labels continue to influence the way we understand the expansive chronology of ancient Egyptian history.  
(source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/egypt/>)

The pyramids were tombs for the pharaohs of Egypt, places where their bodies were stored and preserved after death. The preservation of the body was important and was directly related to Egyptian religious beliefs that a person was composed of a number of different elements. These included the *Ka*, *Ba*, *Ahk*, and others. A person's *Ka* was their spiritual double. After the physical body died, the *Ka* remained but had to stay in the tomb with the body and be nourished with offerings. The *Ba* was also a type of spiritual essence, but it separated from the body after death, going out in the world during the day and returning to the body each night. The duty of the *Ahk*, yet another type of spirit, was to travel to the underworld and the afterlife. The belief in concepts like the *Ka* and *Ba* was what made the practice of mummification and the creation of tombs important in Egyptian religion. Both elements needed the physical body to survive.

Before the pyramids, tombs and other architectural features were built of mud-brick and called *mastabas*. But during the Early Dynastic reign of the pharaoh Djoser, just before the start of the Old Kingdom, a brilliant architect named Imhotep decided to build a marvelous stone tomb for his king. Originally, it was intended to be merely a stone mastaba. However, Imhotep went beyond this plan and constructed additional smaller stone mastabas, one on top of the other. The result was a mult-tiered step pyramid ([Figure 3.20](#)). Surrounding it, Imhotep built a large complex that included temples.



**FIGURE 3.20** The Pyramid of Djoser. The Pyramid of Djoser, sometimes called the step pyramid, is composed of six stone *mastabas* set atop each other, each slightly smaller than the one below. Built by the architect Imhotep during the reign of Pharaoh Djoser, it is the earliest large stone building in Egypt. (credit: "Pyramid of Djoser (Step Pyramid)" by Jorge Láscar/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The step pyramid of Djoser was revolutionary, but the more familiar smooth-sided style appeared a few decades later in the reign of Snefru, when three pyramids were constructed. The most impressive has become known as the Red Pyramid, because of the reddish limestone revealed after the original white limestone surface fell away over the centuries. It had smooth sides and rose to a height of 344 feet over the surrounding landscape. Still an impressive sight, it pales in comparison to the famed Great Pyramid built by Snefru's son Khufu at Giza near Cairo (Figure 3.21). The Great Pyramid at Giza was 756 feet long on each side and originally 481 feet high. Its base covers four city blocks and contains 2.3 million stone blocks, each weighing about 2.5 tons. Even more than the Pyramid of Djoser, the Great Pyramid is a testament to the organization and power of the Egyptian state.



**FIGURE 3.21** The Great Pyramid at Giza. The Giza pyramid complex, located just outside modern Cairo, includes three large pyramids and many other monuments and minor pyramids. From left to right, the large pyramids shown

here are the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre, and the Pyramid of Menkaure, all built between 2600 and 2500 BCE. (credit: "The Giza-pyramids and Giza Necropolis, Egypt" by "Robster1983"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Later pharaohs of the Old Kingdom built two additional but slightly smaller pyramids at the same location. All align with the position of the Dog Star Sirius in the summer months, when the Nile floods each year. Each was also linked to a temple along the Nile dedicated to the relevant pharaoh.

Egyptian rulers invested heavily in time and resources to construct these tombs. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus recorded that the pyramid of Khufu took 100,000 workers twenty years to construct. Herodotus lived two thousand years after this pyramid was built, however, so we might easily dismiss his report as exaggeration. Modern archaeologists suspect that a much smaller but still substantial workforce of around twenty thousand was likely employed. Excavations at the site reveal that these workers lived in cities built nearby that housed them as well as many others dedicated to feeding and caring for them. The workers were not enslaved, as is commonly assumed. Indeed, they likely enjoyed a higher standard of living than many other Egyptians at the time.

As the pyramid and temple complexes became larger and more numerous during the Old Kingdom, so too did the number of priests and administrators in charge of managing them. This required that ever-increasing amounts of wealth be redirected toward these individuals from the central state. Over time, the management of the large Egyptian state also required more support from the regional governors or **nomarchs** and administrators of other types, which meant the pharaohs had to delegate more authority to them. By around 2200 BCE, priests and regional governors possessed a degree of wealth and power that rivaled and sometimes surpassed that of the nobility. For all these reasons and more, centralized power in Old Kingdom Egypt weakened greatly during this time, and scholars since the nineteenth century have referred to it as the First Intermediate Period.

Scholars once claimed that this was a time of chaos and darkness. As evidence, they noted the decline in the building of large-scale monuments like the giant pyramids as well as a drop in the quality of artwork and historical records during these decades. Modern research, however, has demonstrated that this is a gross simplification. Power wasn't necessarily lost so much as redistributed from central to regional control. From the perspective of the reigning noble families, this may have seemed like chaos and disorder. But it was not necessarily the dark age older generations of historians believed it to be.

### A Second Age of Egyptian Greatness

The First Intermediate Period came to an end around 2040 BCE as a series of powerful rulers, beginning with Mentuhotep II, was able to reestablish centralized control in Egypt. This led to the rise of what we now call the Middle Kingdom Period, which lasted nearly 260 years.

In the year 1991 BCE, Amenemhat, a former vizier (adviser) to the line of kings who established the Middle Kingdom, assumed control and founded a line of pharaohs who ruled Egypt for two centuries. Under the leadership of these pharaohs, Egypt acquired its first standing army, restarted the large-scale building projects known in earlier times, made contacts with surrounding peoples and kingdoms in the Levant and in Kush (modern Sudan), and generally held itself together with a strong centralized power structure.

### LINK TO LEARNING

New Kingdom pharaohs circulated a work of literature that foretold the rise of Amenemhat, who would bring an end to disorder and restore Egypt to prosperity. This ancient work was called the [Prophecy of Neferty](https://openstax.org/l/77prophecy) (<https://openstax.org/l/77prophecy>) and is presented as an English translation by University College London.

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During the Middle Kingdom Period, pharaohs introduced the cult of the deity Amon-Re at Thebes. Amon-Re was a combination of the sun-god Re, the creator god worshipped in the north of Egypt, and Amon, a sky god revered in the south. He was portrayed as the king of the gods and the father of each reigning pharaoh. The

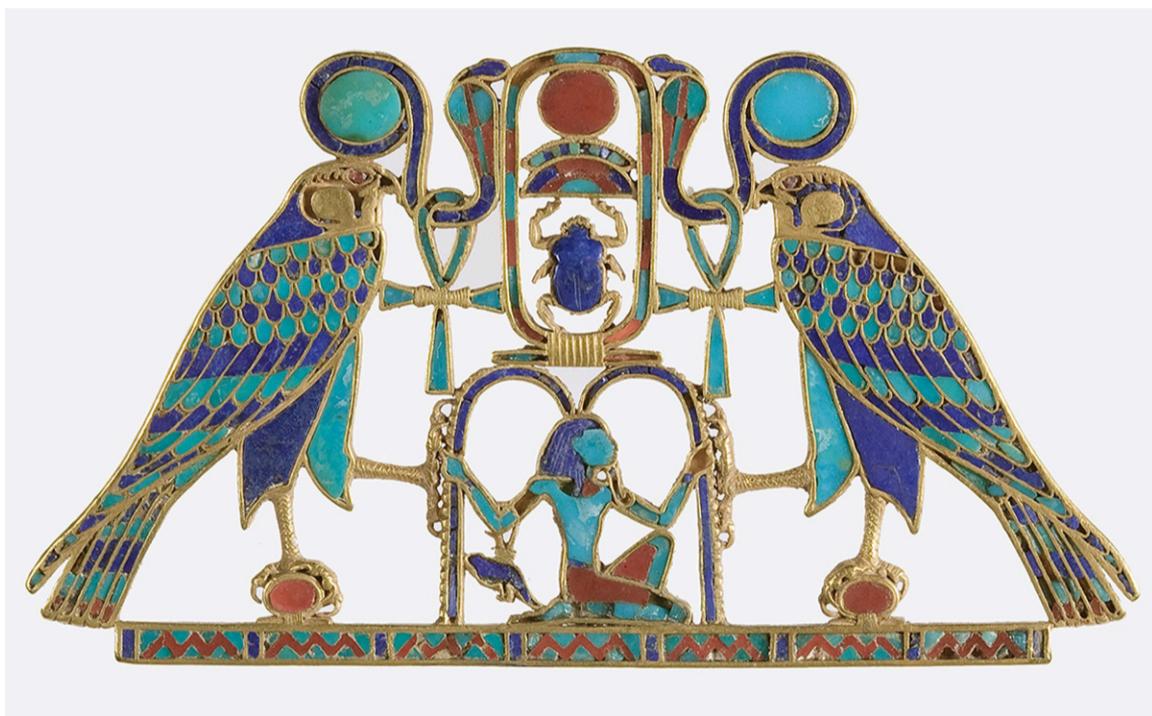
pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom no longer constructed massive pyramids for their tombs. Instead, they focused on erecting massive temples to Amon-Re and his wife, the mother-goddess Mut, at Thebes ([Figure 3.22](#)). The ruins of these temples are located at Karnak in southern Egypt. Amon-Re's temples featured immense halls in which multiple columns or colonnades supported the roof, courtyards, and ceremonial gates. They housed the sacred images of the deities, which on festival days were brought out in ritual processions.



**FIGURE 3.22** Temple of Amon-Re. The temple of Amon-Re, built around 2055 BCE, was plundered in ancient times for its stone. What remains are these ruins. The large ceremonial gates still stand, towering above the visitors who walk beneath them. (credit: modification of work "Karnak Temple Complex at Luxor, Egypt" by Daniel Csörföly/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Middle Kingdom Egypt reached its height in the 1870s and 1860s BCE during the reign of Senusret III, a powerful warrior pharaoh and capable administrator of the centralized state. He greatly expanded Egypt's territorial control, leading armies up the Nile into Kush and into the Levant. These efforts not only strengthened Egypt's ability to protect itself from invasion but also greatly increased the flow of trade from these regions. Kush was known for its rich gold deposits and capable warriors, and Senusret III's several campaigns there brought Egypt access not only to the gold but also to mercenaries from Kush.

Senusret also dramatically increased the degree of centralized power held by the pharaoh, reducing the authority and even the number of the nomarchs. Overall, Egypt now grew wealthier, safer, more centralized, and more powerful than it had ever been. As a result, his reign was also a time of cultural flourishing when Egyptian art, architecture, and literature grew in refinement and sophistication ([Figure 3.23](#)).



**FIGURE 3.23** The Art of the Middle Kingdom. This pectoral, a form of jewelry worn over the chest, is an excellent example of the fine artwork of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom Period. It once belonged to an Egyptian princess called Sithathoryunet and is made of gold and semiprecious stones. (credit: modification of work "Pectoral and Necklace of Sithathoryunet with the Name of Senwosret II" by Purchase, Rogers Fund and Henry Walters Gift, 1916/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The deaths of Senusret III and his son Amenemhat III led indirectly to a rare but not unprecedented transfer of royal power to an Egyptian woman. Possibly Amenemhat IV's wife, sister, or both, Sobekneferu, the daughter of Amenemhat III, was the first woman to rule Egypt since before the Old Kingdom. She reigned for only a few years, and little is known of her accomplishments. But scholars have determined that she was the first pharaoh to associate herself with the Egyptian crocodile god Sobek. She may even have commissioned the construction of the city of Crocodilopolis to honor this important god. Because she died without having had children, she was the last in the long series of pharaohs in the line of Amenemhat I.

Even before the reign of Sobekneferu, Egypt was already experiencing some degree of decline. Over the next century, the pharaohs and their centralized control became steadily weaker. Increasing numbers of Semitic-speaking peoples from the Levant flowed into Egypt, possibly the result of increased trade between Egypt and the Levant at first. But by the late 1700s BCE, these Semitic-speaking groups had grown so numerous in the Nile delta region and centralized control of Egypt had grown so weak that some of their chieftains began to assert control in a few areas. The Egyptians called these Semitic-speaking chieftains *Heqau-khasut* (rulers of foreign lands). Today they are more commonly called Hyksos, a Greek corruption of this Egyptian name.

By the time the Hyksos were asserting their control over parts of the Nile delta, Egypt was already well into what historians of the nineteenth century dubbed the Second Intermediate Period. Like the First Intermediate Period, the second was a time of reduced centralized control. Not only did the Egyptian nobles, ruling from their capital in Thebes, lose control of the delta, they also lost territory upriver to an increasingly powerful kingdom of Kush in the south. This meant that the territory once controlled by the powerful centralized state bureaucracy was effectively split into three regions: one ruled by Hyksos in the north, one by Kushite in the south, and one by the remnants of the Egyptian nobility in the center.

Despite the fragmentation, for most of this period, the three regions of Egypt appear to have maintained peaceful relationships. That changed, however, beginning in the 1550s BCE when a string of Theban Egyptian

rulers was able to go on the offensive against the Hyksos. After the Hyksos were defeated and the Nile delta recaptured, the emboldened Egyptians turned their attention south to Kush, eventually extending their control over these regions as well. These efforts ushered in a new period of Egyptian greatness called the New Kingdom, the highest high-water mark of Egyptian power and cultural influence in the ancient world.

## 3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the growth, development, and decline of the Indus valley culture
- Describe the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa
- Identify key themes in Indus valley religion and culture

More than fifteen hundred miles east of Mesopotamia, in the fertile valley of the Indus River, another early civilization developed in the early third millennium BCE as a peer of ancient Sumer. Early in the second millennium BCE, however, the cities of this Indus valley culture experienced decline. Lacking written records, historians have only cultural artifacts on which to base any speculation about the rise and fall of this spectacular culture, which undoubtedly influenced subsequent civilizations that arose in South Asia.

### The Origins of the Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus River flows from the Himalayan Mountains south into the Indian Ocean, depositing rich alluvial soil from the mountains along its banks. Its valley (in modern Pakistan and India) thus provided a hospitable environment for population growth for the emerging Indus valley civilization (c. 2800 BCE–1800 BCE).

Evidence for the domestication of plants and animals in this region dates to about 7000 BCE, but the process may have begun earlier. It is likely that agriculturalists in the region adopted barley and wheat cultivation techniques from the Near East, where people had been practicing agriculture for thousands of years by this point. However, it is also possible that the people of the Indus valley developed some of these techniques independently. Regardless, by about 5000 BCE, they were clearly in contact with the civilizations in Egypt and Sumer.

The farmers of the Indus valley cultivated wheat and barley as well as raised cattle and sheep, as did the farmers of Mesopotamia and western Asia. They also domesticated and cultivated bananas and cotton for cloth production, which were both unknown in ancient Mesopotamia. Thanks to the Neolithic Revolution, which secured a stable food source and stimulated population growth, people began living in settled communities along the Indus River valley as a new early civilization developed.

Beginning around 2800 BCE, the Indus valley entered a new phase in its development with the growth of a great number of urban centers. The two largest cities emerged at what are now the archaeological sites of Harappa in the northeast and Mohenjo-Daro to the southeast and downriver. Other large urban centers existed at Dholavira, Ganeriwala, and Rakhigarhi, along with many smaller but similarly organized cities scattered across the valley. By the time this civilization reached its height around 2000 BCE, more than one thousand urban centers of varying sizes were spread across the expansive region ([Figure 3.24](#)).



**FIGURE 3.24** The Indus Valley Culture. The Indus valley civilization was spread over a very large area that today includes parts of Pakistan and India. By 2000 BCE it was highly urbanized, with several large cities and as many as a thousand smaller urban areas. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Despite the large size of this civilization, its existence was unknown to modern scholars until the early nineteenth century when British excavations revealed the ancient city of Harappa. Because Harappa was the first major site discovered by archaeologists, the term **Harappan** often appears as a synonym for Indus valley civilization.

The archaeological sites of Harappa in the north and Mohenjo-Daro in the south have received the most study of all the Indus valley cities and remain the best known. At their height, they likely had populations of about thirty thousand people each. The political organization across the Indus valley remains imperfectly understood, but it may have consisted of a collection of independent city-states, such as existed in ancient Sumer. It is equally plausible, however, that the few large cities functioned as regional capitals ruling over the surrounding smaller ones. The fact that the sites all possessed a similar structural organization, with a sophisticated grid of well-laid-out city streets, lends credibility to theories that some form of central authority was operating.

### LINK TO LEARNING

There is much to explore at the sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Take a look at these walkthrough slideshows on [Harappa](https://openstax.org/l/77harappa) (<https://openstax.org/l/77harappa>) and [Mohenjo-Daro](https://openstax.org/l/77mohenjo-daro) (<https://openstax.org/l/77mohenjo-daro>) to better understand how these cities were organized and what they look like today.

All the cities are divided into two sections: a lower city that was largely a residential area, and an upper city or citadel that was walled off from the rest of the settlement (Figure 3.25). This citadel may have served as a monumental ceremonial center for ritual activities and the residence of the ruling elite, like the palaces and temples of Egypt and Mesopotamia. At Harappa, the wall of mud-brick enclosing the citadel was forty-two feet thick at its base and nearly fifty feet high (about as tall as a five-story building today), with rectangular towers at regular intervals. Within the citadels stood platforms built of mud-brick where ritual activities such as

animal sacrifices may have been performed; at Harappa, the platform was twenty-three feet high. At the site of Kalibangan, in northwestern India, archaeologists uncovered a pit on top of the platform containing burned cattle bones.



**FIGURE 3.25 The Citadel Mound at Mohenjo-Daro.** The stupa at Mohenjo-Daro, located in present-day Pakistan, was built circa 2500 BCE. The identification and dating of the stupa in 1923 by Indian archaeologist Rakhal Das Banerji led to the first major excavations at the site in the 1920s and 1930s. (credit: "Stupa at Mohenjo-Daro" by Omair Anwer/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)]

The citadels also included public baths. At Mohenjo-Daro, the tank of the bath was forty feet long and twenty-three feet wide and entered by staircases on either side. A nearby well provided the water. Archaeologists have uncovered a large hall supported by pilasters composed of mud-brick at Mohenjo-Daro, as well as a multistory residence built around an open courtyard. This evidence suggests that ritual specialists, perhaps priests, lived and performed religious functions in the citadels that may have required them to bathe in the large public bath and congregate in the hall. An extensive granary for grain storage was found at Mohenjo-Daro. Farmers from outlying rural areas undoubtedly produced the surplus crops that were stored here to provide sustenance for the elite, religious specialists, and other city residents such as merchants and artisans, just as in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The lower sections of the Indus valley cities consisted of residential quarters and workshops. At Mohenjo-Daro and Kalibangan, the houses typically consisted of four to six rooms built around a central courtyard and were equipped with wells to provide running water to a bathroom. Larger homes in the cities were multistory with as many as thirty rooms. There is also evidence of devices attached to some of the roofs that pumped wind into homes and other large buildings to cool them.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

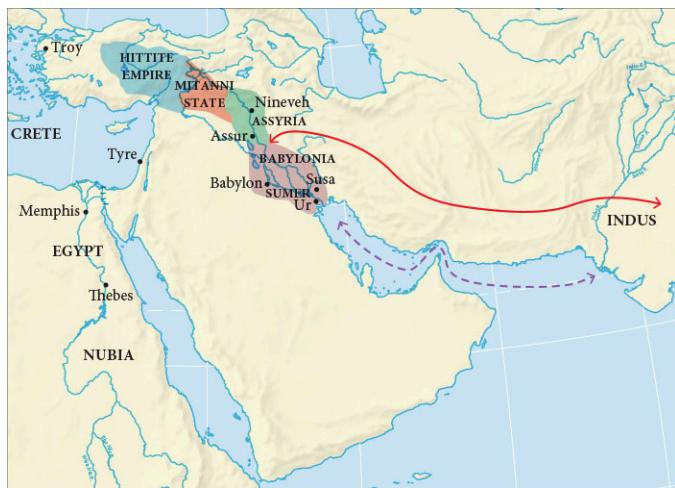
Some of the most intriguing evidence at the large Indus valley civilization sites indicates the residents had sophisticated knowledge of water engineering and built [citywide drainage systems \(\*https://openstax.org/l/77IndusDrainage\*\)](https://openstax.org/l/77IndusDrainage) with covers for servicing. Evidence was found of indoor toilets that connected to this [drainage network \(\*https://openstax.org/l/77DrainageNet\*\)](https://openstax.org/l/77DrainageNet) that ran throughout the city.

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The Indus valley cities also included an industrial area where workshops were located. At Harappa, this district included quarters for the laborers who worked there. The ancient city at the site of Lothal near the Indian Ocean included a dockyard and a warehouse for incoming trade goods. The inhabitants of these cities may have included the artisans and merchants who provided goods for the ruling elite. As in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the majority of the population were probably farmers who lived in the outlying rural areas surrounding each city.

### **Trade, Writing, and Religion**

Archaeological work has revealed that a considerable amount of trade flowed between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley. Cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia refer to the Indus valley as *Meluhha* and document that precious stones such as lapis lazuli and carnelian, as well as marine shells from the Indian Ocean, were imported from there. Merchants traveled by sea across the Indian Ocean and by land over the Iranian plateau (Figure 3.26).



**FIGURE 3.26** Indus Valley Trade with Mesopotamia. From the work of archaeologists, we know that significant trade took place between the inhabitants of the Indus River valley and their contemporaries in Mesopotamia. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The influence of Mesopotamia on the Indus valley culture is evident in the use of seals. The Indus valley seals were inscribed with depictions of human figures and animals such as bulls and goats, likely totems for families or lineages, and brief inscriptions that likely indicate names, titles, or occupations. Merchants marked ownership of goods by making an impression of the seal on the soft clay that covered the mouth of the jar or other vessel that held the objects, or on clay tags attached to sacks of grain (Figure 3.27). A similar practice occurred in contemporary Mesopotamia, where the seal was in the shape of a cylinder that could be rolled to leave an impression. Archaeologists have found seals from the Indus valley in ancient Sumerian cities such as Ur.



**FIGURE 3.27** An Indus Valley Seal. On the left is a seal from the Indus valley civilization, and on the right is a modern clay impression made from it. Such seals typically showed animals and a script that remains to be deciphered. (credit: modification of work "Stamp seal and modern impression: unicorn and incense burner (?)" by Dodge Fund, 1949/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The script that appears on many of the seals is unique to the people of the Indus valley civilization, and scholars have yet to decipher it. It seems to consist of phonograms, signs for the sounds of syllables, and there appear to be about four hundred such signs. Many speculate that the language written in this script may be

related to the Dravidian languages still spoken across southern India today. It may also be similar to the script invented by the Elamites of southwestern Iran. Unlike the case in Mesopotamia and Egypt, archaeologists have not uncovered clay tablets or papyrus rolls in the Indus valley.

### THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

#### Deciphering Indus Valley Script

One of the great mysteries surrounding Indus valley script is what exactly it represents. Was it a means of capturing spoken language, or did the marks simply indicate whether taxes had been paid on an item or signify the quality of a particular good (in the same way we use stars to rate products and services online today)?

Rajesh Rao, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington who became fascinated with the Indus valley civilization as a child in India, created a computer program to help him answer this question by measuring conditional entropy in Indus valley writing. Conditional entropy measures the degree of randomness in a sequence. In a system of writing that encodes language, there is a fairly low level of randomness. Letters appear frequently in some combinations and rarely or never in others. For example, in the English language, the letter *q* is usually followed by the letter *u* and never by the letter *k*. At the beginning of a word, the letter *h* is never followed by a consonant.

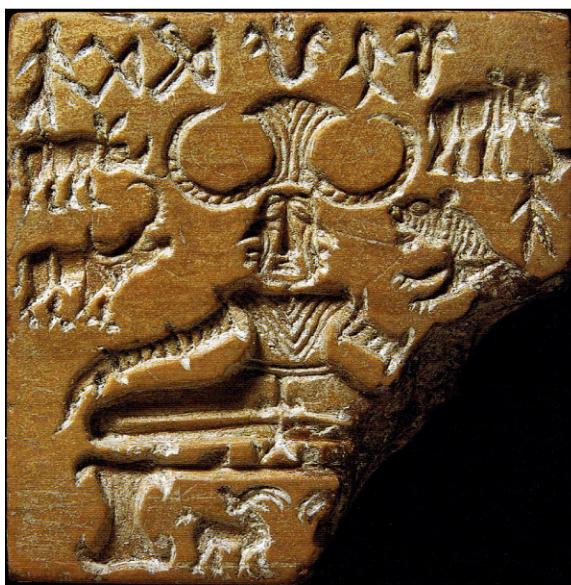
Rao tested the conditional entropy of the Indus valley script along with that of several natural languages including English, artificial languages such as those written for computers, and other sequences not related to language such as human DNA sequences. He discovered that the Indus valley script has a degree of randomness similar to that of natural languages, leading him to the conclusion that the symbols do represent a language and are not simply marks of quality or signs that something has been taxed. He also concluded that the rate of conditional entropy in Indus valley writing resembled that of Old Tamil, an earlier form of the Tamil language currently spoken in southern India that belongs to the Dravidian language family. This idea angered many Indians, especially those who speak Hindi, a language derived from Sanskrit that is the first language of many people in northern India. This issue is both historical and modern. If the language of the ancient Indus valley was Dravidian in origin, it calls into question the ancestry of the people who lived there, and given the evolution of the caste system, it raises questions about social identities that have existed for centuries. The issue remains in question, and the controversy about ancestral origins is far more complex than the single issue of language.

- Why do you think the origin of language matters so much to the people of India?
- If Indus valley writing were deciphered, what could historians learn about the culture that we cannot currently know?
- In what other ways could computers help historians learn about the past?

Bronze technology probably also entered the Indus River valley by the third millennium BCE through trade with Mesopotamia. Merchants from the Indus valley may even have exported tin from Afghanistan to Mesopotamia, since this metal was in demand for the manufacture of bronze.

Notwithstanding the many obvious Mesopotamian influences and trading connections, the people of the Indus valley civilization developed their own unique culture. Their distinctive religion may have shaped later cultures in India. For example, clay figurines from the Indus valley that are believed to depict deities are often interpreted as portraying a goddess whose female attributes are similar to those of the Hindu goddess Durga, consort of the god Shiva. Some seals depict a horned three-faced figure surrounded by animals, which closely resembles the Hindu deity Shiva when represented as the Lord of the Animals (Figure 3.28). Archaeologists have also found stones molded into shapes that resemble *lingams* and *yonis*, which are representations of male and female sexual organs associated with the worship of Shiva. The people of the Indus valley buried their dead with modest grave goods such as clay pots, which suggests a belief in an afterlife. However, there is

no evidence of temples or monumental tombs such as the Egyptian pyramids or the royal tombs of Ur in Mesopotamia.



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 3.28 Possible Influence of Indus Valley Religious Imagery.** Historians speculate that the religion of the Indus valley might have influenced later Indian cultures. For example, a seal from 2600–1900 BCE discovered at Mohenjo-Daro (a) shows a seated figure with three faces surrounded by animals. A much later sixth-century CE portrayal of Shiva from the Elephanta Caves in western India (b) shows the Hindu god seated, also with three faces and surrounded by animals. (credit a: modification of work "Shiva Pashupati" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Elephanta Caves" by Christian Haugen/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The artisans of the Indus valley created unique sculptures in clay, stone, and bronze. One of the more spectacular stone works from Mohenjo-Daro depicts a serene bearded man who may be a priest or leader in the community. A tiny bronze figure appears to represent a young woman dancing ([Figure 3.29](#)). Her bracelets and necklaces indicate that the people of this culture employed artisans to manufacture such adornment, which may have indicated high social status. Artisans of the Indus valley were also very busy manufacturing pottery and seals. Their artistic designs influenced artisans in neighboring cultures over a wide area, from the upper Ganges River valley in what is today northwestern India to Baluchistan in western Pakistan and southeastern Iran.



**FIGURE 3.29 The Mohenjo-Daro Dancer.** This four-inch-tall bronze statue of a young woman discovered at Mohenjo-Daro and dated to circa 2300–1750 BCE could depict a goddess or a woman of the elite class who is dancing. If she is dancing, we can also conclude that music and dance may have been incorporated into social and religious rituals. (credit: modification of work "Bronze 'Dancing Girl,' Mohenjo-daro, c. 2500 BC" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Merchants from the Indus valley were undoubtedly active in exchanging such wares in these regions. In the absence of coinage, they used a common system of stone cubical weights to assess goods in commercial exchanges that required barter. The cities of the Indus valley could have also used these weights to assess taxes in kind that they collected for their granaries.

### The Era of Decline

Beginning around 1800 BCE, the centuries of trade between the Indus valley and Mesopotamia came to an end. Over the next four centuries, the cities of the Indus River valley were slowly depopulated, and the civilization declined, likely in stages. Why and how this decline occurred remains unknown. One common view is that it was related to regional climate change. Around 2000 BCE, the floodplain of the Indus River shifted dramatically, creating dry river beds where cities had been and water once flowed. Changes in the pattern of seasonal wind and rainfall, known as the **monsoon** in South Asia, may have caused these environmental effects. Without a secure source of water for drinking and irrigation, the cities would have suffered declines in population. Another theory suggests that centuries of environmental degradation caused by urbanization and large population growth made the land unsuitable to human populations. Still other views point to the possibility of tectonic activity that changed the course of the rivers, or even epidemic disease that decimated the population.

Before these environmental factors began to be considered, the view for many years was that the Indus valley civilization was violently destroyed in a conquest by nomadic Indo-European speakers calling themselves Aryans, a Sanskrit-speaking group of nomadic pastoralists who raised cattle and horses. Some Aryans began migrating from the Eurasian Steppe north of the Black and Caspian Seas around 3500 BCE. Over time, different groups spread into Europe, Anatolia, Iran, and eventually Pakistan and India.

The Aryan invasion theory of decline depends heavily on Indo-European works of religious literature like the *Rigveda*, produced sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE in northwestern India. This work includes a great number of hymns, rituals, descriptions of deities, and other largely religious topics geared toward understanding the origin of the universe and the nature of the divine. But in parts it also discusses the arrival of the Aryans and describes them attacking the walled cities and forts of the indigenous population. While some of these descriptions were likely developed centuries after the fall of the Indus valley civilization and may be unrelated to it, some scholars continue to hold that these passages describe the conquest of Mohenjo-Daro. Archaeological evidence attesting to the fact that Mohenjo-Daro was attacked around 1500 BCE and mostly destroyed lends some credibility to these claims.

We may never know what best explains the collapse of the Indus valley civilization. A few or all these causes may have played a role. For example, environmental degradation caused by years of resource exploitation and high population density certainly had an effect. These issues could have been compounded by climate change and disease. And in a weakened state, the people of the region would have been far more vulnerable to attack by raiding groups like the Aryans.

However it happened, by around 1500 BCE, the social and political systems had broken down, and the sophisticated culture of the Indus valley civilization had collapsed. The architectural styles that characterized the cities at their height were abandoned, as was the writing system, the sophisticated metalworking, and other artisanal crafts. The Indus valley civilization had come to an end.

## Key Terms

- Bronze Age** the period from 3500 to 1110 BCE when bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons
- city-state** an independent political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls
- Code of Hammurabi** a list of judicial decisions that the Babylonian king Hammurabi had inscribed on stone pillars throughout his kingdom
- culture** all the ways in which members of a human society interact with one another and with their environment and pass these ways from generation to generation
- cuneiform** a phonetic writing system based on the sounds of words and invented by the Sumerians in about 3000 BCE
- Harappan** a term describing the ancient Indus valley civilization, named for one of its largest cities and the first to be discovered by archaeologists
- hieratic** a simplified form of hieroglyphics employed by Egyptian scribes for recording everyday documents such as receipts and contracts
- hieroglyphics** a complex writing system developed around 3000 BCE in which written symbols represented both sounds and ideas
- lugal** the Sumerians' term for their ruler
- monsoon** the seasonal pattern of wind and rainfall across South Asia
- nomarchs** regional governors in ancient Egypt
- papyrus** a type of paper Egyptians made from a common reed plant growing along the Nile
- pastoralists** nomadic people who rely on herds of domesticated animals for subsistence
- pharaoh** the title of the Egyptian ruler, translated as “big house”
- Polytheists** people who worship multiple gods, usually associated with different aspects of the natural world
- social stratification** the hierarchical order of society in which people sharing the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata
- specialization** a societal characteristic in which people perform specific tasks, such as farming (farmer) or producing tools and clothing (artisan), that contribute to the well-being of the community
- ziggurat** an immense stepped tower with a flat top built of mud-brick that served as a temple in Sumerian cities

## Section Summary

### 3.1 Early Civilizations

For tens of thousands of years, humans lived largely as mobile, subsistence hunter-gatherers. But with the innovation of agricultural production in a few areas around the world, some groups began to settle, and a new agricultural and sedentary lifestyle gave rise to early civilizations characterized by urban settings, the specialization of labor, and increasing social stratification. The earliest examples appeared in Neolithic settlements like Jericho, Çatalhöyük, Mehrgarh, and others in China, Mesoamerica, and the Andean region of South America.

### 3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia

The city of Uruk in the land of Sumer was one of the first true cities in world history. Advances in technology such as the invention of bronze-making techniques, a writing system called cuneiform, and a sophisticated religion with a pantheon of deities spread and facilitated the development of a complex Mesopotamian culture and the rise of other city-states there. The Sumerian city-states under the rule of their *lugals* or kings commonly waged war against one another and against a stream of foreign invaders.

The period of independent city-states came to an end with the rise of the world's first empire, the Akkadian Empire of Sargon of Akkad. While it lasted only about a century and a half, this empire inaugurated a new era in the region, which later saw the emergence of other powerful realms. These included the Third Dynasty of Ur

and the famous Babylonian Empire of Hammurabi, who created an influential law code. These later empires preserved many elements of the earlier Sumerian civilization, including cuneiform and works of literature like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

### **3.3 Ancient Egypt**

Ancient Egypt arose as an early civilization along the Nile River valley in the fourth millennium BCE. A polytheistic society with a great assortment of deities and its own writing system, Egypt was united under the pharaohs for much of its ancient history. Its people held that order, truth, and justice (Ma'at) ruled the day and ordered the universe.

The Old Kingdom was the era of pyramid building. The Middle Kingdom was a time of renewed strength and territorial expansion. “Intermediate” periods of weakened centralized control followed and preceded these kingdoms. The First Intermediate Period was a time when regional governors gained power at the expense of the pharaohs. During the Second Intermediate Period, traditional Egyptian nobles lost control of the Nile delta to the Hyksos people and control of far upper Egypt to the kingdom of Kush. These areas were later reconquered with the inauguration of the New Kingdom.

### **3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization**

The Indus valley culture emerged as an early civilization in the early third millennium BCE. It drew inspiration from contacts with Mesopotamia, but its people also developed large well-planned cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro that were quite different from contemporary cities in ancient Sumer. Since the written script of the Indus peoples remains undeciphered, historians can only speculate about how these great cities arose and why they fell in the early second millennium, perhaps as a result of trade disruptions, changes in the course of rivers, the arrival of Indo-European-speaking nomads, climate change, environmental degradation, disease, or some combination of these factors.

## **Assessments**

### **Review Questions**

1. What is a characteristic of early civilizations?
  - a. nomadic lifestyle
  - b. egalitarian society
  - c. specialization
  - d. subsistence economy
2. What does the construction of the tower at Jericho suggest about that Neolithic settlement?
  - a. It likely revered ancestors.
  - b. It likely had some type of government.
  - c. It likely performed animal sacrifices.
  - d. It likely had a small population.
3. The population of what Neolithic town in today's Turkey may have shared a belief in a mother-deity?
  - a. Çatalhöyük
  - b. Jericho
  - c. Caral
  - d. Anyang
4. The earliest known script, cuneiform, was written by pressing a stylus made of reed into what type of material?
  - a. wet clay
  - b. hot bronze

- c. dry papyrus
  - d. gold plates
5. How large do scholars estimate the population of the city of Uruk may have been by the end of the fourth millennium BCE?
- a. twenty thousand
  - b. thirty thousand
  - c. forty thousand
  - d. fifty thousand
6. Who is credited with establishing the first-known empire in world history?
- a. Hammurabi
  - b. Ur-Nammu
  - c. Naram-Sin
  - d. Sargon of Akkad
7. What two adjectives best describe the gods of Mesopotamia?
- a. pleasant and helpful
  - b. fickle and easily angered
  - c. distant and unconcerned
  - d. weak and cautious
8. What adjective best describes the afterlife, according to the Sumerian belief system?
- a. gloomy
  - b. happy
  - c. exciting
  - d. scary
9. Who do scholars believe was the first pharaoh to unite all Egypt?
- a. Narmer
  - b. Amenemhat I
  - c. Djoser
  - d. Khufu
10. What was another role of the pharaoh, in addition to being the political head of the state?
- a. merchant
  - b. scribe
  - c. high priest
  - d. farmer
11. Imhotep built a large stone step pyramid for what pharaoh?
- a. Djoser
  - b. Khufu
  - c. Menkaure
  - d. Snefru
12. What role did the nomarchs play in the decline of the Old Kingdom and beginning of the First Intermediate Period?
- a. They instituted important religious practices.
  - b. They assumed more control over their regions.

- c. They allowed for greater Hyksos immigration.
  - d. They rejected the authority of the priests.
- 13.** What was significant about the reign of Sobekneferu?
- a. She was both pharaoh and priest.
  - b. She was the last pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom.
  - c. She gave unprecedented power to the nomarchs.
  - d. She was the first woman to rule since before the Old Kingdom.
- 14.** The Mesopotamians called the Indus valley civilization by what name?
- a. Meluhha
  - b. Harappa
  - c. Mohenjo-Daro
  - d. Dholavira
- 15.** What may have served as the monumental ceremonial center in Indus valley cities?
- a. a ziggurat
  - b. a pyramid
  - c. a citadel
  - d. a sunken court
- 16.** What was the likely purpose of the large baths at Mohenjo-Daro?
- a. watering of livestock
  - b. ritual cleansing
  - c. storage of drinking water
  - d. the king's use only
- 17.** What was a common trade item exported from the Indus valley to Mesopotamia?
- a. lapis lazuli
  - b. diamonds
  - c. rubies
  - d. sapphires

### Check Your Understanding Questions

1. In what ways did the nomadic and seminomadic peoples beyond the borders of early civilizations contribute to these civilizations?
2. What do the artifacts and other archaeological finds from Jericho and Çatalhöyük suggest about life in these early urban environments?
3. What was the *Legend of Sargon*, and how does it explain Sargon of Akkad's rise to power?
4. In what way did the palace and temple complex in ancient Mesopotamian cities function as an economic redistribution center?
5. How were gods honored and served in the Sumerian religion?
6. In what respects were the Sumerian *lugal*s and Egyptian pharaohs different?
7. What do ancient sources and modern analyses suggest about the labor required to build the large pyramids of the Old Kingdom?
8. Why is the reign of Pharaoh Senusret III considered the high point of Middle Kingdom Egypt?

9. What evidence suggests that the walled citadel areas in Indus valley cities may have been used for religious purposes?
10. What suggests that the religion of the Indus valley civilization may have survived for many centuries in a different form?
11. What are some of the theories about the decline of the Indus valley civilization?

### Application and Reflection Questions

1. Imagine that you lived through a transition from a nomadic to a settled way of life. What in your life would have changed the most? Do you think your standard of living would be better or worse? Why?
2. What may have motivated the people of the Neolithic towns of Jericho and Çatalhöyük to produce an agricultural surplus? How was this surplus likely used?
3. The Code of Hammurabi identifies different punishments and expectations for people based on their social position. Why do you think this was the case? Why wouldn't everyone have faced the same types of punishments and expectations?
4. Why did the rise of the Akkadian Empire bring an end to the era of independent city-states in Mesopotamia? Why didn't the city-states simply reassert their independence after the empire collapsed?
5. Many scholars have explained the capricious actions of the Mesopotamian gods and the generally pessimistic worldview of the people as consequences of a difficult environment. Does this sound convincing? Why or why not? Can you think of an alternate explanation?
6. Terms like Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and Intermediate Period were developed in the nineteenth century by scholars seeking to organize Egyptian chronology into distinct ages. Despite some flaws, this naming convention is still used. Do you think it should be? Why or why not? What other type of chronological organization might you suggest? Why?
7. While Egypt was unified early (about 3150 BCE), Mesopotamia was not unified until the rise of Sargon almost a thousand years later. What do you think accounts for this difference? Why didn't Egypt emerge as a number of independent city-states and Sumer as an empire early on?
8. We know there was trade between the Indus valley civilization and that of Mesopotamia. But it remains unclear to what extent the rise of the Indus valley culture can be attributed to connections with Mesopotamia. What elements of Indus valley culture may have been influenced by Mesopotamia? What elements are unique to the cities of the Indus valley?
9. In what ways do the Indus valley cities resemble those of Mesopotamia? In what ways do they resemble modern cities?
10. Historians' inability to read the writing of the Indus valley civilization means that we know less about this culture than we do about Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. What elements of a culture are difficult to understand without the help of written documents? Why is this the case? What kinds of things are impossible to know until the script is deciphered?



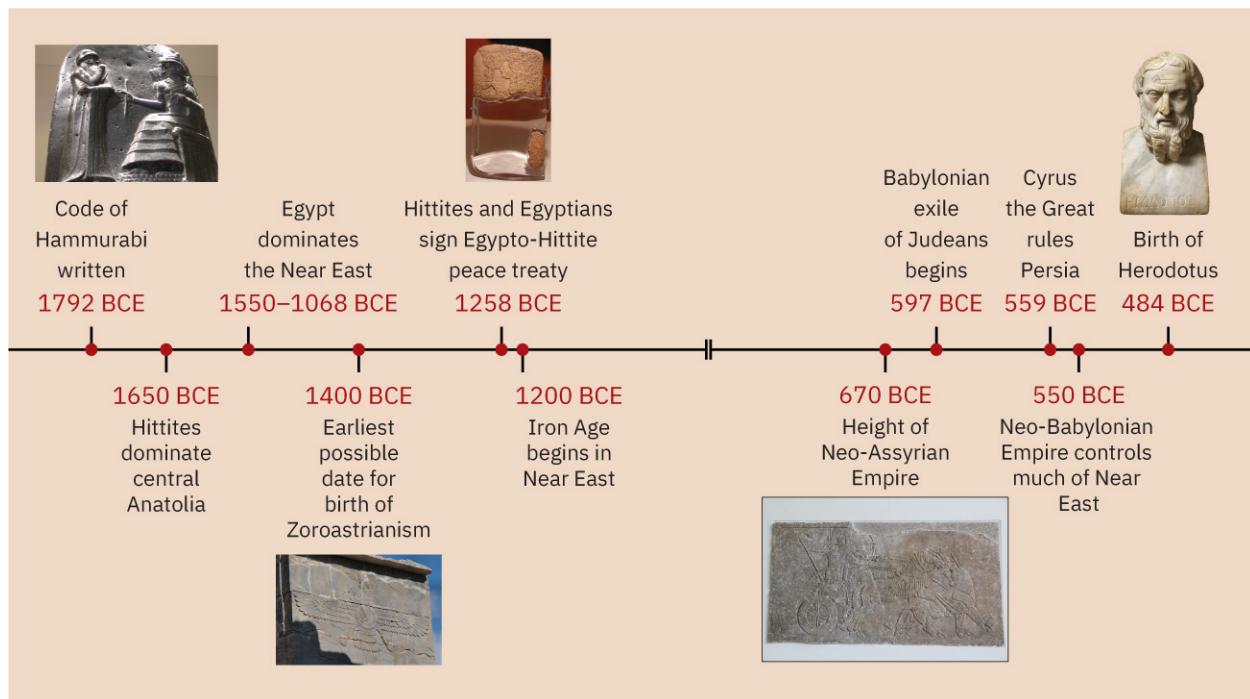


**FIGURE 4.1 An Army at War.** This seventh-century BCE stone relief from an Assyrian palace shows the army of King Ashurbanipal fighting against nomadic Arabian desert groups. (credit: modification of work “Assyrian Arabian Battle” by “LaLouvre”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

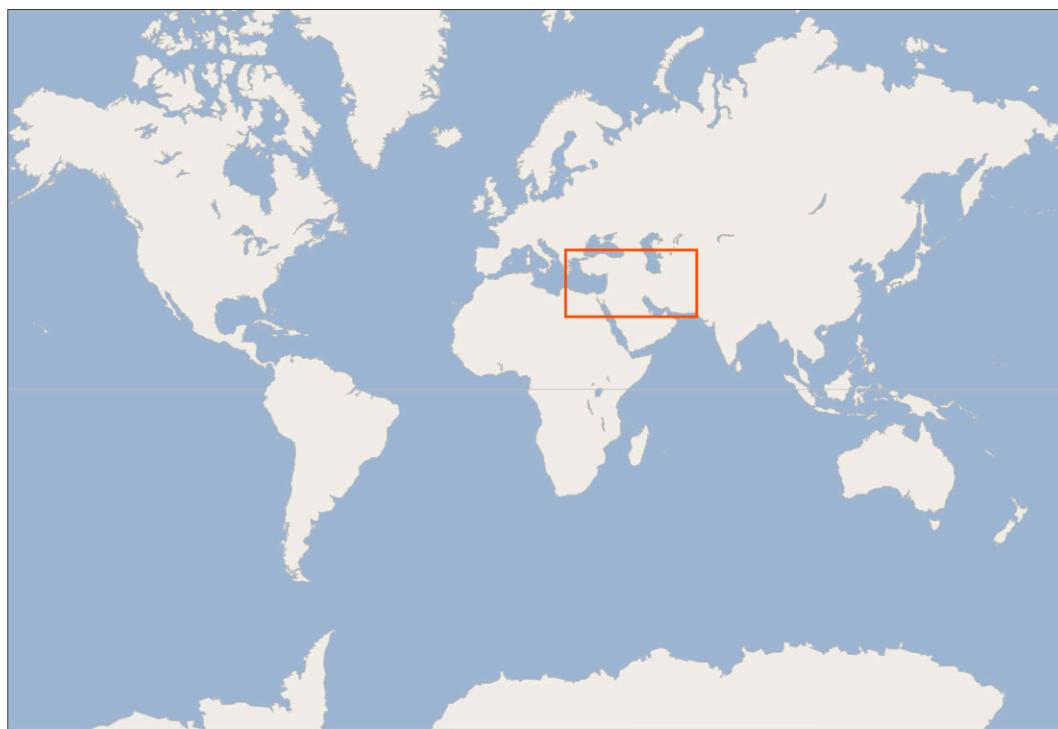
## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 4.1** From Old Babylon to the Medes
- 4.2** Egypt’s New Kingdom
- 4.3** The Persian Empire
- 4.4** The Hebrews

**INTRODUCTION** At the dawn of the Iron Age, which began around 1200 BCE in the Near East, highly trained Assyrian armies with bronze and iron weapons expanded out of northern Mesopotamia. Within a few centuries, their conquests had provided the Assyrians with an empire larger than the Near East had ever seen. Relying on archaeological finds like this detailed relief as well as textual documentation from the Bible and other sources, historians have pieced together the history of this once-mighty state (Figure 4.1). The Assyrians conquered the kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE, added Egypt to their lands in the seventh century BCE, and held it all together with a combination of ruthless military tactics, efficient state organization, and a wide network of royal roads. They left a powerful regional legacy, yet theirs is just one of many empires that rose and fell in the complicated and dangerous world of the ancient Near East. Though these local power brokers were linked by the shared heritage of a Sumerian past, including influences such as cuneiform and Hammurabi’s law code, their rapid succession speaks to the level of rivalry and conflict experienced by the people of the area. Yet the same chaos led to important innovations in all aspects of society, particularly military technology.



**FIGURE 4.2 Timeline: The Near East.** (credit “1792 BCE”: modification of work “Louvre - Hammurabi’s Code” by “Erin”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit “1400 BCE”: modification of work “Persepolis, Tripylon, eastern gate (2)” by Marco Prins/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “1258 BCE”: modification of work “Treaty of Kadesh” by Iocanus/Museum of the Ancient Orient/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0; credit “670 BCE”: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Lion Hunt, Nimrud, 883–859 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit “484 BCE”: modification of work “Marble bust of Herodotus” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 4.3 Locator Map: The Near East.** (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 4.1 From Old Babylon to the Medes

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the geography of the Ancient Near East
- Discuss the political norms, technological innovations, and unique social attributes of the major city-states of the Ancient Near East
- Explain how city-states of the Ancient Near East interacted with their neighbors

When Sargon of Akkad built Mesopotamia's first empire in approximately 2300 BCE, he inaugurated a new era in the Near East. Though it lasted only about a century and a half, his model of imperial expansion and administration was followed by a number of successive regional powers in the region. The Third Dynasty of Ur and Hammurabi's Babylonian kingdom were in many ways imitators of Sargon's earlier example. Later powers like the Hittites, Neo-Assyrians, and Neo-Babylonians continued to borrow from earlier empires and added unique traits as well. Within these different empires existed a diverse assortment of peoples, social classes, religions, and daily practices. From the archaeological record and surviving documents, historians have cataloged these groups and learned a little about how they lived.

### Power Politics in the Near East

The end of the third millennium BCE was a transformative, if sometimes chaotic, period in Mesopotamia. Foreign invaders from the north, east, and west put tremendous pressure on the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the last Sumerian dynasty. One of the greatest threats came from nomadic peoples then living in the desert regions of Syria. Raiding by these Amorites was considered such a problem that in approximately 2034 BCE, Shu-Sin, ruler of Ur, constructed a 170-mile wall from the banks of the Euphrates to the Tigris to keep them out. The strategy ultimately failed, and in the reign of Shu-Sin's son Ibbi-Sin, the Amorites breached the wall and began attacking cities. They were soon joined by the Elamites from the east. As raids by these groups increased in volume and intensity, city after city fell, and the Third Dynasty of Ur disintegrated. By around 2004 BCE, all that remained of Ibbi-Sin's empire was the city of Ur itself. In that year, it too was sacked by the Elamites and others.

Amorites then spread out across Mesopotamia, establishing powerful cities of their own. They adopted the region's existing religious traditions, its local customs, and the Akkadian language. They also embraced the political culture of rivalry, and their two most prominent cities, Isin and Larsa, fought for supremacy. The drive for dominance stoked the same kinds of innovation and expansion that had characterized the first city, Ur.

### The Rise of Babylon

During the later stages of the competition between Isin and Larsa, a new power emerged in southern Mesopotamia. This was the city of Babylon. Unlike Ur, Babylon had not previously been an important city-state. Its name is of unknown origin and was likely pronounced *Babil*. Akkadian speakers of the area called it *Bab-ili*, which meant "gateway of the gods." In 1894 BCE, an Amorite chieftain named Sumu-adum took the city and installed himself as ruler. His successors expanded their control over the surrounding area, building public works projects and digging canals. But this expansion was modest, and by about 1800 BCE, Babylon controlled only a relatively small territory around the city itself. Indeed, at this time, it was just one of a handful of small states making up a loose coalition in Mesopotamia.

It was during the reign of Hammurabi in eighteenth century BCE that Babylon rose as a center of power and the administrative capital of a new Mesopotamian empire ([Figure 4.4](#)). Early in his reign, Hammurabi made an alliance with the powerful Assyrians to the north. This pact gave him the protection he needed to expand his kingdom, taking control of Isin, Uruk, and other key cities of southern Mesopotamia. Soon Babylon had become a major center of power in the south and the target of rival kingdoms. In approximately 1764 BCE, a coalition led by the city-states of Elam and Eshunna invaded Babylonian territory, hoping to capture

Hammurabi's powerful realm, but it failed, and Hammurabi turned his attention to the south. Eventually, he sent his armies even against his former ally, Assyria. By 1755 BCE, he had transformed the small kingdom he inherited into the center of a Mesopotamian empire to rival any that had come before it.



**FIGURE 4.4** Hammurabi. This relief at the top of a seven-foot stone stele from the time of King Hammurabi shows him (at left) receiving his royal insignia from a seated god, likely Marduk. This grant makes it clear that Hammurabi's right to rule comes directly from the heavens. The lower portion of the stele includes his famous law code. (credit: "Louvre - Hammurabi's Code" by "Erin"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

At its height during Hammurabi's reign, the Babylonian Empire stretched from the upper reaches of the Euphrates River, not far from modern Aleppo in the north, to the Zagros Mountains in the east and the Persian Gulf in the south ([Figure 4.5](#)). But these extensive borders did not long survive the death of Hammurabi himself. Under the rule of his son Samsu-iluna, Babylon faced resistance from the Kassites of the Zagros Mountains and from a newly formed kingdom called Sealand in the marshy region near the Persian Gulf. The empire's territorial control continued to decline until, by the reign of Samsu-ditana in the late sixteenth century BCE, all that remained was the small region around the city of Babylon itself. In this weakened state, Babylon was sacked by a new emerging power, the Hittites, and the dynasty of Hammurabi came to a definitive end.



**FIGURE 4.5** Hammurabi's Realm. Under Hammurabi, the Babylonians expanded out of Babylon to conquer much of Mesopotamia and construct the region's first empire, shown here in green. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### The Hittites

Unlike the Babylonians, the Hittites were not from Mesopotamia, nor were they members of the Semitic language group. Rather, they were an Indo-European-speaking group that emerged as a powerful force in Anatolia starting in the 1600s BCE. Their precise origins are not known, but they were likely immigrants to Anatolia who blended into the local population and adopted much of its culture and religion. By 1650 BCE, the Hittites dominated central Anatolia from their capital at Hattusas. Their expansion across Anatolia and into Syria continued into the early sixteenth century BCE under the reign of Mursilis, during which time the growing kingdom also set its sights on Babylon.

Possibly as a demonstration of military might or simply to seize an opportunity, the Hittite army descended into Mesopotamia and took the city of Babylon. Despite the success of the campaign, Mursilis's power in Anatolia began to weaken during his absence. He was assassinated soon after he returned, and the Hittite Empire began to crumble as its subject kingdoms rebelled and it was consumed by war. By 1500 BCE, order had been restored, but the new rulers struggled to return the Hittites to their former glory.

Beginning with the rise of the Hittite king Tudhaliyas I in 1420 BCE, the Hittite Empire experienced a revival and new imperial growth (Figure 4.6). By the reign of Suppiluliumas I in the mid-fourteenth century BCE, it had become arguably the most powerful empire in the Near East and a major rival of New Kingdom Egypt. The two realms vied for control of the eastern Mediterranean in the 1300s and 1200s BCE, eventually facing off in the epic Battle of Qadesh in 1274 BCE.



**FIGURE 4.6** The Hittite Empire. Shown in green at its greatest extent in the thirteenth century BCE, the Hittite Empire included all of Asia Minor to the borders of Assyria and parts of Syria. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Generally accepted as a draw or possibly a narrow Hittite victory, the fighting at Qadesh is most memorable for ultimately leading the two forces to recognize that they had more to gain from peace than war. In 1258 BCE, the Hittite king Hattusilis II and the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II signed one of early history's greatest peace treaties ([Figure 4.7](#)). The agreement confirmed Hittite control of Syria and Egyptian dominance over the Phoenician ports of the eastern Mediterranean. However, little more than fifty years later, the once-powerful Hittite Empire collapsed, never to reappear.



**FIGURE 4.7** The Egypto-Hittite Peace Treaty. These carved fragments are from one of many copies of the Egypto-Hittite Peace Treaty of 1258 BCE. (credit: “Treaty of Kadesh” by Iocanus/Museum of the Ancient Orient/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

The Hittite Empire was not the only important Near Eastern power to disintegrate during this period. Across the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia beginning around 1200 BCE, kingdoms and empires from Greece to Mesopotamia went into a decline so extensive it is now called the Late Bronze Age Collapse. Although its trigger remains unknown, the collapse coincided with widespread regional famine, epidemic disease, war, and waves of destructive migrations across the eastern Mediterranean. By the time calm returned around 1100 BCE, the region had entered a new era, the **Iron Age**. This was a period in which iron replaced bronze as the metal of choice for tools and weapons, and new and more sophisticated empires expanded across the Near East.

### The Neo-Assyrian Empire

For a few centuries after the Late Bronze Age Collapse, Mesopotamia experienced transformations that dramatically reshaped the region and set the stage for a new imperial era. During the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE, decline came to both Assyria and especially to Babylonia, where dynasties competed for control. Complicating the situation for the Babylonians, a Semitic group of unknown origin called the Chaldeans took control of far southern Mesopotamia during this period. Assyria in the north fared a little better but also struggled to reestablish control over northern Mesopotamia. One of the major factors limiting Assyria's ability to grow was the presence of a group of West-Semitic seminomads called Aramaeans. The Aramaeans likely emerged first in southern Syria; they exploited Assyrian and Babylonian weakness to expand into Mesopotamia, disrupting Assyrian trading routes as they went. By the tenth century BCE, they had become the dominant population in western Mesopotamia and controlled a number of powerful kingdoms there.

It was only around 900 BCE that Assyria was able to reestablish control over northern Mesopotamia. This marks the birth of what historians often refer to as the Neo-Assyrian Empire (to distinguish it from the Old

Assyrian Empire of 2000–1600 BCE and the Middle Assyrian Empire of 1400–1100 BCE). Beginning in the reign of Ashurnasirpal II in the early ninth century BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire began a steady march toward imperial dominance across the Near East, asserting control over many Aramaean kingdoms in Syria and eventually over Babylonia itself. By the end of Tiglath-Pileser III's reign in 727 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire had become the dominant power in the Near East. Over the next several decades, successive Assyrian kings were able to build an expansive empire across Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean through wars of conquest. In 671 BCE, King Esarhaddon invaded Egypt and added that center of wealth and power to his kingdom.

With this conquest, the Neo-Assyrian Empire achieved a degree of territorial control far surpassing that of any earlier empire of the region (Figure 4.8). But its supremacy was not to last. Beginning in the last decades of the seventh century BCE, two growing powers threatened and eventually overthrew Assyria. These kingdoms were Babylonia and Media.



**FIGURE 4.8** The Neo-Assyrian Empire. This map shows the Neo-Assyrian Empire (in orange) at its height, around 670 BCE. Note the major cities and peoples consumed by its conquests. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

During the period of Assyrian expansion, Babylonia had been reduced to a **vassal state** of the empire, meaning it was nominally independent in the running of its internal affairs but had to bow to imperial demands and provide goods and soldiers when commanded. But in 616 BCE, the Chaldean Babylonian ruler Nabopolassar attempted to take advantage of a period of Assyrian weakness by launching a bold attack against the Old Assyrian capital of Asshur. Although the attack failed, it encouraged the Median dynasty to risk its own attack into Assyria. The Median Empire, a kingdom in northwestern Iran, had only recently unified and strengthened, largely because Assyria had devastated the rival kingdoms around it, such as Elam. The attack on Assyria proved successful, and Asshur was destroyed in 614 BCE. Shortly afterward, the Babylonians and the Medes entered into an alliance to overthrow Assyria. Assyria received support from Egypt, but it was unable to prevent the Babylonian-Median alliance from overwhelming its forces and capturing its cities. In 612 BCE, the

Babylonians and the Medes reduced the once-great Assyrian city of Nineveh to rubble, killing the Assyrian king in the process. The remaining Assyrian forces fled west and held out for a few more years. By 605 BCE, however, the Assyrian Empire had been defeated and its people carried off into slavery.

The victors divided the spoils. The Median Empire took the areas to the east, north, and northeast and expanded its control to central Anatolia, much of western Iran, and the southern area between the Black and Caspian Seas.

The Babylonians, often called the Neo-Babylonians to distinguish them from Hammurabi's subjects in the Old Babylonian period, took control of the western portion of the former Neo-Assyrian Empire. This included much of Mesopotamia, Syria, and the important Phoenician ports along the Mediterranean (Figure 4.9). Under king Nebuchadnezzar II, they waged war in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean to weaken Egypt's power. Then, in 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attempted a bold invasion of Egypt itself, only to be repulsed by strong resistance.



**FIGURE 4.9 The Neo-Babylonian Empire.** By 550 BCE, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (shown in green) had extended its control over Mesopotamia, Syria, and Judah, and even into the Arabian Peninsula. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### Foreign Affairs and Trade

The many city-states, kingdoms, and empires of Mesopotamia operated in a complex world in which both risks and rewards for rulers were extremely high. War was especially common, and diplomatic mistakes could have costly consequences. Kings preferred to avoid war if possible and maintain healthy diplomatic relationships with others instead. A smaller kingdom, for example, might find it advantageous to seek an alliance with a large regional power like Assyria, Babylonia, or the Hittite Empire. Sending sons and daughters to rival kingdoms in marriage also helped forestall war and build cultural and familial bridges between competitors. The Hittite king Suppiluliumas attempted to marry one of his sons into the Egyptian royal family, which would have united these two regional powers and competitors. That marriage never took place, but many others did.

Ambassadors were a key part of Mesopotamia's complex diplomatic world. Kings frequently sent their representatives to friendly and even rival kingdoms to mend or strengthen relationships, a vital task frequently performed under extreme pressure. A wrong move could start a war. As they are today, however, such emissaries were guaranteed certain protections. In ordinary situations, they could expect to be free to leave unharmed when the situation demanded it, to be exempt from certain taxes, and to have their property respected. But if war broke out between the two kingdoms, an ambassador could get caught in the middle.

Gift giving was an important part of the ambassadors' role. When sent to another kingdom, emissaries frequently carried with them an offering of high value for the king who received them, and on their return home, their king expected a present of equal or greater worth. This exchange of gifts demonstrated respect and goodwill between the rulers. Returning empty-handed suggested the foreign king was breaking off diplomatic relations or had even become hostile. Occasionally an ambassador might be unable to return home, either because the relationship between the two kingdoms had gone sour or because the foreign king refused to supply an appropriate gift.

Rulers did not rely only on ambassadors for collecting intelligence in Ancient Mesopotamia. They often employed spies to inform them of what was happening inside both rival and friendly foreign kingdoms. These could be merchants, sailors, artisans, or refugees fleeing foreign lands. Hammurabi, for example, made frequent use of espionage. Not only did he recruit agents of all types to keep tabs on other kings, but he even established a special intelligence bureau in the palace at Mari to collect, translate, and analyze documents provided by his many spies. The most common uses of this intelligence were to anticipate war, learn about troop movements, and assess the strength of a foreign kingdom before putting an army into the field. Using spies was risky, however, because the very nature of the work suggested that such agents were never to be trusted, and betrayal was always a possibility. An even greater risk was borne by the spies themselves, who could expect a painful death if caught.

Long-distance trade was another important point of contact between different kingdoms around the region. Archaeological work has unearthed a wealth of information about the trading networks that crisscrossed the Near East and beyond. As early as the empire of Sargon of Akkad, Mesopotamian traders operating in the Persian Gulf sailed as far as modern-day Pakistan to trade with the people of the Indus River valley. Large empires had an interest in encouraging trade and maintained roads and bridges across the Near East for that purpose. The Assyrians were productive builders of roads and bridges that carried people and goods into and across their territory. Roads in the enormous Neo-Assyrian Empire were managed by a central government authority to ensure that the movement of goods and especially of soldiers proceeded unhindered.

By today's standards, the long-distance roads that crisscrossed this landscape were often of poor quality. They were generally unpaved and were maintained by local authorities, who would frequently carve a new road alongside the old one after years of wear. In the desert regions where soil was firm, the roads might be straight, while in more diverse terrain, they might wind around mountains and other imposing obstacles like swamps. Traveling between cities on such roads could take several weeks, even over relatively short distances. Traders could expect some form of protection from local rulers, however, in exchange for paying custom fees and duties.

Access to foreign goods and raw materials was a major concern of empires in the Near East. In Mesopotamia in particular, vital resources like stone, timber, and metal ores were scarce, and they had to be procured in large quantities from distant locations. The flow of these goods into imperial centers often took the form of tribute payments, much like a tax, from vassal or subjugated kingdoms ([Figure 4.10](#)). However, tribute was not the only mechanism for international trade. During the Old Assyrian period (c. 2000–1600 BCE), for example, Assyrian traders traveled between Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and even Afghanistan trading in valuable goods like copper, tin, and textiles. Copper and tin were especially important because they are the ingredients needed to make bronze, the primary material for manufacturing metal tools and weapons in this period. The Assyrians even established merchant colonies in Anatolia where they exchanged tin and textiles for silver and gold.



**FIGURE 4.10 Receiving Tribute.** In this relief from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, Assyrian king Shalmaneser III is shown receiving tribute from Jehu, the king of Israel, bowing before him. The limestone obelisk was erected in 825 BCE as a public monument and is one of only two complete Assyrian obelisks that have been discovered to date. (credit: “First depiction of Hoshea on the Black Obelisk” by The British Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Explore this website, created by the British Museum, about [trade and contraband \(<https://openstax.org/l/77MesoTrade>\)](https://openstax.org/l/77MesoTrade) in Ancient Assyria.

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### Daily Life and the Family in the Near East

The ability to purchase luxury trade items was the privilege of the elites, who were also treated differently under the law. Hammurabi’s Code, the list of judicial decisions issued by Hammurabi and inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout his kingdom, identified three social classes during the Old Babylonian period: nobles (*awelum*), commoners (*mushkenum*), and the enslaved (*wardum*). These classes were not fixed but were important for understanding how individuals were treated under the law. For example, if a commoner put out the eye or broke the bone of a noble, the noble was empowered to do the same to the offending commoner. However, a noble who injured a commoner could expect to merely pay a fine.

Social distinctions also applied in the treatment of women under the law. For example, if a husband divorced his wife because she had not given birth to sons, he was required to return her dowry and pay her a sum equal to the bride price paid upon marriage. If no bride price had been paid and the husband was a noble, he was required to pay his wife one mina of silver, the equivalent of about a year’s wage for an average worker. However, if he were a commoner, he was expected to pay only one-third of a mina of silver.

The homes of Babylonians in this period reflected these social distinctions. Commoners’ dwellings were typically windowless and made of mud with thick walls that protected the occupants from the oppressive summer heat. Some were of baked brick with a type of plaster along the walls to keep out moisture and preserve the brick. They were very simply furnished and usually contained a set of interior stairs leading to the roof, where occupants could dry vegetables or perform religious rituals. The homes of the wealthy, by contrast, were larger structures built around a central courtyard and included several rooms for different purposes, such as kitchens, bathrooms, reception rooms, and storage rooms. They contained various types of

wooden furniture, and walls were decorated with paintings of animals or even insects. Enslaved people commonly lived within the home, especially women and girls who worked as servants.

All Babylonians were expected to serve the gods, who were regarded as an aristocracy of powerful lords ruling over all. These deities tended to take human forms and express human emotions and desires such as love, hate, and envy. By the time of Hammurabi, the large pantheon included gods of Sumerian origin as well as gods introduced by other groups that had influenced Mesopotamian religious practices, such as the Akkadians and the Amorites. During Hammurabi's dynasty, the storm god Marduk was elevated to the highest tier of the pantheon and accepted as the patron god of Babylonia. Other powerful deities included Ea (Enki) ([Figure 4.11](#)), the god of fresh waters; Sin (Nanna), the god of the moon; and Shamash (Utu), the god of the sun and justice. Each city had its own patron god and corresponding temple. Individuals worshipped their city's patron god but also believed they had their own personal deity who offered protection in exchange for daily worship and service.



**FIGURE 4.11** The Babylonian God Ea. In this detail from the Adda Seal, an ancient cylinder seal dating to approximately 2300 BCE and housed at the British Museum, the Babylonian god Ea, also known as Enki, is depicted wearing a horned helmet and surrounded by a river of flowing water. (credit: “Enki (detail of the Adda seal)” by British Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The temples dedicated to the gods supported complex administrations consisting of singers, scribes, diviners, snake charmers, stone carvers, guards, exorcists, and male and female priests. Temple rituals included the carefully choreographed serving of meals for the gods accompanied by music, during which the gods were believed to consume the essence of the food provided. (Afterward, the actual food was consumed by the temple staff and the king.) The temple staff also participated in elaborate religious festivals performed in the cities, such as the New Year Festival. During these events, the divine images of the gods were carried from the temples and throughout the town in a grand procession where everyone might catch a glimpse of the deity.

Since Assyria was also part of the larger Mesopotamian world, there were many social and cultural similarities between the Babylonians and the Assyrians. The Assyrian population was made up of four hierarchically organized classes: the nobility, the professional class, the peasantry, and the enslaved. The nobility occupied the highest position and controlled large estates. Members of this class could expect to receive a thorough education in preparation for serving in elite positions within the empire, such as military officers, governors, and high-ranking priests. Priests were important not only as interpreters of divine will but also as points of connection between the center of political power and the rest of the empire.

The large professional class included a host of skilled groups, from bankers and physicians to scribes and merchants. Each group maintained its own guild, which enforced high professional standards and saw to it

that proper taxes were paid. The largest class, and the least well documented, was the peasantry. Most in this group were almost certainly poor farmers who worked the lands of the higher classes. At the very bottom of the social order were the enslaved, the majority of whom had been captured during war. They often worked the most dangerous jobs and had almost no rights. Those enslaved not by war but by unpaid debt had a somewhat higher status and could own property, conduct business, and even buy their way out of slavery in rare instances.

Above all these classes was the household of the Assyrian king. The kings of Assyria were considered viceroys of the gods, especially the chief deity Asshur. They were expected to emulate the gods through their own virtuous behavior and to act in accordance with divine omens interpreted by religious advisers. In acting on the omens, the ruler was fulfilling the dual role of defender of order against chaos and representative of humanity's interests. When times were difficult and the gods displeased, the king might be expected to subject himself to penalties in order to calm the heavenly ire. For example, during the annual New Year Festival, the king underwent a form of ritual humiliation intended to satisfy the gods and protect his people from harm. In extreme situations, he might even need to symbolically die in order to appease the gods. In these instances, the king would step back and allow a substitute king to rule in his place for a period of weeks or months. Once that time was over, the substitute king was killed and the actual king returned to power.

The constant wars of conquest undertaken during the Neo-Assyrian Empire necessitated a highly skilled and well-organized standing army. This army included charioteers, cavalry, archers, and wielders of slings and spears ([Figure 4.12](#)). All Assyrian men were expected to serve some period of military service. The king was the official head of the army, and his chief officials were high-ranking military officers. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was effectively a military state, and it was demonstrably efficient at expanding its territory and keeping its vassals in line.



**FIGURE 4.12** The Victorious Assyrian Army. These large stone reliefs from the late eighth century BCE were carved to decorate an Assyrian palace or public building. They depict victorious Assyrian soldiers returning from battle carrying the heads of their enemies and standing on their headless bodies. (credit: “Orthostats showing Assyrian soldiers, Tell Tayinat, Amuq Valley, Iron Age, 738 BC, limestone” by “Daderot”/Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Those who defied the Assyrian war machine could expect swift and devastating consequences, including public torture and mutilation to demonstrate the price of rebellion (a response scholars have called “calculated frightfulness”). Another tactic to shut down regular or particularly difficult rebellions was the forced

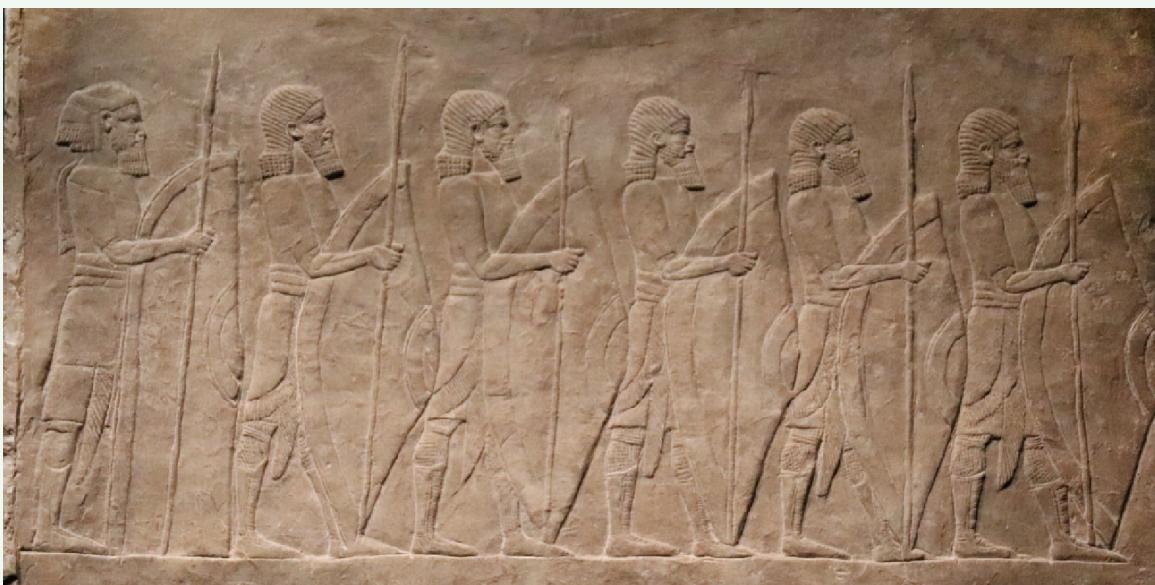
deportation of entire populations to other parts of the empire. The elite and skilled in a city were compelled to move to a previously depopulated region, there to be steadily assimilated into the surrounding culture until they became culturally indistinguishable from other Assyrians.

## BEYOND THE BOOK

### The Neo-Assyrian War Machine

Inscriptions, art, and even the Bible attest that the Neo-Assyrian military at its height was the most modern and efficient in the ancient world. Unlike other armies whose farmer-soldiers could fight only in summer, the Neo-Assyrians were a highly trained professional standing army of both male citizens and subject peoples. Training and the ability to fight year-round gave a considerable advantage and transformed the waging of war in the Near East.

Specialized groups worked together in battle. A standard Neo-Assyrian infantry team included spear fighters as well as archers and slingers who provided cover in battle ([Figure 4.13](#)).



**FIGURE 4.13** Assyrian Spear Fighters. This large seventh-century BCE stone relief from the wall of a palace in Nineveh shows a line of Assyrian soldiers with large shields and spears. (credit: modification of work “Gypsum Wall Panel Relief, North Palace, Nineveh, Iraq, 645-635 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

The archers used composite bows, a design capable of firing accurately at a range of four hundred feet ([Figure 4.14](#)).



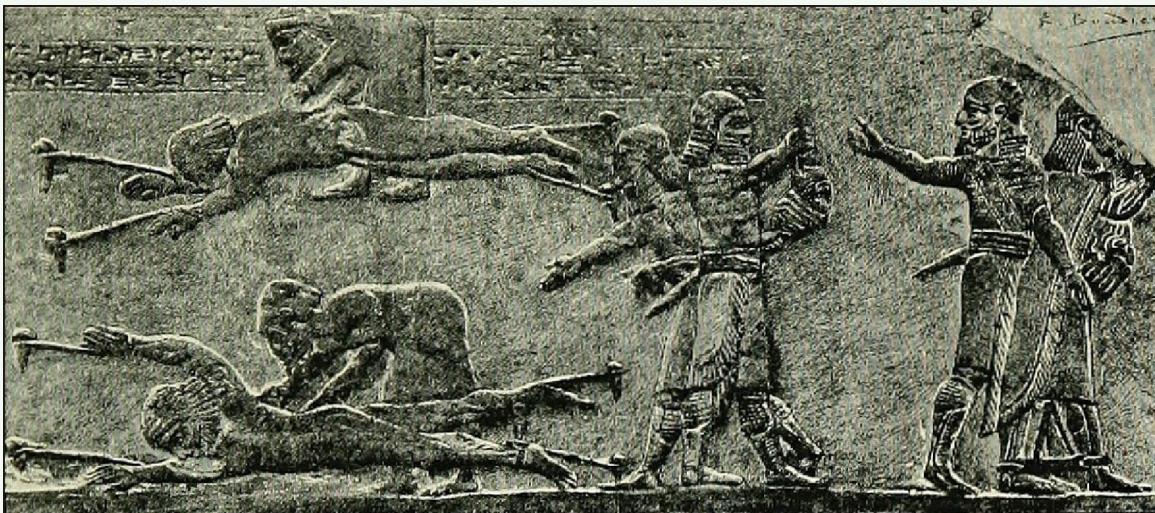
**FIGURE 4.14** Neo-Assyrian Archers. Helmeted Neo-Assyrian archers carry large bows in this relief from about the eighth century BCE, which once decorated the Palace of Sennacherib. (credit: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Armed Soldiers, Palace of King Sennacherib (704-689 BC)” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Four-wheeled chariots had featured in Mesopotamian warfare since at least 3000 BCE, but the two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariot that appeared around 2000 BCE proved far superior (Figure 4.15). Neo-Assyrian fighters often assembled in squadrons of fifty chariots, each with a driver and an archer carrying swords and clubs for close combat.



**FIGURE 4.15 Assyrian Charioteers.** This Assyrian stone relief from the ninth century shows charioteers on a lion hunt; a similar vehicle served in battle. (credit: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Lion Hunt, Nimrud, 883-859 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Though mighty, the Neo-Assyrians tried to avoid warfare, usually by demanding a besieged city surrender without a fight. But if forced, they used “calculated frightfulness” to demonstrate the price of resistance, inflicting various forms of torture on the conquered peoples ([Figure 4.16](#)).



**FIGURE 4.16 Resistance to Neo-Assyrian Rule.** This stone relief made after a battle against the Elamites in 653 BCE shows two rebellious chiefs staked to the ground and being flayed alive. Such displays would remind other chiefs of what awaited resistance to Neo-Assyrian rule. (credit: modification of work “Image from page 248 of ‘History of Egypt, Chaldea, Syria, Babylonia and Assyria’ (1903)” by Internet Archive Book Images/Flickr, Public Domain)

- 
- Why might some rulers have resisted Neo-Assyrian control despite knowing the cost?
  - What set the military of the Neo-Assyrians apart from their rivals? How did their use of technology increase the severity and frequency of warfare in the Near East?

Hittite society differed dramatically from that of the Assyrians and Babylonians. The entire empire included only a few large cities, like Hattusas, and most people lived in small rural villages or towns. With the exception of some leased acreage, village land was mostly held in common and worked by the people. Early in Hittite history, enslaved people had been relatively rare, but they became more numerous later on as the number of war captives rose. The Hittites practiced **chattel slavery**, meaning enslaved people were considered property and could be sold at will. They were frequently put to work in agricultural settings to free Hittite citizens for military service.

The religion of the Hittites incorporated elements from a number of different religious traditions, including that of Mesopotamia. Divination rituals, for example, were essentially Mesopotamian in origin and included studying the organs of sacrificed animals, consulting female soothsayers, and observing the movement of birds. Among the most important gods were the sun goddess Arinna and her consort the weather god Tarhunna ([Figure 4.17](#)). The former oversaw the government of the king and queen, the latter the rains and war. The king was the high priest and was responsible for performing specific rites at major religious festivals, such as the New Year Festival when gods laid out the course of events for the coming year. The people were expected to do their part by performing religious rites at cult centers, such as giving sacrificed animals and food and drink to the gods.



**FIGURE 4.17** The Hittite Weather God Tarhunna. This stone relief made between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE depicts the Hittite weather god Tarhunna. He is holding his traditional symbols, an axe in one hand and a three-pronged thunderbolt in the other. (credit: “God of Thunder. Hittite relief from Samal (now Zincirli)” by “Maur”/Pergamonmuseum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 4.2 Egypt's New Kingdom

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the causes and consequences of the Hyksos invasion
- Analyze the successes and failures of key New Kingdom pharaohs
- Discuss Egypt's interaction with its neighbors via immigration and trade
- Identify the political and religious innovations of Egypt's New Kingdom

During the New Kingdom period, Egyptian pharaohs reunited Upper and Lower Egypt following two centuries of foreign rule. They also ended the isolation that had been typical of the Old and Middle Kingdoms and embarked on expansionist conquests. The New Kingdom pharaohs were among the greatest warriors and builders in Egyptian history. As a result of their conquests, trade flourished with the Near East and other areas, and significant advances took place in the arts.

### The Hyksos in Egypt

As centralized power in Egypt declined during the late Middle Kingdom, Egyptians were less able to enforce their borders and preserve their state's integrity. The result was that Semitic-speaking immigrants from Canaan flowed into the Nile delta. It is not entirely clear to historians what prompted these Hyksos to leave Canaan, but some suspect they were driven into Egypt by foreign invasion of their land. Others suggest the early Hyksos may have been traders who settled in Egypt and later brought their extended families and others. However it happened, by about 1720 BCE, they were so numerous in Lower Egypt that some of their chieftains began to assert control over many local areas. This transformation coincided with the onset of the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1720–1540 BCE) and the general collapse of centralized Egyptian rule.

Over the next several decades, many more Canaanite migrants made their way across the Sinai and into Lower Egypt. During this period, several Egyptian princes held onto power despite the changes occurring around them. Then, around 1650 BCE, one group of recently arrived Canaanites challenged the remaining princes, overthrew them, and assumed control of the entire delta, inaugurating an important new period in Egyptian history.

These Canaanites are often referred to as the Hyksos. While that name is a much later Greek corruption of the Egyptian *hekau khasut*, meaning “chieftains of foreign lands,” it has stuck. The Hyksos ruled the delta for more than a century, from approximately 1650 to 1540 BCE. After they had been defeated, Egyptian tradition described their rule as one of wanton destruction, including the enslavement of Egyptians, the burning of cities, and the desecration of shrines. However, these descriptions are almost certainly rooted more in later New Kingdom propaganda than in reality. Like many others who came to Egypt, the Hyksos readily adopted Egyptian culture, art, language, writing, and religion. They established their own dynasty but relied on Egyptian patterns of rule and even included Egyptians in their bureaucracies.

Hyksos rule appears to have benefited Egypt in a number of ways. It was likely the Hyksos who brought sophisticated bronze-making technology into Egypt from Canaan, for example. The advantages of bronze over softer materials like copper were obvious to Egyptians, and the metal soon became the material of choice for weapons, armor, and other tools where hardness was desired. The Hyksos also introduced composite-bow technology (which made archery faster and more accurate), new types of protective armor, and most importantly, the horse-drawn, lighter-weight chariot with spoked wheels. They may have brought the horse itself to Egypt in this period, but we do not know for sure. The chariot, however, was an especially important arrival. By the 1500s BCE, horse-drawn chariots with riders armed with powerful and highly accurate composite bows had become a staple of Egyptian militaries, just as they were across all the powerful empires and kingdoms of the Near East.

During this Second Intermediate Period, the once-vast domains of Middle Kingdom Egypt were effectively

divided into three parts: the Hyksos kingdom in Lower Egypt (nearest the Mediterranean), the kingdom of Kush far upriver beyond the first cataract (an area of shallow rapids), and the Theban kingdom of Upper Egypt ([Figure 4.18](#)). Occupying all of Lower Egypt, the Hyksos kingdom had access to Canaan and by extension to the rest of the Near East. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence attest to a considerable flow of trade between Lower Egypt and the Canaanites in Palestine and Syria, though the extent of the Hyksos' political power beyond Egypt was likely limited to a few city-states in Palestine, if that.



**FIGURE 4.18 Three Kingdoms in Egypt.** During the Second Intermediate Period, Egypt was effectively divided into three kingdoms, those of the Hyksos, the Kush, and the Thebans. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

In the Theban kingdom, centered on the city of Thebes, indigenous Egyptian rulers still held sway. It is possible that in the early years of their rule in Lower Egypt, the Hyksos were able to exert some indirect control over Thebes, but distance made direct rule nearly impossible. Still, the connections between the two kingdoms continued, perhaps with some intermarrying.

The Theban kings resisted Hyksos control of Lower Egypt. However, an alliance between the Hyksos and the kingdom of Kush in the far south made any effort to oust the Hyksos extremely risky. It was only beginning in the 1550s BCE that a string of Theban Egyptian rulers were able to go on the offensive against the Hyksos. After multiple failed attempts, these rulers eventually succeeded in capturing large portions of Hyksos territory and bringing the fight to the edges of Avaris, the capital of Hyksos Egypt. By approximately 1540 BCE, Pharaoh Ahmose I had broken the defenses around Avaris, destroyed the Hyksos kingdom, and reasserted Egyptian power in Lower Egypt ([Figure 4.19](#)). He then turned his attention south to Kush and east to Palestine, extending Egyptian control over these regions as well. His reign ushered in a new period of Egyptian greatness called the New Kingdom.



**FIGURE 4.19 Ahmose I.** This colorized image of a decorative feature on the blade of a ceremonial Egyptian axe shows Pharaoh Ahmose I killing a Hyksos. Ahmose's military victories ushered in Egypt's New Kingdom period. (credit: "Pharaoh Ahmose I slaying a Hyksos (axe of Ahmose I, from the Treasure of Queen Aahhotep II) Colorized per source" by Georges Émile Jules Daressy/Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte /Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### The Pharaohs of the New Kingdom

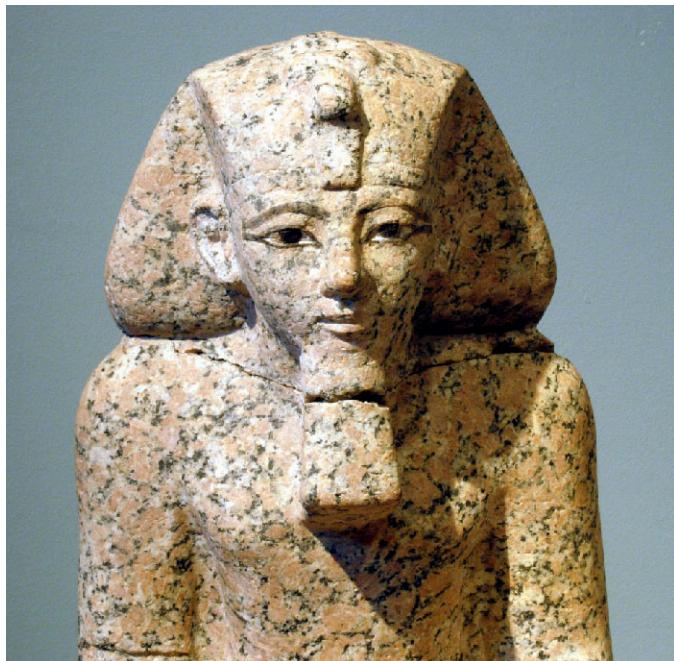
The New Kingdom period (c. 1550–1069 BCE) represents the pinnacle of Egyptian power and influence in the Near East. During this time, Egypt not only reconquered the territory it had lost following the collapse of the Middle Kingdom, but it also extended its reach deep into the Libyan Desert, far south into Nubia, and eventually east as far as northern Syria. This expansion made Egypt the Mediterranean superpower of its day. So it is not surprising that the pharaohs of this period are some of the best known. They include the conqueror Amenhotep I, the indomitable Queen Hatshepsut, "the magnificent" Amenhotep III, the transformative Akhenaten, and the highly celebrated Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great. Many came to power at a young age and ruled for an extended period of time that allowed for many accomplishments. They also commanded massive and highly trained armies and had at their disposal a seemingly endless supply of wealth, with which they constructed some of the most impressive architectural treasures of the entire Near East.

The New Kingdom began with the reign of Ahmose, the pharaoh who recovered not only Lower Egypt but also Nubia and Palestine. When he died in 1525 BCE, his oldest surviving son, Amenhotep I, assumed control. Amenhotep then married one of his sisters, Meritamun, as was common in this period and as the gods of Egyptian myth were believed to have done.

The rise of the early New Kingdom pharaohs coincided with the elevation of a previously minor deity, the Thebans' patron god Amun. Respect for him merged with regard for Re, the patron of the monarchy, and he became known as Amun-Re. Amenhotep I and his successors built temples and other major public works in his honor, particularly the great Temple of Amun at Karnak. Thebes also had special importance for the New Kingdom pharaohs as the state's religious capital and the favored royal burial place, commonly called the Valley of the Kings.

Dying without an heir, Amenhotep I was succeeded by Thutmose I, a general who may have been a distant relative. Thutmose I and his son Thutmose II both campaigned in Nubia and Syria. The father marched his armies all the way to the Euphrates River in Syria, likely as a show of force against emerging powers in the region. The son married his sister Hatshepsut, who gave birth to a daughter but not a son. So when Thutmose II died in 1479 BCE, his two-year-old son conceived by a concubine assumed the throne as Thutmose III.

Acting as regent for the infant pharaoh, Hatshepsut inaugurated a very unusual period in Egyptian history. Rather than merely rule in the background as a typical regent would, she proclaimed herself co-regent with her stepson and soon assumed the title of pharaoh. Statues of her from this period depict her wearing the pharaonic headdress and ceremonial beard and give her the broad torso more typical of a male ([Figure 4.20](#)). Such masculine features were not an attempt to obscure her femininity but rather a recognition that all the symbolic representations of Egyptian pharaohs were male. Inscriptions clearly indicated that she was a woman. She was called the “Daughter of Re,” and feminine word endings appear in some inscriptions, such as “His Majesty, Herself.”



**FIGURE 4.20** Pharaoh Hatshepsut. This granite statue of a kneeling Pharaoh Hatshepsut, carved in the fifteenth century BCE and originally painted, measures just over twenty-seven inches high. As this detail shows, the work depicts her with male features including a flat chest and a beard. (credit: “Kneeling statue of Hatshepsut” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1923/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As Egyptian pharaohs had done for many centuries, Hatshepsut also claimed divinity. While the reasons for this long-standing belief remain unclear and may never be fully understood, this is one of the features of Egyptian culture that made it very different from that of Mesopotamian contemporaries, who usually held kings to be only viceroys of the gods, not gods themselves. Unlike earlier pharaonic claims of divinity, however, Hatshepsut’s included a detailed account of her heavenly origins in the form of a poem she had inscribed on the walls of her mortuary temple for all to see. In the poem, Amun-Re himself assumes the form of Thutmose I and, after conceiving Hatshepsut with her mother, predicts that his child will rule all Egypt and elevate it to unsurpassed glory. The poem then describes how a council of Egyptian gods proclaimed Hatshepsut’s earthly authority, and how Thutmose I recognized her divinity and named her his rightful successor.

As both a woman and a regent, Hatshepsut was prudent to thus legitimate her rule. And by all accounts, the heavenly prophecies about her reign proved accurate. For twenty-one years she ruled over a prosperous and dominant Egypt, even conducting military campaigns into Nubia and possibly southern Palestine. At one

point, she sent a large fleet south into a mysterious land the Egyptians called Punt, likely coastal East Africa near modern Somalia, where her ships collected and brought back a cargo of exotic plants, animals, precious metals, and spices.

Construction of Hatshepsut's three-tiered mortuary temple began shortly after she took the throne and likely lasted many years. The temple was built into the side of a cliff and included a series of ramps that took visitors through garden courtyards, past large obelisks and statues, and toward a shrine to Amun at the top ([Figure 4.21](#)). In the years after her death, elaborate rituals including libations, food offerings to the gods, purification rituals, recitations, and singing were performed by the priests who managed the enormous complex.



**FIGURE 4.21** The Temple of Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut's mortuary temple is located at Deir el-Bahri, beneath cliffs near the Valley of the Kings. Its large ramps and tiers were designed to blend neatly into the cliff behind it. (credit: modification of work "Temple of Hatshepsut" by Hesham Ebaid/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0)

When Hatshepsut died in 1458 BCE, her stepson Thutmose III took control as sole ruler in Egypt for the first time. He was about thirty years old by then and had extensive military training. This preparation served him well, for soon he faced a Hittite and northern Mesopotamian threat to Egypt's control in Syria and Palestine. Leading his armies himself, he was able to neutralize the threats, launch a major raid across the Euphrates River, and take numerous Canaanite princes hostage so as to deter any uprisings from his vassals.

It was only late in his reign that Thutmose III began to eliminate his predecessor from history. He had Hatshepsut's statues toppled and smashed, her name removed from monuments, and references to her scrubbed from the official king lists. The evidence suggests that he harbored no ill will toward his stepmother. Instead, her erasure from the record was probably part of Thutmose's process of paving the way for his son to rule in his own right in the future, without a dominant female like his stepmother to assert control.

Amenhotep II, son of Thutmose III, continued the successful military campaigns against both Hittite and Mesopotamian threats to Egyptian influence in Palestine and Syria. His rule was followed by the short reign of

Thutmose IV, likely a younger son, and the long and especially prosperous rule of Amenhotep III, known as “the Magnificent.”

Amenhotep III’s nearly forty-year reign in the fourteenth century BCE was a time of extended peace during which numerous monuments to Egyptian greatness were constructed. These included the sumptuous palace at Thebes, the Serapeum—a temple of the god Serapis—at Saqqara, many temples for other gods, Amenhotep’s own large mortuary temple, and a great many statues of himself. His reign was also marked by an increased emphasis on the Egyptian sun god Aton, one of many manifestations of Re. Amenhotep’s palace at Thebes and the large royal barge upon which he and his queen glided along the Nile for important religious events were named for Aton. Toward the end of Amenhotep III’s reign, he officially proclaimed himself the personification of Aton, and his servants greeted him as such.

Under Amenhotep III’s heir Amenhotep IV, the emphasis on Aton reached its fullest extent. Amenhotep IV built a new city downriver from Thebes that he called Amarna, “the place where the solar orb is transformed.” It was also known as Akhetaton. The following year, he changed his own name to Akhenaten, meaning “the transfigured spirit of the solar orb,” and moved himself and his entire family to the new city. Akhenaten later closed the temples of the other major Egyptian gods and ordered representations of them destroyed and their names chiseled off monuments. The pharaoh and his wife Queen Nefertiti now became the chief priests of a new cult built around Aton ([Figure 4.22](#)).



**FIGURE 4.22 Nefertiti.** One of the most recognizable New Kingdom artifacts is a nineteen-inch limestone bust of Queen Nefertiti that was made in about 1345 BCE and discovered at Amarna, Egypt, in 1912. (credit: “Nefertiti Statue photo from Rosicrucian Museum, replica from the original at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin” by E. Michael Smith “Chiefio”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In the emerging new religion, people were instructed to worship the pharaoh. This made Akhenaten and Nefertiti intermediaries between the people and their god, eliminating the need for powerful priests like those of Amun ([Figure 4.23](#)). Many theories have been proposed to explain Akhenaten’s motive for founding a new monotheistic religion, including sincere belief, but most have been discarded. It is possible he was merely attempting to revert to an older model of religious practice in which the king was the primary state deity.



**FIGURE 4.23 Akhenaten and Nefertiti.** This small stone engraving made during his lifetime shows Pharaoh Akhenaten at left, sitting beneath the Aton (the solar orb) with his queen, Nefertiti. Akhenaten cradles one of their three daughters, while Nefertiti holds the other two on her lap and her shoulder. (credit: “Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and three daughters beneath the Aten” by Richard Mortel/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

### DUELING VOICES

#### The Many Strange Faces of Akhenaten

Mystery and debate have surrounded the pharaoh Akhenaten ever since archaeologists first uncovered the lost city of Akhetaton in the 1880s. He has been called a heretic, a revolutionary, a lunatic, and more. Some of the fascination comes from the theory that he gave birth to modern monotheism. Others have seen in him a way to reject monotheism entirely.

In 1910, the British Egyptologist Arthur Weigall published a biography called *The Life and Times of Akhnaton* in which he argued that the Egyptian pharaoh had experienced a “pre-Christian revelation.” The book was a bestseller in Europe, drawing Christian readers eager to learn about a possible connection between their religion and Ancient Egypt.

In 1939, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed his own interpretation of Akhenaten’s significance in his biography of Moses, *Moses and Monotheism*, arguing that Moses was in fact a priest of Akhenaten’s new religion. When Akhenaten died and his religion was washed away, Moses was forced to flee Egypt. His religious ideas, according to Freud, passed to the people of Canaan and led to the monotheistic religion of Judaism.

In the 1930s and 1940s, some followers of the Nazi movement in Germany became fascinated with the life of Akhenaten. Eager to reject Christianity because of its connections of Judaism, they supported a revival of pre-Christian paganism rooted in nature worship, which they felt was more authentically German. Reading about Akhenaten and seeing his artifacts on display in the Berlin Museum, they could not help but see similarities between his religion and the pagan sun-worshipping religion they were trying to advance in Germany. Their ideas led to a number of books, like Savitri Devi's 1939 *A Perfect Man: Akhnaton, King of Egypt* and Josef Magnus Wehner's 1944 novel *Akhenaten and Nefertiti: A Tale from Ancient Egypt*.

Devi actually wrote several books about Akhenaten and his religion. Few today find her analysis worth considering, but they are a reminder of the way Akhenaten's religious movement has fascinated and influenced people thousands of years after his death.

- Try developing your own interpretation of Akhenaten's religious motivation. Consider what you learned about the actual Akhenaten as well as any other elements you want to imagine.
- Why do you think early twentieth-century writers saw what they wanted to see in the life and religion of Akhenaten? Can you think of any examples of this phenomenon today?

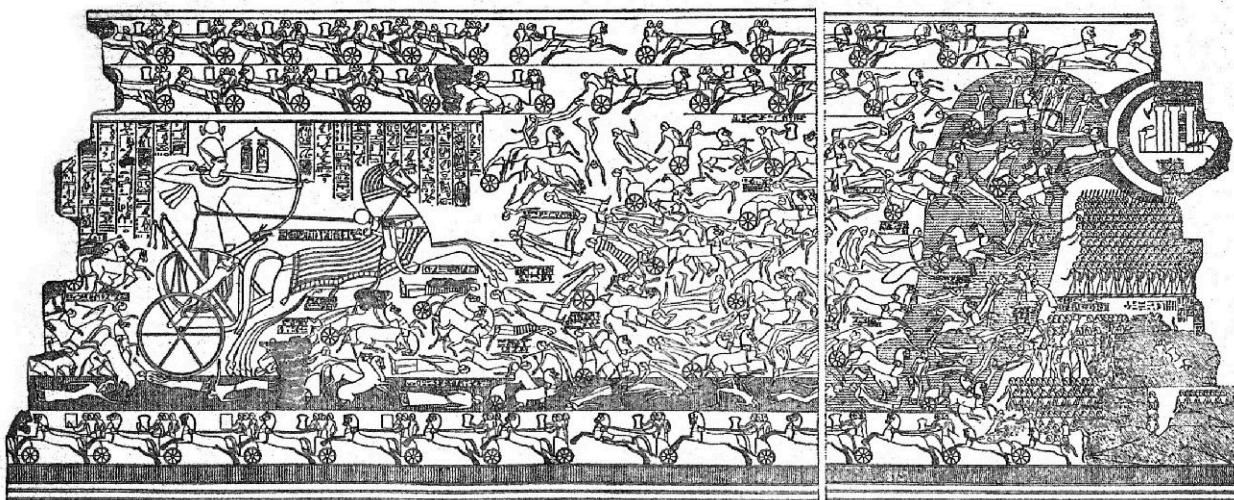
One reason many questions about him remain is that after Akhenaten died in about 1336 BCE, Egyptians reverted to their older religious traditions and attempted to erase this period from their history. The process was begun by his successor Smenkhkare and accelerated under the pharaoh who followed, Tutankhamun. These two young and short-lived pharaohs ushered Egypt back to the old faith, abandoning the city of Akhetaten, returning to Memphis, and beginning repairs on the temples desecrated under the previous regime. Tutankhamun also sent his armies into Nubia and Canaan to put down revolts and challenge the threat posed by the Hittites. He may have been leading one of these armies when he was killed, at the age of only eighteen or nineteen. The next pharaohs continued restoring the old religions, even scratching out references to the Aton and destroying what remained of Akhetaten.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

In November 1922, British archaeologist Howard Carter became the first person to enter the interior chambers of [King Tutankhamun's tomb](https://openstax.org/l/77KingTu) (<https://openstax.org/l/77KingTu>) in thousands of years. The discovery of the tomb caused excitement and fascination around the world and began a years-long excavation and cataloging of its many treasures. Take a look at these colorized images of photos taken during the excavation process to see why. (Note that the excavation techniques you see in the photos were often destructive and would never be used today.)

When Horemheb, the final pharaoh of this first dynasty of the New Kingdom, died childless, a military commander named Ramesses I took control and began a new dynasty. His heirs, sometimes called the **Ramesside kings**, worked hard to restore Egypt to greatness through impressive military and building campaigns. The greatest pharaoh of this period, and the last great pharaoh of the New Kingdom, was Ramesses II, who ruled Egypt for more than sixty-five years from 1279 to 1213 BCE.

During his long reign, Ramesses II fought several wars with the Hittites in Syria and launched additional wars against the Libyans to the west of Egypt. The threat from the Hittites was especially pronounced in this period. In an attempt to push them back and restore Egyptian influence in Syria, Ramesses II led an army of twenty thousand into Syria to retake the important city of Qadesh. During the fighting, Ramesses himself led several chariots straight into the Hittite lines. It was only by a combination of luck and Hittite negligence that he and his forces survived and were able to ultimately beat back the enemy ([Figure 4.24](#)). While the attempt to recapture Qadesh failed, once he was safely home, Ramesses II claimed the campaign was a success.



**FIGURE 4.24** Ramses II. This sketch of an engraving on a wall of the mortuary temple of Pharaoh Ramesses II depicts him (on the left) as a larger-than-life charioteer firing arrows into the Hittite army at the Battle of Qadesh. The Egyptian records of the battle note that the pharaoh demonstrated great bravery as he led a small group of chariots into the fray. (credit: modification of work “Battle scene from the Great Kadesh reliefs of Ramses II on the Walls of the Ramesseum” by A History Of Egypt From The Earliest Times To The Persian Conquest by James Henry Breasted/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The failed attempt to retake Qadesh helped convince Ramesses to agree to a peace treaty with the Hittites in approximately 1258 BCE. The threat they continued to pose also motivated him to build a new capital in the Nile delta, much closer to Canaan. Called Pi-Ramesses (“House of Ramesses”), it included a great number of impressive monuments, some with reliefs showing the pharaoh defeating the Hittites. Beyond the building campaigns in Pi-Ramesses, Ramesses II also enlarged and beautified several additional temples in Thebes and other locations. However, the greatest monuments to his rule were the two temples he built at Abu Simbel, far to the south in Nubia. The more impressive of the two is called the Great Temple at Abu Simbel. It was carved into the side of a mountain and includes four massive seated statues of Ramesses II himself. A passageway between the two center statues leads to chambers that stretch hundreds of feet into the sandstone ([Figure 4.25](#)). The engineers who designed the temple constructed it such that twice a year, the rays of the sun would enter the building at dawn and bathe the gods placed there in light.



**FIGURE 4.25** The Temple at Abu Simbel. In 1968, Ramesses II's thirteenth-century BCE temple at Abu Simbel was relocated because the creation of a large dam on the Nile was going to flood the original site. This photograph shows the structure as it looks today. (credit: “Abu Simbel Temple of Ramesses II” by “Than217”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### Egypt’s Foreign Policy

Powerful pharaohs used war beyond their borders to keep their rivals and other major powers in check. Thutmose III had led armies into both Nubia and Canaan for this purpose. In Canaan, his efforts were directed at blunting the growing influence of Mitanni, a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia. The rise of Mitanni led a number of Canaanite leaders who had previously pledged their allegiance to Egypt to instead seek Mitanni protection. By campaigning in Canaan several times, Thutmose III was able to bring the Canaanite regions back into Egypt’s orbit. He also directly attacked Mitanni itself in order to weaken its control in the region. His numerous successors continued these efforts, thus ensuring Egypt’s influence in Canaan. Amenhotep II brought back thousands of prisoners and a wealth of treasure from his campaigns in the region, for example. Well over a century later, Seti I and Ramesses II were still pursuing these efforts to preserve Egyptian dominance.

Pharaohs also frequently took hostages, usually members of the royal families of subject kingdoms. Thutmose III brought back a number of the sons of Canaanite kings after his campaigns, who were raised and educated in Egypt and learned Egyptian customs. Apart from serving as cultural bridges, hostages also helped strengthen Egypt’s relationships with its subject realms by reducing the likelihood their fathers would rebel in the future. Another means of improving relations with other kingdoms was marriage. Thutmose IV married one of the daughters of the Mitanni king as part of an agreement intended to check the power of the Hittites.

While wars in foreign lands could pacify enemies and preserve Egypt’s international influence, military campaigns also had a strong economic component. Conquering new territory meant conquering new wealth that could be used to benefit the state. Records of just one of Thutmose III’s campaigns in Canaan note that the booty included more than two thousand horses and twenty thousand sheep, almost two thousand goats, wheat,

weapons, equipment, captives, and items made of precious metals, such as copper from mines in the Sinai. Descriptions of campaigns in Nubia recount similar acquisitions. Conquered peoples were also expected to provide annual tribute to the Egyptian state.

And there were benefits from maintaining control over vital trade routes and centers of commerce. The eastern Mediterranean regions of Canaan and Syria included routes connecting Mesopotamia with the sea and Cyprus. Major trading centers included Hazor and Qadesh. Megiddo was located at a mountain pass on the trade routes connecting Mesopotamia with important Canaanite cities on the way to Egypt (Figure 4.26). The value of these trade routes and commercial centers prompted Egypt to launch several campaigns into the area. Battles were fought at Qadesh and Megiddo in an effort to keep the Hittite and Mitanni kingdoms out and maintain Egyptian control over the area. These famous battles came at enormous cost in troops and wealth, and the results were mixed. The Battle of Qadesh was at best a draw. The Battle of Megiddo, fought in the fifteenth century BCE by the forces of Thutmose III, was largely an Egyptian success and led to the kingdom establishing firm control over the larger region.



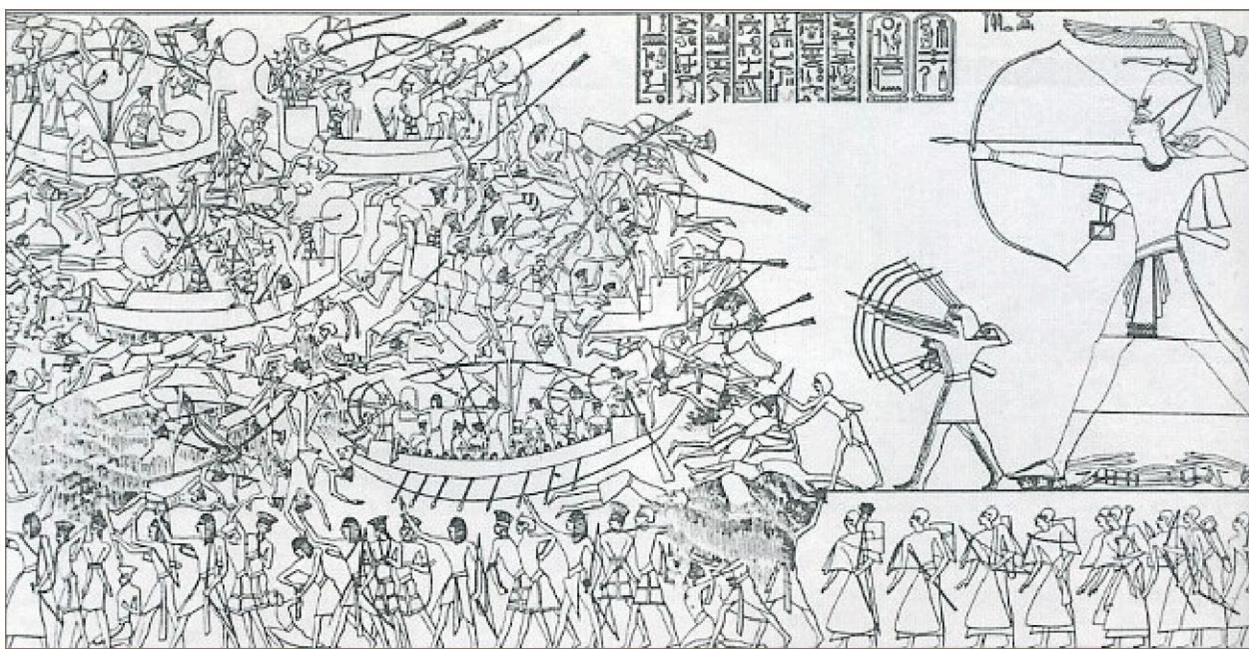
**FIGURE 4.26** Trade Routes in the Eastern Mediterranean. The regions of Canaan and Syria connected vital trade routes (shown in red) that ran from Mesopotamia to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula as well as Anatolia.  
 (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

By maintaining their influence in Canaan, Syria, and Nubia, Egyptian pharaohs preserved the state's access to vital trading resources. Tin and copper were transported from Anatolia via trading routes through Canaan. Phoenicia in northwestern Canaan was a major source of the cedar used to construct Egyptian ships. It was also through the Phoenician port city of Byblos that Egyptian papyrus frequently flowed to other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek name for book, *biblos*, reflects this connection with Byblos and is the ancient origin of the English word “bible.” Ivory, ebony, leopard skins, incense, and gold were procured in Nubia. There were also mines in the Sinai for turquoise, alabaster, and quartzite. Trade goods coming from Egypt to other parts of the world included pottery, grains, papyrus, linen, and many other items. To protect the flow of trade, Egypt provided border protection, supervised toll roads, and generally ensured the safety of

merchants. Records from New Kingdom Egypt note frequent deliveries of trade goods from foreign allies such as Mitanni, Babylon, and others. They are described as gifts, but scholars believe they were almost certainly trade.

Toward the end of the New Kingdom era, Egypt's ability to maintain control over the trade routes in Canaan and Syria declined steadily. Instability in the commercial centers and banditry on the roads became more common. One travel report from the tail end of the New Kingdom (c. 1100 BCE) describes some of the problems experienced by an Egyptian envoy sent to Phoenicia to buy a supply of cedar. First he was robbed by his own crew, then he was refused the cedar he was promised in Phoenicia, and finally he was attacked by roving migrants. He appealed to officials in Egypt, but little could be done. In earlier centuries, such difficulties would have been unthinkable, but by 1100 BCE, Egypt's influence in the region was no longer strong.

Many of the problems the envoy described were symptoms of the Late Bronze Age Collapse and were out of Egypt's control. One of the consequences of this larger civilizational decline was that large numbers of migrants, such as those who attacked the envoy, were sweeping across the eastern Mediterranean bringing chaos and destruction. An Egyptian inscription from 1208 BCE described them as "coming from the sea," which has led modern scholars to refer to them as the Sea Peoples ([Figure 4.27](#)). It appears that many came from the Aegean area.



**FIGURE 4.27** An Attack by the Sea Peoples. This redrawing of a wall relief from the Temple of Ramesses III records the arrival of a group of Sea People (on the left) and the Egyptians led by Ramesses (the larger-than-life archer on the right) preparing to defend themselves. (credit: modification of work "A depiction of the army of Ramesses III fighting the Sea Peoples" by "Seebeer"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As inscriptions from the period demonstrate, Egypt resisted the invading forces. Many of the Sea Peoples were likely killed. But many others settled in Egypt and assimilated there, just as they did across the entire eastern Mediterranean. All this disruption took a toll on the region, however. The Mycenaean kingdoms in Greece and the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia suffered greatly and collapsed. City-states across Canaan were especially hard hit. Even kingdoms far from the Mediterranean, like Assyria and Babylon, weakened during this time of troubles.

Though Egypt proved more able to withstand the dangers of the period, it did experience problems. Grain prices, for example, soared during this time. Tomb robbing became common as workers who had not been paid found other ways to support their families. At the same time the Libyans and Sea Peoples were leading

their attacks in northern Egypt, Nubian subjects rose up in rebellion to Egypt's south. And the migrating Sea Peoples in Canaan greatly weakened Egypt's control of the region. By 1070 BCE, the challenges had been mounting for years, and the New Kingdom came to an end.

## 4.3 The Persian Empire

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

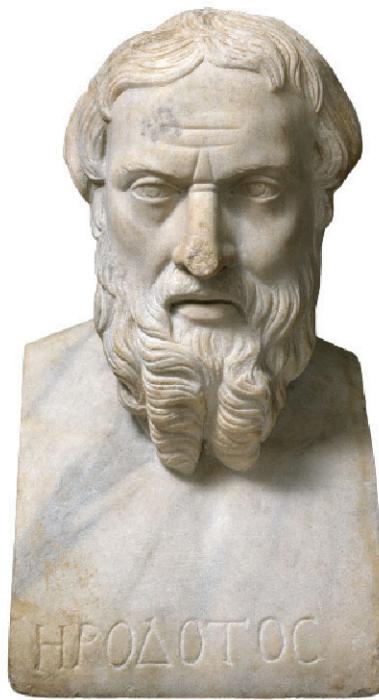
- Discuss the history of Persia through the reign of Darius I
- Describe the origin and tenets of Zoroastrianism
- Identify the achievements and innovations of the Persian Empire

In conquering Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt, the Neo-Assyrians created the largest empire the Near East had ever seen. Their dominance did not last, however, because Babylonia and Media destroyed the empire and carved up the spoils. But this proved to be a transitional period that set the stage for an empire that dwarfed even that of the Neo-Assyrians. Emerging from the area to the east of Mesopotamia, the founders of the Persian Empire proved to be both excellent warriors and efficient imperial organizers. Their kings commanded power, wealth, and authority over an area stretching from the Indus River to the Nile. Governors stationed in the many conquered regions served as extensions of the king's authority, and trade flowed along a large network of roads under Persian military protection. For two centuries, Persia was the undisputed superpower of the ancient world.

### The Rise of Persia

The origins of the Persians are murky and stretch back to the arrival of nomadic Indo-European speakers in the Near East, possibly as early as 2000 BCE. Those who reached Persia (modern Iran) are often described as Indo-Iranians or Indo-Aryans. They were generally pastoralists, relying on animal husbandry, living a mostly migratory life, and using the horse-drawn chariot. The extent to which they displaced or blended with existing groups in the region is not clear. From written records of the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the ninth century BCE, we know the Assyrians conducted military campaigns against and exacted tribute from an Indo-Iranian group called the Persians. The Persians lived in the southern reaches of the Zagros Mountains and along the Persian Gulf, in general proximity to the Medes with whom they shared many cultural traits.

Much of what we know about the early Persians comes from the work of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who was born about 484 BCE ([Figure 4.28](#)). According to Herodotus, Persia was made a vassal of Media in the seventh century BCE but freed itself in the sixth century BCE under the leadership of Cyrus II, also called Cyrus the Great. Inscriptions from the period suggest that Cyrus was likely a member of the Persian royal family, the Achaemenid dynasty. Once in power, he reorganized the Persian state and its military to mirror those of the Median Empire. This step included creating divisions for cavalry, archers, and infantry and setting up special training for the cavalry. Then, in 550 BCE, just a few years into his reign, Cyrus sent his military to challenge the Medes, whereupon the Median troops revolted, handed over their king, and accepted Cyrus's rule. He then proceeded to integrate the Median elite and officials into his own government. The Median domains had become the Persian Empire.



**FIGURE 4.28 Herodotus.** The ancient Greek historian Herodotus is one of our major sources for information about the Persian Empire. This roughly life-sized stone bust of him is a second-century Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE bronze statue. (credit: “Marble bust of Herodotus” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Between 550 and 539 BCE, Cyrus sent his armies east and west to expand his recently acquired realm. In 539 BCE, he turned his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, defeating its armies and marching into Babylon. His Persian Empire now incorporated the territories controlled by Babylonia, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Judah, and had become the largest empire to have existed in the Near East to that point. Organizing and administering this massive domain required the use of governors, whom Cyrus generally selected from local areas, a prudent move in a world where rebellions were common.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Cyrus the Great left a record of his conquest of Babylon inscribed on a clay spool about eight inches long. This artifact, now called the Cyrus Cylinder, was created in 539 BCE and promptly buried in the foundation of the city wall, to remain there until its discovery in 1879. Explore this link to the British Museum website to see a high-resolution image of the [Cyrus Cylinder](https://openstax.org/l/77CyrusCyl) (<https://openstax.org/l/77CyrusCyl>) and a translation of its inscriptions.

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Cyrus died in battle in 530 BCE, leaving the throne and empire to his son Cambyses II. The first task for Cambyses was to continue preparing for the invasion of Egypt his father had planned. A large fleet was built in the Mediterranean and a massive land force assembled for crossing the Sinai. The invasion began in 525 BCE. The defending Egyptians were soon overwhelmed, and the pharaoh retreated up the Nile but was captured. Having now added Egypt to his already large empire, Cambyses took on the role of pharaoh, adopting the proper titles and caring for the Egyptian religious institutions. This practice of respecting local traditions was a common feature of Persian expansion and helped to win support in newly acquired areas.

Under Cambyses II, the Persian Empire stretched from the edges of India to the shores of the Aral Sea, the Aegean coast of Anatolia, and the Nile River and included everything in between. Then, just as Cambyses was

reaching the height of his power, a Persian revolt broke out in 522 BCE in support of his brother Bardiya. On his way to put down the rebellion, Cambyses II died, leaving the future of the empire uncertain but allowing for the rise of possibly Persia's most famous and powerful leader, Darius I.

### Darius I and the Reorganization of the Empire

The events surrounding the rebellion of Cambyses II's brother Bardiya are unclear because a handful of different accounts survive. According to Herodotus, Cambyses ordered one of his trusted advisers to secretly murder Bardiya. Since no one knew Bardiya was dead, an impostor pretending to be him launched a rebellion against Cambyses, though after several months the false Bardiya was killed in a palace coup at the hands of Darius, an army officer who claimed descent from the royal house. Afterward, since neither Cambyses nor Bardiya had sons, Darius made himself king. Other accounts differ in some ways, and some scholars have speculated that Darius invented the story about a false Bardiya in order to legitimize his own coup against the real Bardiya and take the throne.

We may never know exactly what happened, but Darius was indeed able to grasp control of the Persian Empire in 522 BCE. However, it took more than a year for him to put down the ensuing rebellions, some possibly instigated by those who refused to recognize the legitimacy of his claim to the throne. Once these had been quelled, Darius commissioned an enormous relief inscription to be made on the cliff face of Mount Behistun. It shows a dominating figure of himself facing a number of bound former rebels, accompanied by lengthy descriptions of the rebellion and, in three different languages, Darius's version of the events that led to his rise to power ([Figure 4.29](#)). To further strengthen his claim on the throne, Darius integrated himself deeply into the royal line through a number of marriages, to the daughters of Cyrus II, the widow of Cambyses II, and two of Cambyses's sisters.



**FIGURE 4.29** The Behistun Relief. The massive Behistun Relief, more than eighty feet long and almost fifty feet high, shows a crowned Darius (on the left) with his foot on the impostor he claimed to have overthrown. Captive rebels and a narrative in three languages of Darius's version of events complete the carving. (credit: "Behistun Inscription" by "Hara1603"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Darius now set about reorganizing the empire, carving it into twenty different governing districts called

satrapies (Figure 4.30). Each **satrapy** was administered by a royal governor called a satrap, usually a trusted Persian or Median noble. Satraps answered directly to the king, had their own courts, wielded great power, and possessed vast lands within the satrapy. They often ruled from the large cities of the regions and were responsible for ensuring that their satrapy remained pacified and submitted its allotted taxes, though there were also local rulers within the region who managed affairs related to specific ethnic or religious groups. The only area not made into a satrapy was the Persian heartland, which was governed directly by the king.



**FIGURE 4.30 The Persian Empire.** The Persian Empire under Darius I reached from the edge of India in the east to Libya in the west. To manage this large empire, Darius divided it into twenty different satrapies. (credit: modification of work “Achaemenid Empire 500 BCE” by “Cattette”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Darius I and later kings had a number of tools at their disposal to keep the powerful satraps in line. For example, they frequently sent royal officials, known as the “eyes and ears of the great king,” to arrive unannounced and conduct audits, compiling detailed reports about how the satrapies were being governed that were sent directly to the king for review. If the reports were negative, the satraps could expect either removal or even execution at the hands of the region’s military garrison. These garrisons were used by the satraps to enforce the laws and maintain order, but they ultimately answered to the king and could discipline the satraps when necessary.

Communication between the satraps and the king was carried out through letters dictated to scribes and transmitted along royal roads. These roads constituted an impressive communication system that linked the many key cities of the empire with the Persian heartland and its cities, like Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae. While it was not new—the Neo-Assyrian Empire had its own network of roads that the Persians adopted and improved—it was a valuable tool for administering the large and complicated empire. Along the many royal roads of the empire were inns, resting places, and waystations with stables for horses. Safety was ensured by the troops stationed along the way, especially at key and vulnerable points. To move letters along the roads, a member of the army of mounted royal messengers would travel the roughly twenty miles to the first station, change horses, and continue to the next station. In this way, communication could move roughly two hundred miles in a single day.

## THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

### Persia and the U.S. Postal Service

The Persian Empire required a sophisticated communications network to move messages across its vast territory, so it relied on speedy couriers who traveled roads first developed by the Assyrians and then improved. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus commented on Persian communications in his famous *Histories*:

There is nothing that travels faster, and yet is mortal, than these couriers; the Persians invented this system, which works as follows. It is said that there are as many horses and men posted at intervals as there are days required for the entire journey, so that one horse and one man are assigned to each day. And neither snow nor rain nor heat nor dark of night keeps them from completing their appointed course as swiftly as possible. The first courier passes on the instructions to the second, the second to the third, and from there they are transmitted from one to another all the way through, just as the torchbearing relay is celebrated by the Hellenes in honor of Hephaistos. The Persians call this horse-posting system the *angareion*.

—Herodotus, *Histories*

Herodotus was not the only ancient author to describe the Persian courier system. The biblical Old Testament Book of Esther notes that not just horses were used:

And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus' name, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries.

—Esther 8:10 (KJV)

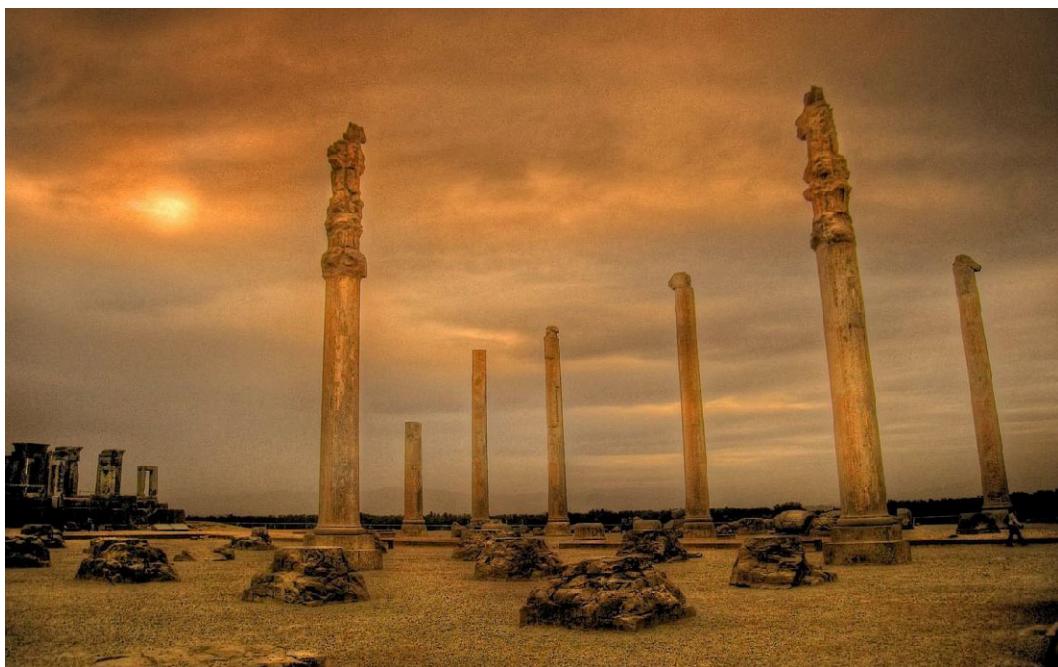
Even today, many still marvel at the efficiency of the Persian courier system. When the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City came across Herodotus's description, he thought it perfect for a large inscription on the new building (Figure 4.31). His paraphrase of Herodotus is still visible there. Popularly thought of as the U.S. Postal Service's unofficial motto, it reads as follows: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."



**FIGURE 4.31** “Neither Snow nor Rain nor Heat nor Gloom of Night.” The unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service, which once also described the Persian Empire’s courier system, is inscribed on the face of this New York City building, over the colonnade. (credit: modification of work “[Post Office, New York City](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/det.4a24669/) (<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/det.4a24669/>)” by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division/Library of Congress)

- What purposes might the Persian courier system have served? How might the empire have functioned in the absence or breakdown of such a system?
- Why might the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City have selected Herodotus' description?

Building projects were another important expression of Darius's power and authority. During his reign, he undertook the construction of elaborate palaces at Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae (Figure 4.32). These were constructed and decorated by skilled workers from many different locations and reflected artistic influences from around the empire, among them fluted columns designed by Greek stonemasons, Assyrian reliefs carved by Mesopotamians, and a variety of other features of Egyptian, Lydian, Babylonian, Elamite, and Median origin. The many workers—men, women, and children—who built these palaces migrated to the construction sites and often lived in nearby villages or encampments.



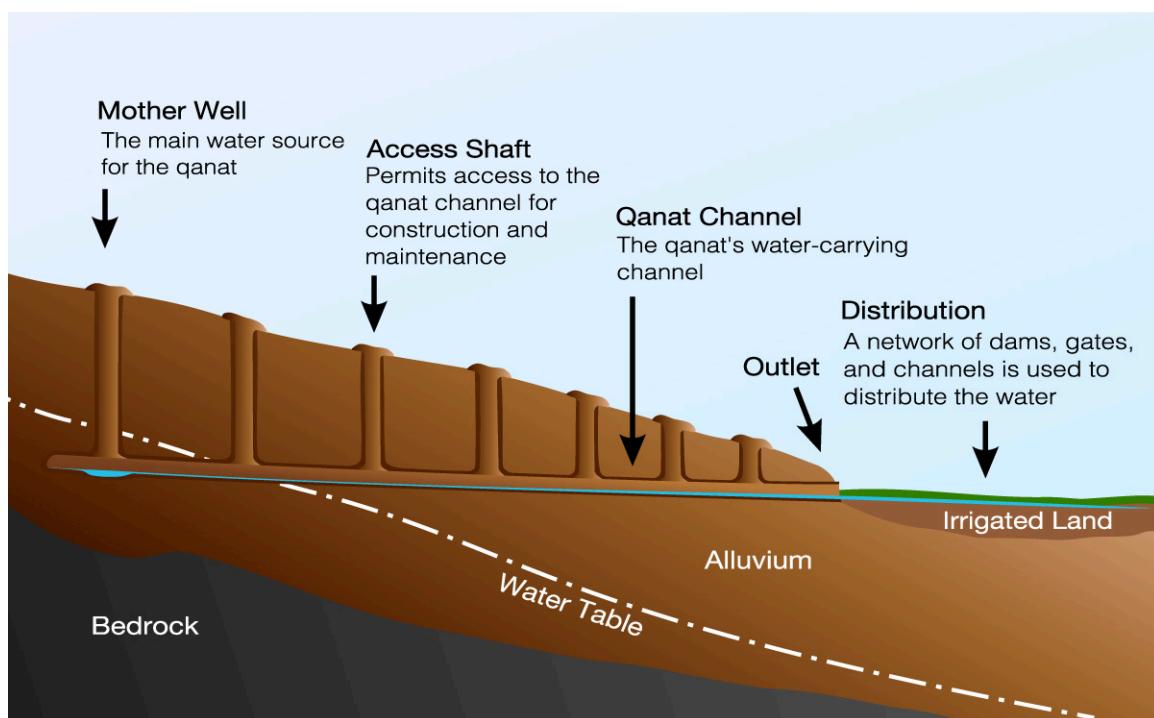
**FIGURE 4.32 Persepolis.** The ruins of the city of Persepolis, situated thirty-seven miles southwest of modern-day Shiraz (in modern Iran), reveal that the site was an impressive imperial center in Darius's time. (credit: modification of work "HDR image of Persepolis, Iran" by "Roodiparse"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Explore a reconstruction of the palace complex of [Persepolis](https://openstax.org/l/77Persepolis) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Persepolis>) as it may have appeared to a visitor in ancient Persia via the Getty Museum's Persepolis Reimagined interactive exhibit.

Major infrastructure projects were also a feature of Darius's reign. For example, he ordered the construction of a long canal that would have allowed ships to pass from the Red Sea into Egypt's Nile River and thus to the Mediterranean. It is unclear whether he actually completed it. It seems unlikely, though Herodotus insists he did. Whatever the case, that Darius attempted this massive undertaking is a testament to the power and resources the kings of Persia had at their fingertips. Other infrastructure projects included the expansion and rebuilding of the many roads that crisscrossed the empire, as well as the construction of a number of *qanats* (Figure 4.33). These were long, underground tunnels used for carrying fresh water over many kilometers, usually for irrigation, and represented a major improvement over earlier technologies. They likely had been

used before the Achaemenids, but their construction expanded with the rise of Persian power.



**FIGURE 4.33** Qanats for Irrigation. The *qanats* built by Darius were designed to carry fresh water over long distances into populated areas or to irrigate land for farming. (credit: modification of work “Qanat cross section” by Samuel Bailey/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

### Persian Culture and Daily Life

The social order of the Persian Empire included a number of hierarchically organized groups. At the bottom were the enslaved. While the Persians did not have a long history of using slavery before becoming a major power, it was common in the regions they conquered. Over time, the Persian nobility adapted to the practice and used enslaved people to work their land.

Next in the hierarchy were the free peasants, who generally worked the land and lived in the villages of the empire. On the next level were the various kinds of artisans, and higher still were the educated classes of scribes, imperial recordkeepers, and important merchants. And higher than all of these was the ruling order, including priests, nobles, and warriors ([Figure 4.34](#)).



**FIGURE 4.34** Persian Recordkeeping. Thousands of clay tablets like this one from the administrative archives at Persepolis have been key to helping historians understand the way the empire functioned and was socially

organized. Like the rulers of earlier Near Eastern empires, the Persians also used cuneiform. (credit: “Persepolis tablet” by “Pentocelo”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Persian king occupied a place far above and removed from these groups. As the earthly representative of the god Ahura Mazda, he expected complete submission from everyone in the empire. Those in his presence had to position themselves on the ground to show his superiority over them. Servants who came near had to cover their mouths so as not to breathe on him. His power was absolute, though he was restrained by custom and the advice of leading nobles. One of the most important of these nobles was the “Commander of a Thousand,” who managed the large court, served as a gatekeeper to any audience with the king, and oversaw the king’s personal protection service. As was the case in the Assyrian Empire, kings were not necessarily eldest sons. Rather, the current king could select his heir and frequently chose a younger son for any number of reasons.

The Persian king and his court seem not to have remained in one centralized capital. Rather, they moved periodically between the cities and regions of Babylon, Susa, Rhagae, Parthia, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and possibly others. One motive was a desire to avoid extreme weather during certain seasons, but there were also political considerations. For example, by moving across the countryside, the king made himself visible not only to important individuals in the cities but also to the many peasants in the villages that dotted the landscape. Thus, he allowed them opportunities to present him with petitions or seek his guidance.

Moving the court in this way was no easy feat, however. It required the efforts of thousands of people including officials, soldiers, religious leaders, wives, other women, and servants of all types, and the transport of horses, chariots, religious objects, treasure, and military equipment. In many ways, it was as though the state itself migrated with the seasons. The arrival of this migrating state in any major location was met with elaborate public ceremonies of greeting and welcome. Some contemporary descriptions detail how flowers and incense were laid along the city roads where the king moved. His dramatic entry was followed by the proper sacrifices to the local gods and an opportunity for the people to bring gifts to the king, such as exotic animals, jewels, precious metals, food, and wine. It was considered a great honor to present the king with a gift, and the gift-giving ceremonies served to strengthen the king’s relationship with his subjects.

The vast army of Persia had its own ceremonies and customs. Herodotus records that it was made up of a great number of subject peoples from around the empire, all with their own colorful uniforms. Military training began at a very young age and included lessons in archery, horseback combat, and hand-to-hand combat. The most talented of the infantrymen in the Persian army might hope to rise to the ranks of the Immortals, an elite, heavy-infantry combat force that served both in war and in the king’s personal guard. The larger army was made up of various units of infantry, archers, and cavalry. The largest unit was the corps, made up of ten thousand men. Each corps had a commanding officer who answered to the supreme commander. In battle, the archers would rapidly fire their arrows into the enemy as the cavalry and infantry advanced in their respective formations. Occasionally, when rebellions were put down or new territories added, the Persians deported the conquered populations elsewhere within the empire.

Because most records from the Persian Empire focus on kings, wars, the military, and high-level officials and bureaucrats, we know little about commoners. But we know that most ordinary Persians had diets of bread or mash made of barley, supplemented by figs, dates, plums, apples, almonds, and other fruits and nuts. Much more rarely, meals might also include goat, mutton, or poultry. Besides the military, the empire supported a host of other necessary occupations, such as sentinels, messengers, various types of attendants, architects, merchants, and numerous types of lower professions. The many agricultural workers grew traditional crops of the Near East, like wheat and barley, in addition to rice (brought from India) and alfalfa (for horse feed). Merchants in the Persian Empire benefited greatly from the stability created by the government and the extensive network of crisscrossing roads that connected the far-flung regions. Although long-distance trade was prohibitively expensive for most things except luxury goods, trade across short distances was apparently common.

The religion of the Persians was a tradition we describe today as **Zoroastrianism**. Its name comes from Zoroaster, the Greek pronunciation of the name of its founder, Zarathustra. Scholars today believe that Zoroaster likely lived at some point between 1400 and 900 BCE and was almost certainly a Persian priest, prophet, or both. His followers likely practiced a polytheistic religion similar in many ways to the Vedic traditions held by Indo-European speakers who migrated into India. Among Zoroastrians' many gods were both powerful heavenly deities and more terrestrial nature gods. Ceremonies included various rituals similar to those of other polytheistic religions, such as the sacrifice of animals on outdoor altars.

Zoroaster appears to have emphasized the perpetual conflict between the forces of justice and those of wickedness. Over time, he developed supernatural personifications of these forces: Ahura Mazda was the lord of wisdom and the force of good (Figure 4.35), and Angra Mainu was the destructive spirit and the force of evil. Each was supported by lesser supernatural beings. On the side of Ahura Mazda were the *ahuras* who worked to bring good to the world, and on the side of Angra Mainu were the *daevas* who served the interests of evil.



**FIGURE 4.35 Ahura Mazda.** The Persian god Ahura Mazda was the principal source of good as understood by followers of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion. This large stone carving of him adorns a gate at the ruins of Persepolis (in modern Iran). (credit: “Persepolis, Tripylon, eastern gate (2)” by Marco Prins/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The Persian followers of Zoroastrianism believed Ahura Mazda had created the world as an entirely good place. However, Angra Mainu was dedicated to destroying this perfection with evil, so the two forces fought for the supremacy of good or evil on Earth. The world the Persians saw around them was the product of their pitched battle. However, the fight would not last forever. At some appointed time in the future, Ahura Mazda would overcome the forces of Angra Mainu, and the followers of evil would face judgment and punishment for their crimes. It was up to humans to decide for themselves what path to follow. At the final judgment, the dead would be resurrected and made to walk through a river of fire. Those consumed by the fire were unworthy and would be condemned to torment in hell, while those who survived would live forever in a paradise with no evil.

While Zoroaster's beliefs were not readily accepted by his own people, he found protection and a following among others, and in the centuries after his death, his ideas spread and changed. For example, the Medes incorporated their own priestly class into the Zoroastrian traditions. The Achaemenids borrowed artistic traditions from the Mesopotamians to depict Ahura Mazda in the same way they styled their important gods.

Later, Judeans within the Persian Empire, who were from the Canaanite kingdom of Judah and followers of Judaism, incorporated many Zoroastrian ideas into their own religious traditions. These ideas went on to influence the religions of Christianity and Islam.

### THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

#### Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity may have emerged in the ancient world, but they are all still practiced today. And while in modern times these religions appear quite different, they share important similarities.

Consider these modern similarities between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Both accept the idea of a powerful god as the source of all good, the existence of evil and deceptive forces that plague the world, a final judgment that occurs when the forces of evil have been vanquished forever, and a pleasant afterlife for those who follow the path of righteousness. These similarities are not the product of random accident. Rather, the connections between Zoroastrianism and Christianity date to developments within Judaism in the centuries before the birth of Christ.

It was likely that when the Judeans were members of the Persian Empire, they became acquainted with some of the ideas of Zoroastrianism, and these ideas influenced the way they understood their own monotheistic religion. The notion that a force of evil was responsible for the many problems in the world may have been a comforting thought for those who wanted to believe that God was both all-powerful and thoroughly benevolent. The concept of a final judgment was also appealing to Judeans, who held that they were not only God's chosen people but also persecuted by the forces of evil. While these ideas begin to appear in Judean writings only in the centuries after the fall of Persia, the seeds had likely been planted much earlier through a growing familiarity with the tenets of Zoroastrianism. In the second century BCE, many followers of Judaism had come to accept the idea of a final judgment. It was this form of Judaism that ultimately influenced the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

- What do the connections between Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity suggest about the way religions borrow from each other? Can you think of other examples?
- How might modern Christianity be different had Judaism not been influenced by Zoroastrianism?

While the religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, the empire included people of different religions, including Armenians, Nubians, Libyans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Ionian Greeks, Bactrians, Judeans, and many others. Indeed, it was the Persian king Cyrus II who permitted the Judeans exiled in Babylon to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. The empire expected loyalty and the payment of tribute, but its kings were not interested in transforming their diverse peoples into Persians. Instead, they developed an imperial system that supported the maintenance of a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious empire.

## 4.4 The Hebrews

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the history of the Hebrews in the context of the development of the Near East
- Explain how the Hebrew faith differed from others in the same region and time period

The Hebrews, a Semitic-speaking Canaanite people known for their monotheistic religion of Judaism or the Jewish religion, have preserved a history of their people that claims very ancient origins and includes descriptions of early leaders, kings, religious traditions, prophets, and numerous divine interventions. That history, often called the Tanakh or **Hebrew Bible** in the Jewish tradition and the Old Testament in the Christian tradition, has survived for many centuries and influenced the emergence of the two other major monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam. While fundamentalist Christians and Orthodox Jews hold that the

Bible is both divinely inspired and inerrant, historians must scrutinize the text and the rich history it records. This study and the careful work of archaeologists in the Near East have revealed a number of problems with accepting as infallible the story as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, but research has also opened our eyes to a history that is perhaps even more interesting than the account traditionally preserved.

### The History of the Hebrews

The history of the Hebrews recorded in the Bible starts with the beginning of time and the creation of the first man, Adam. However, it is with the life of the patriarch Abraham that we begin to see the emergence of the Hebrews as a distinct group. Abraham, we are told, descended from Noah a thousand years before, and Noah himself descended from Adam a thousand years before that. Relying on the ages and generations referenced in the Hebrew Bible, we can deduce that Abraham was born around 2150 BCE in the Mesopotamian city of Ur. At the age of seventy-five, he left this city and traveled to the land of Canaan in the eastern Mediterranean. There Abraham and his wife Sarah had their first son together, Isaac. Isaac then had a son, Jacob, and Jacob gave birth to twelve sons. From these twelve sons, the traditional Twelve Tribes of Israel descend ([Figure 4.36](#)).

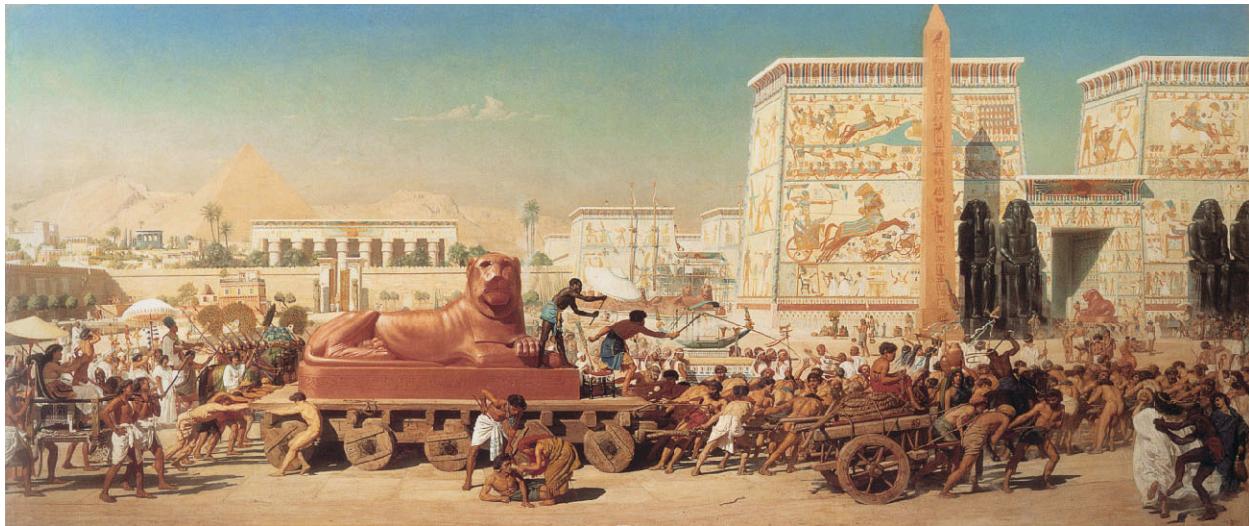


**FIGURE 4.36 Biblical Abraham.** The Bible explains that Abraham migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, as represented in this nineteenth-century painting by a Hungarian artist, and there he eventually had children and grandchildren. (credit: “The Departure of Abraham” by Hungarian National Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While this chronology explains how the Hebrews found themselves in Canaan, there is little to support it. There are no archaeological sites we can reference, and the only evidence we have for Abraham, his trip from Mesopotamia, and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren comes from the Hebrew Bible. This has led some to suspect that the stories of Abraham and his family may have been developed much later than the Bible suggests. And in fact, historians have traced the story of Abraham to sources written down between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE. It is possible that Abraham was a historical person and part of an ancient migration recounted for centuries in oral form, but without additional records or archaeological discoveries that attest to his existence, we cannot know for sure.

The Hebrew Bible notes that Joseph, one of Abraham's twelve great-grandsons, ended up in Egypt. Later,

around 1800 BCE based on the biblical chronology, Joseph's family joined him, and his descendants lived there for several generations. During this long time in Egypt, the Bible explains that the descendants of Joseph experienced increasingly poor treatment, including being enslaved by the (unnamed) Egyptian pharaoh and put to work on building projects in the Nile delta (Figure 4.37). Later, the pharaoh decided to kill all the male Hebrew children, but one was saved from the slaughter by being hidden in a basket to float down the Nile. He was discovered by the pharaoh's daughter, who named him Moses and raised him among the Egyptian royalty as her own.



**FIGURE 4.37** The Hebrews in Egypt. The Bible explains that, as represented in this monumental nineteenth-century painting by the English artist Edward Poynter, the Hebrews were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt. (credit: "Israel in Egypt" by Guildhall Art Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Bible continues the story by explaining that the adult Moses discovered who he actually was and demanded that the pharaoh release the Hebrews and allow them to return to Canaan. After experiencing a number of divine punishments issued by the Hebrew god, the pharaoh reluctantly agreed. The Hebrews' flight from Egypt included a protracted trek across the Sinai desert and into Canaan, during which they agreed to worship only the single god Yahweh and obey his laws. This period of their history is often called the **Exodus**, because it records their mass migration out of Egypt and eventually to Canaan. Once in Canaan, Moses's general Joshua led several military campaigns against the inhabitants, which allowed the Hebrews to settle the land.

The details in the biblical account of the Hebrews' life in Egypt and their exodus from that kingdom have led some scholars to associate these stories with the period of Hyksos rule. It was then, during the Second Intermediate Period, that the Canaanites flooded into the Nile delta and took control, and it may be that the story of Joseph and his family entering Egypt preserves a memory of that process. The exact time of the exodus from Egypt has been difficult for historians to determine for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Bible does not name the Egyptian pharaohs of the Exodus period.

Yet some features of the biblical account indicate there was in fact some type of exodus. For example, Moses's name is Egyptian and not Hebrew, suggesting he came from Egypt. The Bible also names the two midwives who traveled with the group, leading some scholars to conclude there was some oral tradition about a very small group that may have crossed the Sinai into Canaan, though not the very large group described in the Bible. As for the story of the conquests of Joshua, the archaeological record simply does not support this. Even at the site of Jericho, extensive archaeological work has been unable to prove that the city was destroyed when and in the way the Bible describes. This absence of strong evidence has led most to conclude that there likely was no conquest, and that there was already a population of Hebrews in Canaan who were later joined by a smaller group from Egypt.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**What Is in a Name?**

Without archaeological or other evidence, historians have had to rely on the Hebrew Bible for clues about the Exodus. One possible hint comes from the Bible's book of Exodus, which describes the birth of Moses, his mother's effort to save him from slaughter, and his discovery and adoption by the pharaoh's daughter ([Figure 4.38](#)).



**FIGURE 4.38** The Infant Moses. This 1904 Anglo-Dutch painting called *The Finding of Moses* represents the biblical account of the pharaoh's daughter discovering the infant Moses floating in a basket on the Nile. (credit: "The Finding of Moses" by Lawrence Alma-Tadema/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to witness what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children. Then said his [Moses's] sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.

—Exodus 2:1-10 (KJV)

As this story explains, the pharaoh's daughter named Moses to reflect the fact that she "drew him out of the water." Some scholars believe this phrase is a reference to the Hebrew word *mashah*, meaning to "draw out," which sounds similar to the Hebrew pronunciation of Moses, *Mosheh*. That explanation would have made sense to Hebrew readers of the Bible, but it does not make sense that an Egyptian princess would speak Hebrew. While this problem makes it difficult to take the story seriously as evidence, it does raise an interesting question.

Is the biblical account actually an attempt to explain a Hebrew man's name that was not Hebrew but Egyptian? In Egyptian, Moses means "child of." It would have been part of a larger name such as Thutmose, which means "child of [the god] Thoth." The fact that Hebrew tradition tried to explain his Egyptian name suggests to some that Moses may have been a real person with Egyptian heritage. That, in turn, suggests there is some validity to the Exodus story itself.

- Does the scholarly interpretation of the name Moses as Egyptian in origin seem credible to you? Why or why not?
- What does this story reveal about family relationships in the period?

The biblical book of Judges describes how the Hebrews moved into the hills of Canaan and lived as members of twelve tribes. In the book of Samuel, we hear how they faced oppression from the Philistines, one of the many Sea Peoples groups. To better defend themselves against the Philistines, the Hebrews organized themselves into a kingdom they called Israel. Their first leader, Saul, became king around 1030 BCE but failed to rule properly. The second king, David, not only ruled effectively but also was able to drive back the Philistines.

The Hebrews, properly referred to as Israelites in this period because of their formation of the Kingdom of Israel, now entered a golden age in their history. David suppressed the surrounding kingdoms, made Jerusalem his capital, and established a shrine there to the Israelite god Yahweh. This more organized kingdom was then left to David's son Solomon, who furthered the organization of Israel, made alliances with surrounding kingdoms, and embarked on numerous construction projects, the most important of which was a large temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem.

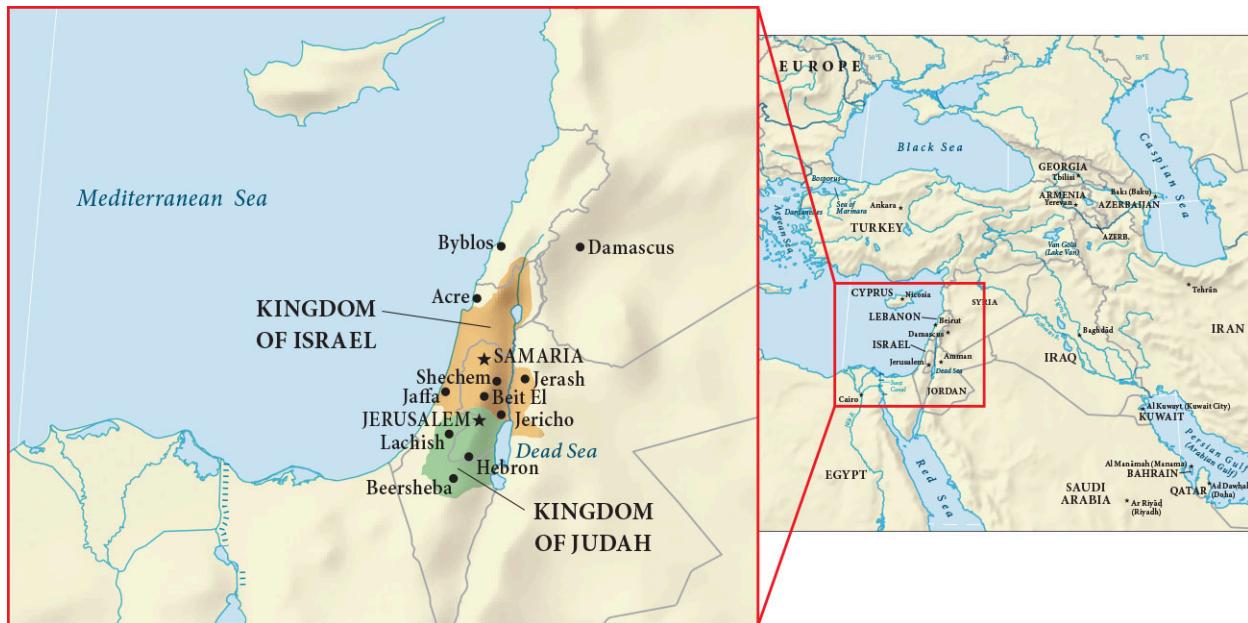
Historians call the period of these three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—the united monarchy period. Archaeological work and extrabiblical sources support many biblical claims about the era. For example, there was a threat to the Hebrews from the Philistines, who were likely one of the many groups of migrants moving, often violently, around the eastern Mediterranean during the period of the Late Bronze Age Collapse. We have Egyptian and other records of these migrants, some specifically mentioning the Philistines by name. It seems likely that the founding of Israel was a response to this threat.

As for the existence of Saul and David, things are less clear. The Bible provides several conflicting accounts of how these two men became king. For example, Saul is made king when he is found hiding among some baggage, but also after leading troops in a dramatic rescue. Similar confusion surrounds David, though it seems clear he became an enemy of Saul at some point and was able to make himself king. Despite these contradictions, there is one piece of archaeological evidence for the existence of King David. The Tel Dan stele discovered in the Golan Heights in the 1990s makes reference to the "house of David," meaning the kingdom of David ([Figure 4.39](#)). However, no similar archaeological evidence has been unearthed for David's son Solomon. Indeed, evidence of Solomon's most famous achievement, the building of the first temple in Jerusalem, has yet to be discovered. However, we have strong archaeological evidence for some of his other public works projects, such as the three-thousand-year-old gates discovered at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo.



**FIGURE 4.39 Evidence for the Existence of David?** This stone fragment from the Tel Dan stele dates from the ninth century BCE and was discovered in the 1990s. It includes an inscription that reads “house of David,” making it the only non-biblical source attesting to the existence of King David. (credit: modification of work “Aramaic Inscription on Basalt Monument, Dan, 9th Century BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0)

After the death of Solomon, the period of the united monarchy came to an end, and Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This inaugurated the period of the divided monarchy (Figure 4.40). Jerusalem remained the capital of Judah, while Samaria was the capital of Israel. The northern kingdom was the larger and wealthier of the two and exerted influence over and sometimes warred with Judah. The biblical account often puts the kings of the northern kingdom in a negative light, noting that they abused their subjects and incorporated elements of foreign religious traditions in their worship of Yahweh.



**FIGURE 4.40 The Divided Monarchy.** After the reign of Solomon, the united monarchy of the Israelites split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its expansion into Canaan, Israel and Judah entered a new era under foreign domination within the Assyrian-controlled Near East. Anti-Assyrian sentiment in both

kingdoms and the Neo-Assyrians' desire to control the eastern Mediterranean eventually led to multiple Assyrian attacks on Israel. The most devastating occurred in 722 BCE, when thousands of Israelites were deported to other parts of the empire, as was the Assyrians' custom.

Prophets in Judah interpreted the destruction of Israel as punishment for its having veered from the covenant with Yahweh. They called for religious reforms in Judah in order to avoid a similar fate. While Judah was incorporated into the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it avoided the destruction experienced by Israel. However, the defeat of Assyria by the Neo-Babylonians brought new challenges to Judah. Resistance to Babylon led to punishments and forced deportations in 597 BCE, and finally to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BCE.

The many Judeans deported to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem were settled in Mesopotamia and expected to help repopulate areas that had been devastated by wars. Many assimilated into Babylonian culture and became largely indistinguishable from other Mesopotamians. Some, however, retained their Judean culture and religious beliefs. For these Judeans, the **Babylonian exile**, as it was called, was a time of cultural and religious revival. They edited various earlier Hebrew writings and combined them into a larger work, thus giving shape to the core of the Hebrew Bible. Finally, with the rise of the Persian Empire and its conquest of Babylonia, the Persian king Cyrus the Great permitted the unassimilated Judeans to return to Judah. They went in two major waves over the next few decades and began a process of reconstruction that eventually included the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple at Jerusalem.

### The Culture of the Hebrews

The most salient feature of Hebrew culture during this period was its then-unusual monotheism. The Bible suggests this tradition began with Abraham, who was said to have entered into a covenant with Yahweh as far back as 2100 BCE. With the emergence of Moses in the Bible, Hebrew monotheism really began to take shape. As the Bible explains, during the exodus from Egypt, Moses was given the laws directly from Yahweh, including the command that only Yahweh be worshipped. This account suggests that pure monotheism was commonly practiced by the Hebrews from that time forward. Yet closer inspection of the biblical stories reveals a much more complicated and gradual process toward monotheism.

For example, the first of the commandments given to Moses by Yahweh demands that the Hebrews "have no other gods before me." This language implies that there are in fact other gods, but those gods are not to be worshipped. In other places in the Bible, God is referred to as plural or occasionally as part of an assembly of gods. This textual evidence likely preserves small elements of the earlier Canaanite polytheistic religious traditions. These include the veneration of El, the head of the pantheon and often associated with Yahweh, and of Yahweh's consort Asherah, the storm god Baal, the fertility goddess Astarte, and many others.

Archaeologists' discoveries of temples and figurines representing these gods attest to the fact that they were worshipped in some form well into the eighth century BCE.

Many portions of the Bible describe how the Hebrews frequently fell away from Yahweh and back into their polytheistic traditions. This backsiding is usually condemned in the Bible and occasionally results in efforts by biblical heroes to restore Moses's covenant with God. King Hezekiah of Judah (727–697 BCE), for example, conducted a cleansing campaign against unauthorized worship around his kingdom. He removed local shrines, destroyed sacred monuments, and smashed cult objects. His son, King Manasseh, however, restored some of these cultic practices and shrines. Setting aside the bias of the Bible's writers, Manasseh may have been attempting to rescue long-standing religious traditions that had been under assault by his reform-minded father. However, as early as the mid-seventh century BCE, the religious reformers who promoted the centralized worship of Yahweh and obedience to the laws of Moses had clearly gained the upper hand. Their interpretation of Hebrew history and religion was then on the rise.

The backsiding theme of the Hebrew Bible was partly a way for its writers to account for the vestiges of Canaanite religious practices that did not fit neatly with their view of the Hebrews as having been monotheistic

from the time of Moses. The abandonment of Yahweh accounted for the disasters that befell the Hebrews in Israel and Judah, especially the destruction of the temple and forced deportation to Babylon. Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia were merely tools, the biblical writers and the prophets they record attest, used by Yahweh to compel the Hebrews to follow the correct path or face punishment. This version of Israelite history was kindled and strengthened during the Babylonian exile, when the core portion of the Hebrew Bible was being edited and assembled.

By the time the Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, the basic framework of what we understand today as Judaism had emerged and been largely accepted. The Jews (or people from Judah) were expected to worship only Yahweh, live moral lives consistent with his dictates, and closely follow the laws of Moses. For example, they were prohibited from murdering, stealing, and committing adultery. They were barred from consuming specific foods such as pork, shellfish, insects, and meat that had been mixed with dairy. Food had to be properly prepared, which included ritual slaughter for animals. Jewish people were also prohibited from working on the seventh day of the week and were compelled to treat wives with respect and give to charity, among many other acts. And of course there were important rules about the worship of Yahweh, including loving him, fearing him, emulating him, and not profaning his name.

Since the Hebrews could trace their origins back to agricultural clans, a number of the laws of Moses dealt with agricultural issues, like prohibitions against eating ripe grains from the harvest before they are made into an offering. The festival of Sukkot, meaning “huts,” was a harvest festival when Jewish people were expected to erect huts, possibly as a way to remember the time when they were primarily agriculturalists. However, as the Hebrews grew in number and began living in cities and adopting urban occupations, these agricultural traditions were relegated primarily to symbolic religious practice. In cities, Jewish people found economic opportunities as craftspeople, traders, and merchants. As Jerusalem grew in the centuries after the Babylonian exile, their religion became ever more adapted to urban life.

At the center of urban life in Jerusalem was the temple, completed around 515 BCE ([Figure 4.41](#)). It included courtyards as well as an enclosed sanctuary with altars and a special location kept in total darkness, referred to as the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh was present. In the temple, the priests organized various religious festivals and performed elaborate rituals, including special sacrifices of animals supplied by worshippers seeking the favor of Yahweh.



**FIGURE 4.41** The Second Temple. This contemporary model of the Second Temple complex in Jerusalem shows the way it would have looked after extensive expansions were completed in the first century BCE. (credit: “Second Temple” by “Ariely”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

## Key Terms

- Babylonian exile** the deportation of Judeans to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem
- chattel slavery** a form of slavery in which one person is owned by another as a piece of property
- Exodus** the mass migration of Hebrews out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses
- Hebrew Bible** the holy book that, according to Jewish tradition, tells the history of the Hebrew people
- Iron Age** the period beginning around 1200 BCE when iron became the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons
- Ramesside kings** the line of kings that ruled New Kingdom Egypt following the reign of Ramses I
- satrapy** one of twenty governing districts in Persia administered by royal governors called *satraps*, who answered directly to the king
- vassal state** a state or kingdom that is nominally independent in the running of its internal affairs but must submit to the demands of a dominating empire and usually provide tribute to it
- Zoroastrianism** the religion of the ancient Persians, named for its founder Zarathustra, pronounced *Zoroaster* in Greek

## Section Summary

### 4.1 From Old Babylon to the Medes

After the challenges to Mesopotamian civilization created by the invasions of the Amorites and Elamites, a succession of new empires emerged. In the 1700s BCE, King Hammurabi transformed Babylon from a minor city-state to the center of a vast empire. At the start of the 1500s BCE, the Hittites exploded out of Anatolia, sacking Babylon and later competing with Egypt for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. During the Iron Age that followed, the Near East underwent an even deeper transformation as the Neo-Assyrians created the first empire to control both Mesopotamia and Egypt. Then, at the end of the seventh century BCE, a resurgent Babylonia allied with the Median Empire to destroy the Neo-Assyrian Empire and carve up the spoils.

Each empire controlled large territories that were home to diverse peoples, religions, and daily practices, often adopted from older civilizations and shaped to suit their own needs and interests.

### 4.2 Egypt's New Kingdom

During the Second Intermediate Period, Egyptian influence dwindled to only the region around Thebes. Semitic-speaking immigrants from Canaan called the Hyksos flowed into the Nile delta and eventually established control there, bringing improved bronze-making technology, the composite bow, and the horse-drawn, lighter-weight chariot.

The first kings of the Egyptian New Kingdom drove out the Hyksos and extended their own influence into Nubia. Pharaohs like Thutmose III led their armies into Canaan and Syria to halt rivals like the Hittite kingdom and Mitanni. The New Kingdom also saw the rise of the cult of Amun-Re in Thebes and Akhenaten's revolutionary transformations. Akhenaten and Ramesses II built new cities as testaments to their greatness, and many others like Hatshepsut commissioned elaborate tombs, temples, and monuments. These powerful pharaohs extended their influence into Nubia, Canaan, and Syria through a number of military campaigns that also allowed Egypt to control vital trade routes to Mesopotamia. After centuries of greatness, however, the New Kingdom's power declined, hastened by invasions, the loss of territory, and deteriorating foreign influence, until finally the kingdom fell.

### 4.3 The Persian Empire

According to Herodotus, Cyrus the Great led the Persians to overthrow the Median dynasty and then by 539 BCE to defeat the Neo-Babylonians. Cyrus's successor Cambyses II extended Persia's control over Egypt and assembled a vast empire that stretched from the edges of India to the Nile River. When Darius I rose to power, he reorganized the empire into twenty districts called satrapies, each with its own governor or satrap, and oversaw a number of public works projects such as elaborate palaces and *qanats* for carrying fresh water over

many kilometers.

The kings of Persia were honored as the earthly representatives of the Persian god Ahura Mazda and commanded a large army of subject peoples from around the empire. The religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, which saw the world as the field of competition between the forces of good and evil and predicted a final judgment after evil had been conquered. But the empire included numerous ethnicities and followers of many religions, including the Judeans with their own unique monotheistic religious tradition.

#### **4.4 The Hebrews**

The history of the Hebrew people as recorded in the Hebrew Bible tracks their emergence in Canaan, their oppression in and exodus from Egypt, their construction of a united monarchy, and their many conflicts among themselves and with empires like Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia. But the archaeological record and various portions of the Bible cast some doubt on a number of aspects of this general story. For example, archaeology does not support the occurrence of Joshua's conquest of Canaan after the Exodus, though at least some of King Solomon's building projects have been discovered in sites like Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo. And the stories of Hebrews migrating to Egypt may preserve much older traditions related to the arrival of the Hyksos there.

The Bible also describes the monotheistic worship of Yahweh, the definitive characteristic of the Hebrews. But contrary to what the Bible suggests, this religious practice did not arise fully formed. Rather, it developed over centuries and under unique circumstances and geopolitical pressures. By the time the Persian Empire extended its domination across the Near East, the religion of Judaism as we know it today was starting to take shape. It demanded absolute obedience to Yahweh and his many laws, including specific dietary restrictions. And the worship of Yahweh was centralized in the temple at Jerusalem.

## **Assessments**

### **Review Questions**

1. What Near Eastern empire was centered in Anatolia?
  - a. Old Babylonian Empire
  - b. Neo-Babylonian Empire
  - c. Hittite Empire
  - d. Neo-Assyrian Empire
  
2. What was the purpose of the Neo-Assyrian practice now called “calculated frightfulness”?
  - a. to settle depopulated lands
  - b. to demonstrate the cost of rebellion
  - c. to appease the gods
  - d. to acquire tin
  
3. What were the four primary social classes in Neo-Assyrian society?
  - a. nobles, professionals, peasants, the enslaved
  - b. nobles, farmers, bankers, peasants
  - c. kings, scribes, landowners, the enslaved
  - d. kings, farmers, priests, the enslaved
  
4. What did the gift-giving ceremonies carried out between empires by their ambassadors demonstrate?
  - a. good will
  - b. hostile intentions
  - c. military might
  - d. divine support

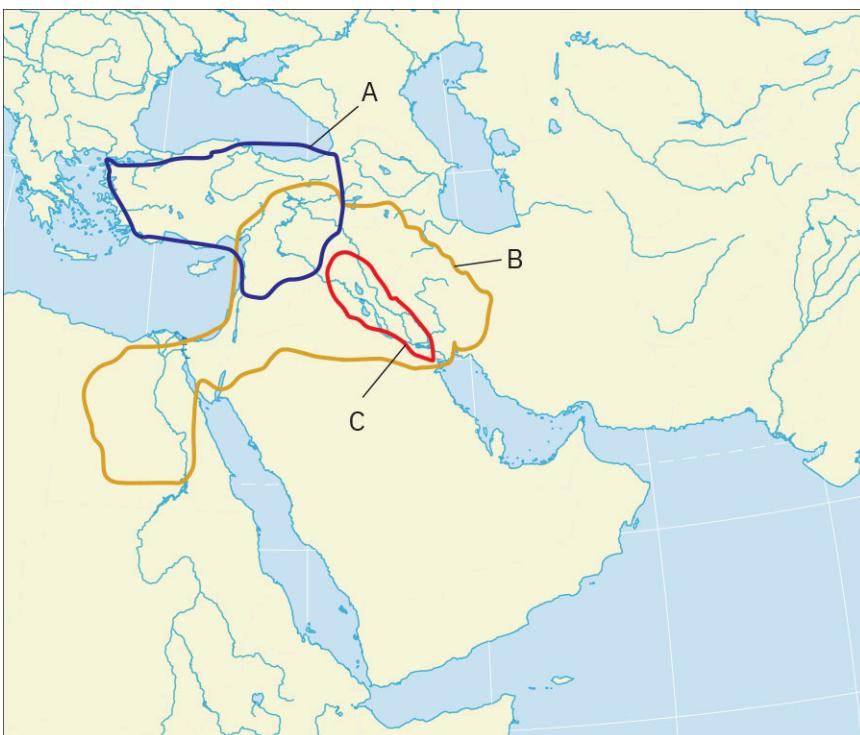
5. What method did ancient city-states and empires use to acquire territory through peaceful means?
  - a. tribute
  - b. intermarriage
  - c. espionage
  - d. war
6. Where did the Hyksos people come from?
  - a. Canaan
  - b. Nubia
  - c. Assyria
  - d. Babylonia
7. What Egyptian pharaoh completed the task of driving the Hyksos from the Nile delta?
  - a. Seqenenre Tao II
  - b. Kamose
  - c. Hatshepsut
  - d. Ahmose
8. To what now-mysterious place did Queen Hatshepsut send an expedition to gather exotic plants, animals, precious metals, and spices?
  - a. Punt
  - b. Anatolia
  - c. Libya
  - d. Canaan
9. Whom did Akhenaten want the people of Egypt to worship exclusively?
  - a. Aton
  - b. Re
  - c. Amun
  - d. the pharaoh
10. What Persian king conquered the Neo-Babylonians?
  - a. Cyrus II
  - b. Cambyses II
  - c. Darius I
  - d. Bardiya
11. According to Zoroastrianism, what happens to people when they die?
  - a. They go to heaven.
  - b. They sleep until final judgment.
  - c. They become gods.
  - d. They are reborn as animals.
12. After Darius I's reorganization, who controlled the individual governing regions of the empire?
  - a. priests
  - b. Judeans
  - c. generals
  - d. satraps
13. What happened to the Judeans when they were attacked by the Neo-Babylonians in the early sixth century

BCE?

- They were deported to Babylon.
  - They fled to Egypt.
  - They became Phoenicians.
  - They became allies of Persia.
- 14.** According to the Hebrew Bible, where did Abraham originally come from?
- Canaan
  - Egypt
  - Mesopotamia
  - Anatolia
- 15.** Which of the following is consistent with the laws God gave to Moses?
- eating pork
  - eating shrimp
  - worshipping only Yahweh
  - worshipping only Ahura Mazda

### Check Your Understanding Questions

- 1.** Use the map provided to identify the following empires at their height: Hammurabi's Empire, the Hittite Empire, the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Match A, B, and C to the respective empire.



- What led to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the late seventh century BCE?
- What methods did Near Eastern kingdoms, city-states, and empires use to gather intelligence about their neighbors, rivals, and vassals?
- What were the consequences of the Hyksos migrations?
- How did Egypt maintain its influence in Canaan during the New Kingdom?

6. Describe the scale of the Persian Empire during the reign of Darius I.
7. What are some similarities between Christianity and Zoroastrianism?
8. What evidence supports the existence of the united monarchy of Israel?
9. How did the Babylonian exile affect the faith of the Judeans?

### Application and Reflection Questions

1. What role did war play in the expansion and maintenance of the major Near Eastern empires? How is this strategy similar to or different from the way countries create and maintain power today?
2. How was the relationship between the people of the ancient Near East and their gods similar to or different from religious practices today?
3. Why might someone want to become an ambassador or a spy in the ancient Near East?
4. What made the New Kingdom pharaohs successful?
5. Why were some New Kingdom pharaohs removed from the historical record, and by whom?
6. If you were the king of a vassal state in the Persian Empire, would you have considered rebellion? Why or why not?
7. What do you think best explains why the Persian Empire was successful?
8. What role do you think religious texts should play in the study of history, and why?
9. The narrative of the Hebrew Bible includes many stories about migration. Why do you think migration was an important theme for the Hebrews?



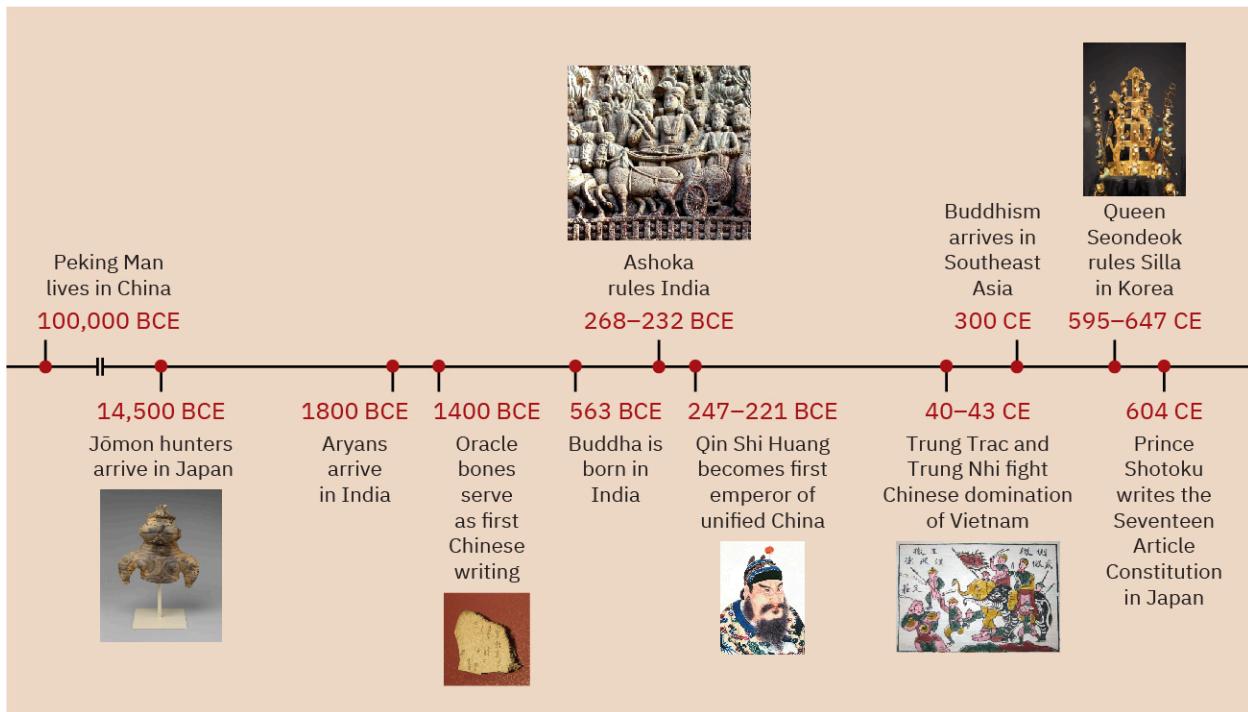
**FIGURE 5.1 Harappa: A Doorway to Trade.** This intricately painted cooking vessel is from the ancient city of Harappa, in today's Pakistan near the Ravi River. Harappan ways left an indelible mark on Indian culture. Featuring standardized weights and measures, uniform bricks, and even indoor plumbing, Harappa and the city of Mohenjo-Daro were doorways to trade, to waves of human migration, and to agriculture flowing from Egypt and Mesopotamia to the rest of Asia. (credit: modification of work "Harappa Vessel - 1-8harappanjar" by Prof Grossetti/Flickr, Public Domain)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

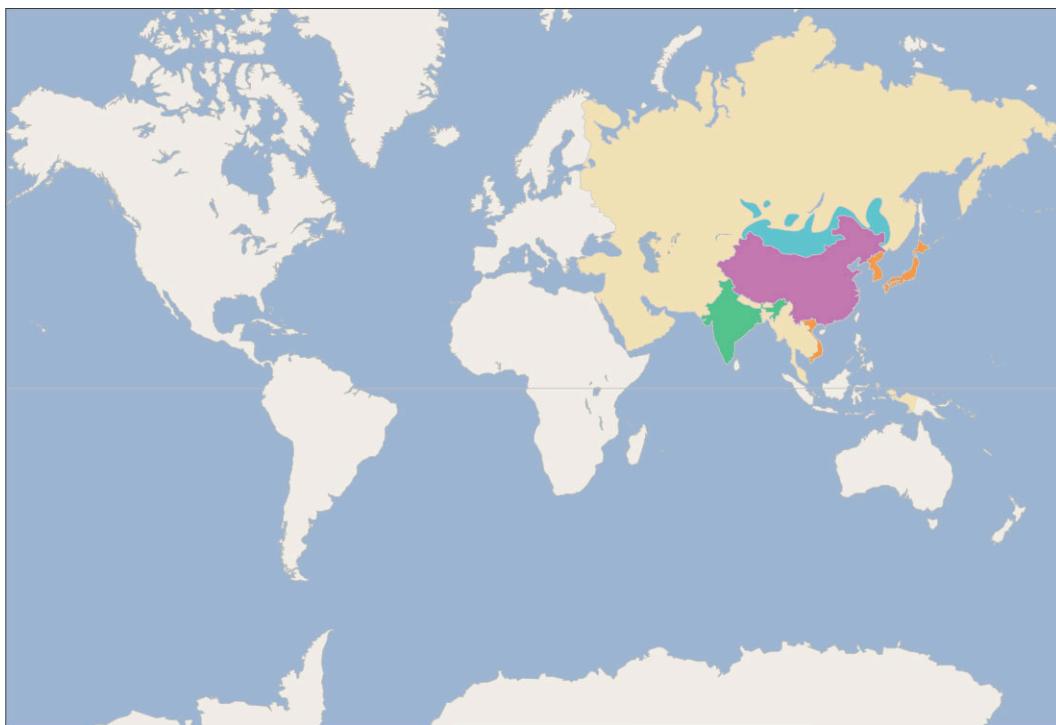
- 5.1 Ancient China
- 5.2 The Steppes
- 5.3 Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- 5.4 Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

**INTRODUCTION** Ancient Asia was dominated by two civilizational poles, one centered in today's India and the other to the east, across the Asian landmass in China. Within both these zones developed impressive cities, kingdoms, and even empires whose commercial might, religion, and technology shaped the lives of Asians for thousands of years ([Figure 5.1](#)). Other Asians—traveling peoples of the steppes—acted as conduits of trade and exchange as they brought goods and ideas from one end of the continent to the other.

The same was true far to the east and the south. There, groups that became the Koreans and Japanese, as well as others who arrived in Southeast Asia via migration and trade, also carved out civilizations, smaller societies that influenced their larger neighbors in China and India. At this time, Asia was a region woven together by networks of traveling monks, nomadic peoples, oceanic and overland trade, and shared writing systems.



**FIGURE 5.2 Timeline: Asia in Ancient Times.** (credit “14,500 BCE”: modification of work “Dogū (Clay Figurine)” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/ Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit “1400 BCE”: modification of work “Shang Ox Bone Oracle Bone” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit “268–232 BCE”: modification of work “King Asoka visits Ramagrama” by Anandajoti Bhikkhu/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit “247–221 BCE”: modification of work “A portrait painting of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty” by Richard R. Wertz/18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes, British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “40-43 CE”: modification of work “Hai ba trung Dong Ho painting” by “LuckyBirdie”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “595–647 CE”: modification of work “Gold Crown of Silla Kingsom” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 5.3** Locator Map: Asia in Ancient Times. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 5.1 Ancient China

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the early dynasties of ancient China
- Analyze the impact of the Warring States Period on ancient Chinese politics and culture
- Explain the connections between ancient Chinese philosophy and its political and social context

Ancient China was not the first area in Asia to practice agriculture and develop cities. But it was home to some of the world’s earliest political dynasties, and it produced written scripts, influential schools of thought and religion, and innovations in architecture and metallurgy, such as the manufacture of bronze and iron agricultural implements, weapons, chariots, and jewelry. A climate of constant regional warfare between small Chinese states imparted to kings and philosophers alike a sense of urgency to build institutions and systems that would bring stability to their realms. Against this background, China’s first empire, the Qin, presided over the creation of some of the ancient world’s greatest historical treasures, including the Terracotta Army and an early form of the Great Wall.

### Prehistoric China

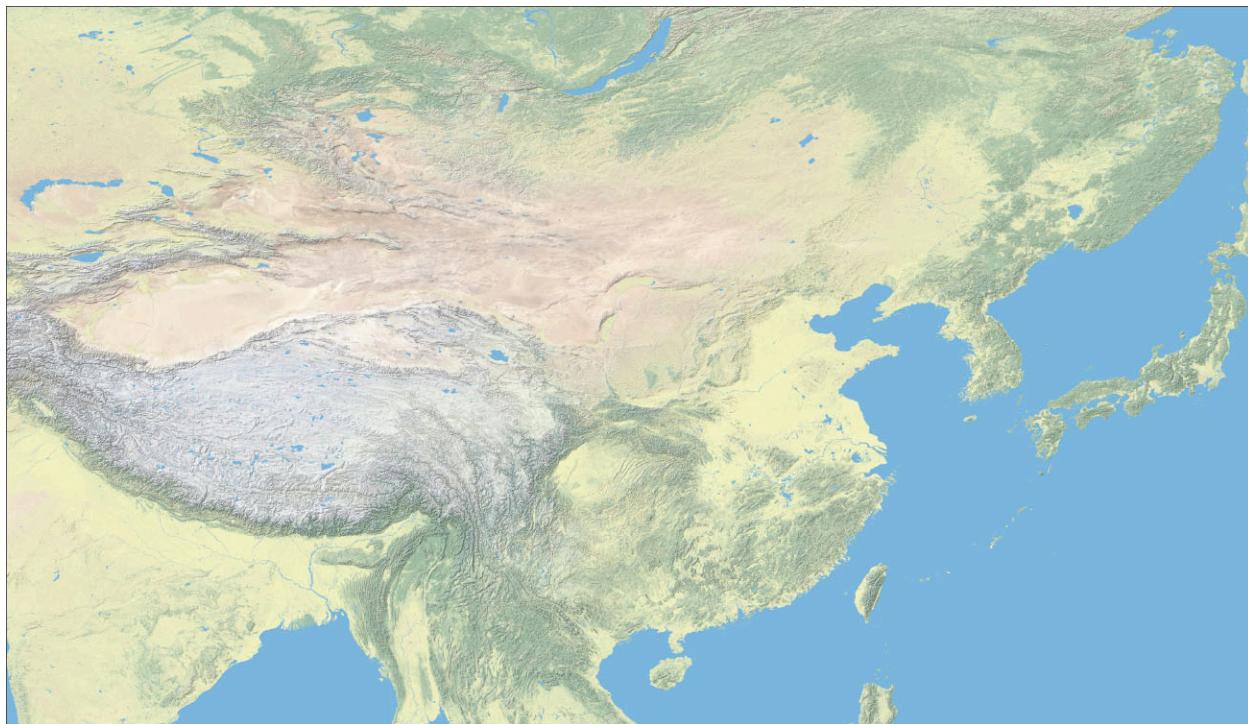
Recent studies of Paleolithic and Neolithic China suggest it was home to several distinct cultural complexes that developed independently of one another and exhibited notable regional variations in agriculture, social organization, language, and religion.

Human beings set foot on the Chinese subcontinent more than a million years ago. Evidence indicates the presence there of an archaic member of the human lineage known as *Homo erectus*, a term meaning “upright man.” One example is the well-known **Peking Man**, a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China in 1929. The species *Homo sapiens* (meaning “wise man” and including all modern humans) appeared later, around 100,000 years ago. These communities of hunter-gatherers followed the mammoth, elk, and moose on which they subsisted into northern China. Later they learned to fish along

China's many rivers and long coastlines and supplemented their food stores by foraging from a rich variety of plants, including many grasses, beans, yams, and roots.

Archaeological evidence from this stage of China's prehistory, the Paleolithic period from roughly 100,000 to 10,000 BCE, confirms that these groups developed symbolic language, which enabled them to evolve ideas about abstractions like kinship and an afterlife and thus produce the foundations for a shared culture and society. Their tools, such as those used for grinding plants, were simple and fashioned primarily of stone, but also of bone and wood. Early humans arrived in China from Africa and western Asia in waves separated by hundreds of years, but they were far from uniform. Thus, they eventually produced early societies that spoke a variety of languages, differed in their spiritual beliefs, and developed the capacity for agriculture independently of one another.

China's diverse geography, climate, and terrain reinforced regional variations in these early cultures as well ([Figure 5.4](#)). The country today stretches for roughly a thousand miles from north to south and east to west, occupying a temperate zone dominated by two major river systems, the Yellow and the Yangtze. Mountains, deserts, grasslands, high plateaus, jungles, and a variety of climates exist, such as the frozen environs surrounding the city of Harbin in the north and the subtropical climate around Hong Kong in the south. Most of the early cultures and later dynasties that produced Chinese civilization lay in a much smaller area, within a series of provinces along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, ringed by the outer areas of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Today these provinces make up the most densely populated areas of the People's Republic of China, inhabited almost entirely by the majority ethnic group in China, Han Chinese. The outlying areas have been the traditional homelands of a great many religious and ethnic minorities, such as Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Manchu, who did not become incorporated into the first dynasties of ancient China. Early inhabitants of China found that each region offered advantages and challenges to meeting the necessities of daily life: food, shelter, and security.



**FIGURE 5.4 Topography of Ancient China.** This map shows the varied topography of ancient China, which included fertile plains, river valleys, numerous mountain ranges, deserts, and a long running coastline on the eastern edge. (credit: "China topography" by Tom Patterson, US National Park Service Natural Earth/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

More than twenty sites that produced unique Neolithic cultures have been found in China. The earliest such culture was the Nanzhuangtou (8500 to 7700 BCE) in Hebei, a province in the northeast, and the last known was the Yueshi culture (1900 to 1500 BCE) found in Shandong, an eastern coastal province. All were capable of farming, domesticating animals, and manufacturing textiles and ceramics.

China's Neolithic cultures are notable for their independent growth and regional diversity, and for the differences between those in the north and those in the south. For example, in the southeastern part of the country, near Shanghai, a site dated to around 8000 BCE was home to people who cultivated rice, used boats, constructed standing homes, and made pottery with geometric designs. Evidence suggests their language was more closely related to those of the peoples living in Southeast Asia today, so calling them "Chinese" is open to debate. To the north, the colder climate forced early communities in today's Hebei province to rely on another grain, millet, for their primary foodstuff. These farmers used stone tools such as sickles and made simple jars to store their grain. Wooden spears and hoes were more common in the south than stone tools, and while both north and south domesticated dogs and pigs, in the north grazing animals such as sheep were tamed, while in the south farmers harnessed the power of water buffalo.

There were distinctive Neolithic cultures in the east and west of China. From about 4100 to 2600 BCE, the Dawenkou culture arose near Shandong in the east, characterized by the manufacture of exquisite works of pottery and the use of turquoise, ivory, and jade. The burial practices of the Dawenkou became more elaborate over time, eventually leading to the use of wooden coffins and the creation of ledges of earth to surround the graves. Later eastern cultures lavished treasures on the deceased, burying them with necklaces and beads, showing an increasing sophistication in the decorative arts.

To the west lay the Yangshao culture, dating to 5000 BCE, whose people farmed millet and dug homes in the earth to protect themselves from a cool climate. In Yangshao, burying the dead was a simpler process, but artists decorated pottery with painted designs and intricate geometric patterns. To the east there are few examples of painted bowls, jars, or cups. Instead, eastern cultures devoted their creative efforts to the slow, painstaking process of shaping jade. The Hongshan culture in Liaoning province and the Liangzhu complex in Jiangsu fashioned beautiful jade talismans, ornaments, and treasures for spiritual ceremonies. The great distance between these two cultures—with Hongshan far in the northeast near today's border with North Korea and the Liangzhu located around the Yangtze River delta in the southeast—shows the breadth of jade's influence along China's eastern seaboard. In the west, jade remained a much rarer object.

Later networks of exchange connected these regional cultures, which increasingly borrowed from each other, accelerating change, innovation, and collision. From roughly 3000 to 2000 BCE, China's Neolithic cultures created and shared new implements for cooking and artistic styles such as geometric patterns on ceramics. With contact, however, came growing conflict as well, suggested in the archaeological record by the emergence of metalworking and cities defended by walls of rammed earth. The need to coordinate defense and construct such ramparts likely required a political evolution within these cultures, giving rise to an elite military class led by chiefs. Thereafter, military elites were shrouded in spiritual rituals revolving around human sacrifice, possibly of captives of war, who were entombed beneath buildings in sites found in northern China. Increasing exchange between Neolithic cultures and the prominence of war may also have led to greater social differentiation. Burial sites for elites show evidence of increasingly elaborate ceremonies to please the gods or ancestors and to honor the deceased and denote their status.

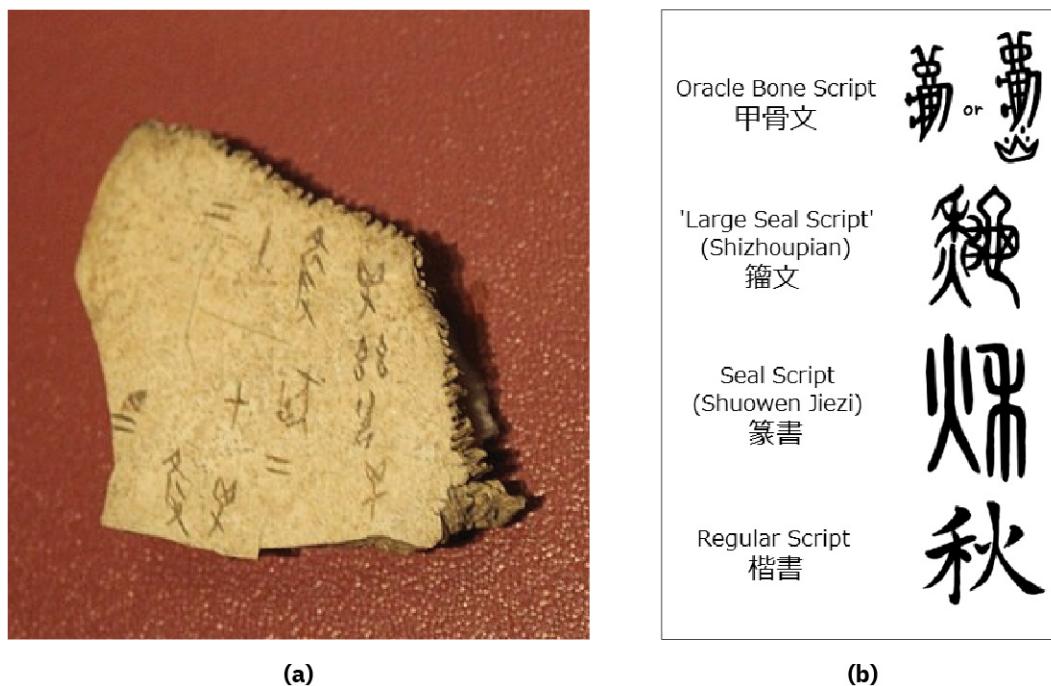
Women were often buried with the same quantity of items and laid in the same position as their male counterparts. Archaeological remains such as graves, figurines, tools, and other materials suggest that many Neolithic Chinese communities were matrilineal societies, in which lines of kinship were traced through the mother's family. While weaving textiles became an important occupation for many women, the division of labor was far less rigid in this period. Carvings depicting goddesses, symbols of fertility, and women's genitalia are prevalent in many of the cultures and seem to suggest women were on a par with men in the Neolithic era, especially when compared with later periods in Chinese history.

## Early Dynastic China

The Yellow River had an enormous impact on the development of Chinese civilization. It stretches for more than 3,395 miles, beginning in the mountains of western China and emptying into the Bohai Sea from Shandong province. (Only the Yangtze River to the south is longer.) Critical to the development of farming and human settlement along the Yellow River was the soil, which is loess—a sediment that is highly fertile, but easily moved by winds roaming the plain and driven along as silt by the power of the river. This portability of the soil and the human-built dikes along the river have caused it to constantly evolve and change over the centuries, leaving the surrounding areas prone to regular flooding and subjecting farmers to recurring cycles of bountiful harvests and natural disasters. Rainfall around the Yellow River is limited to around twenty inches annually, meaning that the river's floods have usually been paired with periodic droughts.

Near the Yellow River, the site of Erlitou in Henan province reveals a culture defined by the building of palaces, the creation of bronze vessels for rituals, and the practice of forms of ancestor worship. Sites such as these have led to debate about whether they prove the existence of the Xia dynasty, a fabled kingdom said to have been founded by one of China's mythological heroes, the Great Yu. No site has yet been found with documents written by the Xia. Instead, all references to it come from records written many centuries after the possible mythical kingdom ceased to exist.

The first Chinese dynasty for which we have solid evidence is the Shang. It created a complex, socially stratified Bronze Age civilization whose signature achievement was the creation of a written script. The Shang were long thought to be a mythological dynasty like the Xia until scholars in the late nineteenth century discovered old turtle shells inscribed with Chinese characters in a medicine shop. Eventually, these shells and other "oracle bones," once used in the art of divination, were found to be written records from China's first dynasty (Figure 5.5).



**FIGURE 5.5** Bronze Age Script. (a) This ancient oracle bone is carved with early variations of Chinese characters. (b) Oracle bone script went through a number of stages to evolve into the contemporary form of script we see today, as evidenced by the early iterations of the characters for the word "autumn," shown here. (credit a: modification of work "Shang Ox Bone Oracle Bone" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Comparison of Chinese characters for autumn" by "Pat457"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Shang kings exerted their authority through rituals of ancestor worship drawn from the Erlitou culture and

adapted to the art of bone divination. First carving written characters onto shells and animal bones and then applying heat to crack and shatter them, they posed questions to spirits and divined from the bones the spirits' predictions regarding impending harvests, military campaigns, or the arrival of an heir. From there, the Shang developed a logographic script whose characters visually represented words and ideas, combining symbols to make new concepts and sounds as needed. These characters served in a number of tasks such as keeping records, making calendars and organizing time, and preserving knowledge and communicating it from generation to generation.

The earliest forms of Chinese writing were likely forged on fragile materials such as bamboo or even silk and have not survived. But the Shang's passing on to future dynasties a logographic script, rather than a phonographic alphabet, meant that for centuries literacy was the preserve of elites. Reading required memorizing hundreds and eventually thousands of symbols and their meanings, rather than learning the sounds of a far fewer number of letters as is the case with an alphabet. Chinese ideas, values, and spiritual beliefs stored in this logographic script long outlived the Shang, becoming a key element of continuity from one dynasty to the next.

Through their invention of writing, the Shang were also able to command enormous resources for two centuries. They developed the organizational capacity to mine metal ores and transport them to foundries to make bronze cups, goblets, and cauldrons that grew to weigh hundreds of pounds. Shang artisans began weaving silk into cloth, and the city walls around an early capital in Zhengzhou were erected by ten thousand workers moving earth into bulwarks that stood thirty feet high and sixty feet wide.

But the Shang became China's first dynasty largely because of their military prowess, expanding their power through conquest, unlike the earlier and more trade-oriented cultures. Through warfare and the construction of a network of walled towns, the Shang built one of the world's first large territorial states controlled by a noble warrior class. This area included territory in Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Hebei, and Shanxi provinces. The Shang used bronze spears, bows, and later horse-drawn chariots to make raids against neighboring cultures, distributing the prizes to vassals and making enemies into allies for a share of the plunder. The prizes included captives of war, enslaved by the Shang warrior elite or sacrificed. An aristocratic and militaristic culture, the Shang also organized royal hunts for game such as deer, bear, and even tigers and elephants to hone their skills.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Visit this website and read a [detailed summary of the importance to ancient Chinese cultures of ritual killing](https://openstax.org/l/77RitualKill) (<https://openstax.org/l/77RitualKill>) to learn more about and see visual examples of the Shang's ritualistic vessels, art of divination, and burial customs.

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The oracle bones suggest that religion and ritual were the backbone of Shang society. The kings were not just military leaders but high priests who worshipped their ancestors and the supreme deity known as Di. Shang queens and princesses were also active in politics and warfare, with a few notable women such as the general Fu Hao leading large armies onto the battlefield. Aristocratic women also regularly served as priests in the royal ancestral cult. Like many other ancient societies, the Shang dynasty exhibited a theocratic dimension, with the kings claiming the exclusive right to act as intermediaries between their subjects and the spirit world.

To stage this royal role, the Shang built palaces, temples, and altars for worship in their capital cities, served by artisans making a host of goods. They developed enormous tombs tunneled beneath the earth for royals and nobility, signifying their capacity to organize labor and resources on a vast scale. Fu Hao's tomb, for example, was small by comparison to many others for Shang royals, but it was dug twenty-five feet deep into the earth and was large enough to hold sixteen human sacrifices and hundreds of bronze weapons, mirrors, bells, and other items fashioned from bone, jade, ivory, and stone. A comparison of early Shang tombs in Zhengzhou with those of a later period discovered in Anyang suggests that human sacrifices became ever more spiritually

significant, and also more extreme. Later kings were found buried not with a few victims but with hundreds of servants and prisoners of war, as well as animals such as dogs and horses. By spilling human blood, Shang royalty hoped to appease Di and their ancestors to ward off problems such as famine. But the scale of these rituals ballooned, with one record indicating that King Wu Ding went so far as to sacrifice more than nine thousand victims in one ritual bloodletting.

Under the sway of the Shang, the disparate Neolithic cultures of northern China grew more uniform, while even groups beyond the Shang's control in the Yangtze River valley and the west were influenced by their artistic styles and motifs. Yet over the course of their reign, the Shang's reliance on constant warfare and a religion centered on human sacrifices bred discontent and may have fueled the perception of their kings as corrupt and sadistic. It might even have precipitated revolt against the Shang rulers and the culture's eventual demise.

### The Zhou Dynasty

The Zhou dynasty, which supplanted the Shang dynasty in 1045 BCE, borrowed extensively from its predecessors. But the Zhou people were originally independent of the Shang, with their homeland lying in today's Shaanxi province in north-central China, in a large fertile basin surrounded by mountains just beyond the core Shang territory that lay to the east. Once settled there, Zhou nobility became vassals of the Shang kings, equipped to defend them and campaign against their hated rivals the Qiang, a proto-Tibetan tribe.

The Zhou combined the practices of farming learned from the Shang with livestock raising learned from nomadic groups living outside the Chinese core. From the Shang, the Zhou also acquired the arts of bronze-making and divination before later developing their own ritual vessels and spiritual practices. Armed by the Shang with chariots, bows, and bronze armor, the Zhou eventually overthrew the Shang kings and founded a new dynastic ruling house. Inheriting the Shang logographic script, the Zhou dynasty became the first to transmit texts such as the *Book of Documents*, records of dozens of speeches and announcements attributed to historical leaders, from the ancient world directly to future generations.

But for all that the Zhou inherited from the Shang, their dynasty also introduced influential changes to ancient China. Likely in order to distance themselves from the Shang, the Zhou allowed the scale of human sacrifices in burials to decline and phased out the use of divination with oracle bones. Above the deity Di, they introduced the concept of a higher power referred to as heaven, and they situated themselves as mediators by performing rituals designed to show that the cosmos legitimated their right to rule (Table 5.1).

Chinese Dynasty	Approximate Duration
Shang dynasty	1600–1050 BCE
Zhou ( <i>pronounced “Jeo”</i> ) dynasty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE)</li> <li>• Eastern Zhou dynasty (c. 771–256 BCE)</li> </ul>	1046–256 BCE
Qin ( <i>pronounced “chin”</i> ) dynasty	221–206 BCE

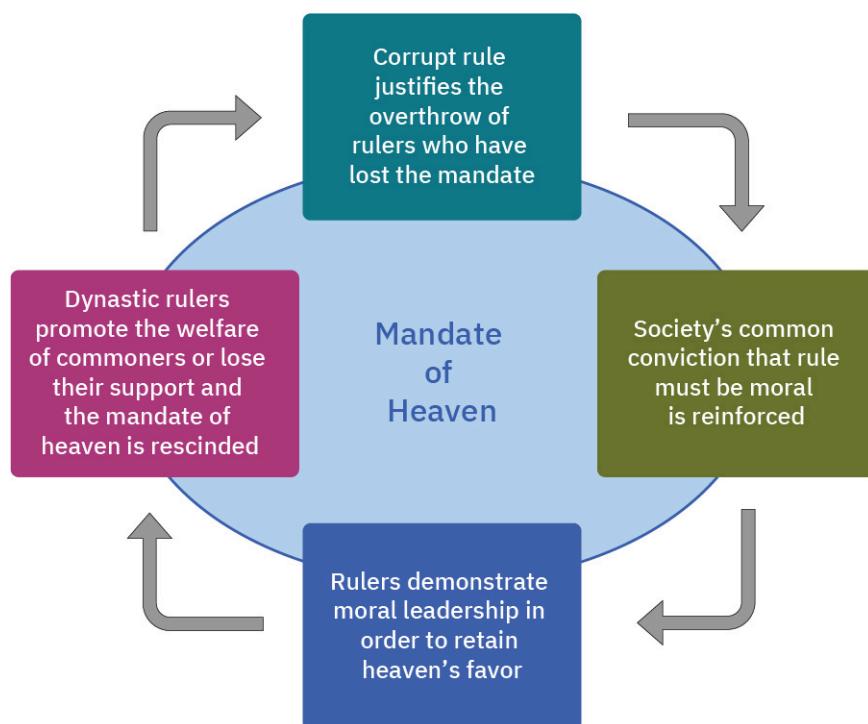
**TABLE 5.1** China's Dynasties This table marks the duration of China's dynasties, from the start of the Shang dynasty to the fall of the last, the Qing, in 1912. The physical borders of Chinese civilization fluctuated from one dynasty to the next. ([http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china\\_timeline.htm#timeline-keyevents](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_timeline.htm#timeline-keyevents))

Chinese Dynasty	Approximate Duration
Han dynasty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Western/Former Han dynasty (206–9 CE)</li> <li>Eastern/Later Han dynasty (25–220 CE)</li> </ul>	206 BCE–220 CE
Six Dynasties Period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three Kingdoms dynasty (220–265 CE)</li> <li>Jin dynasty (265–420 CE)</li> <li>Period of the Northern and Southern dynasties (386–589 CE)</li> </ul>	220–589 CE
Sui ( <i>pronounced “sway”</i> ) dynasty	581–618 CE
Tang dynasty	618–906 CE
Five Dynasties Period	907–960 CE
Song dynasty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Northern Song dynasty (960–1127)</li> <li>Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)</li> </ul>	960–1279
Yuan dynasty	1279–1368
Ming dynasty	1368–1644
Qing dynasty	1644–1912

**TABLE 5.1** China’s Dynasties This table marks the duration of China’s dynasties, from the start of the Shang dynasty to the fall of the last, the Qing, in 1912. The physical borders of Chinese civilization fluctuated from one dynasty to the next. ([http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china\\_timeline.htm#timeline-keyevents](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_timeline.htm#timeline-keyevents))

More than just spiritual changes, these policy shifts helped the Zhou spread a political ideology that fostered a shared cultural identity that was formative to Chinese civilization. According to the Zhou, the Shang rulers over time had grown despotic, ruining the lives of their subjects and squandering the bountiful resources of China. Around 1046 BCE, the Zhou, having grown tired of their abuses, rose up against the Shang and, led by King Wu, defeated them in battle.

The Zhou victory and Shang defeat were recorded in various Chinese classical texts as proof that the heavens had revoked the Shang’s right to rule and conferred it upon the new Zhou dynasty. This “**Mandate of Heaven**” shaped Chinese ideology and understanding of dynastic cycles for centuries to come (Figure 5.6). It justified the overthrow of bad governments and corrupt or inept rulers and reinforced a common conviction that in order to govern, a ruling house must demonstrate morality and order to retain heaven’s favor. The concept also pressured dynastic rulers to deserve the mandate by exhibiting moral leadership and proving their legitimacy through support for agriculture, the arts, and the welfare of the common people. Thereafter, natural disasters such as flood or famine and social upheaval in the form of rebellions or poverty were read as signs that a dynasty was in peril of having its mandate to rule rescinded.



**FIGURE 5.6 The Mandate of Heaven.** The Zhou dynasty's belief that imperial rule must be sanctioned by a mandate from the gods shaped China's history and culture for centuries to follow. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The Mandate of Heaven also ensured continuity between dynasties because it became an element of a core ideology passed from one ruling house to the next, even as non-Chinese groups such as Mongols and Jurchen later invoked it as conquerors. Thus, the mandate created a basis for increasing political unity of the Chinese under a supreme sovereign, while also promoting dissent and latent revolution against unpopular rulers. From this ideology sprang new terms for subjects, identified as denizens of Zhongguo (China), a name formed from the terms for *central* and *state*, or as Huaxia (Chinese) in the Zhou dynasty, to express their membership in a shared culture defined by farming, writing, and metalworking and inherited from mythical figures and common ancestors.

To consolidate their political control, the early Zhou rulers led military campaigns to extend their territory east over the Yellow River and relied on a complex system of decentralized rule. Leniency was shown to the Shang, with a son of the dynasty left to rule his own city and preside over rituals to honor his ancestors. Other Shang nobles were uprooted and moved to new cities to keep them under the watch of the Zhou, whose relatives and trusted advisors governed walled garrisons and cities on the frontier to guard against rising threats. In other areas, the Zhou cooperated with largely autonomous leaders, granting aristocratic titles in return for tribute and military service from local chiefs and nobility. To cement these ties, the Zhou brokered marriages between the royal line and the families of local lords, who within their own domains performed the same spiritual and administrative functions as the ruling family. Like the Zhou, local lords were served by ministers, scribes, court attendants, and warriors, and they enjoyed the fruits of the efforts of ordinary laborers and farmers who lived on their estates.

The Zhou proved more durable than the Shang but, especially in later centuries, their power was diffused among many smaller, competing kingdoms only nominally under their control. The Zhou's decentralized feudal system, in which land and power was granted by the king to local leaders in return for special privileges, gradually weakened as those regional lords ignored the commands of kings, instead amassing armies and searching for alliances and technological advantages over their neighbors.

As a result, scholars typically divide the Zhou dynasty into several periods. The Western Zhou (c. 1046–771

BCE) refers to the first half of the dynasty's rule, from its founding to the sack of its capital in Haojing by nomadic armies in 771 BCE. Afterwards the Zhou reestablished their capital in the east, in Luoyang, inaugurating the period called the Eastern Zhou (771–256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou dynasty itself is often divided into two halves—the Spring and Autumn (771–476 BCE) and the Warring States (475–256 BCE) periods. The first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty derives its name from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. That chronicle, from about the fifth century BCE, documents the gradual erosion of the Zhou kings' power as outlying territories such as Chu, Qin, and Yan became increasingly autonomous. Not surprisingly, then, the Warring States era was characterized by open warfare between these regional powers to enlarge their territories, absorb neighboring kingdoms, and replace the Zhou as the new sovereigns of ancient China.

Bridging the two eras of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States was a period defined by a flourishing of literature and philosophy known as the Hundred Schools of Thought (770–221 BCE). Inspired by political turmoil and rivalries between various Chinese states, those who wished to retain power were drawn to the study of the military arts, diplomacy, and political intrigue. Those who lamented the lack of order and waning loyalty to authority and tradition turned to the study of morality and ethics. In a political climate of competition and reform, new schools of thought informed a swelling class of capable administrators and military strategists contesting for the patronage of rulers. Philosophers such as Mozi and Sunzi, author of *The Art of War*, created their own rival traditions and contributed to courtly debates on morality, war, government, technology, and law.

In this marketplace of ideas, Chinese civilization as a whole rapidly grew more sophisticated. At the same time, rulers sought to expand their revenues, increase the size of their populations, implement new techniques for farming such as draining marshes, and create new forms of currency such as bolts of silk. This era also fostered dynamic new forms of art as the Zhou court became home to musicians skilled with chimes, drums, lutes, flutes, and bells. States such as Chu and Zheng became famous for their artists and styles of dance, while popular hymns were later translated into poems and recorded in the *Book of Songs*. These intellectual traditions and cultural forms, though varied, served as the foundational core for Chinese politics, education, and art in the ancient world.

Foremost among the new schools of thought was **Confucianism**, a philosophical system that shaped morality, governance, and social relations in China before spreading to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan in later centuries. Its founding philosopher, known as Kong Fuzi, or Confucius, was probably born about 551 BCE and lived in relative obscurity as a teacher in the small state of Lu. Later his descendants and disciples made his teachings on the family, society, and politics known in ancient China via *The Analects*, a collection of brief statements attributed to him and recorded long after his death. Later scholars influenced by Confucius, such as Mengzi, went on to win renown for their teachings, attracting throngs of new students while gaining influential positions as advisers in the service of rulers.

A central tenet of Confucianism is the importance of exemplifying virtuous leadership by living a moral life, studiously observing rituals, and being tirelessly devoted to the duties owed to the leader's subjects. Confucian texts such as the *Book of Documents* promoted habits like literacy, critical thinking, the search for universal truth, humility, respect for ancestors and elders, and the valuing of merit over aristocratic privilege. Confucius also considered family relationships to be central to an orderly society. Specifically, he delineated five cordial relationships—between king and subjects, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger siblings, and friends. Each relationship consisted of an authority figure who required obedience and honor from the other person or persons, except for friends who were to honor one another. In return, the person in authority was supposed to embody *ren*, an attitude of generosity and empathy for those beneath him. So long as everyone behaved as they should, good order would flourish.

Later Confucian teachers such as Xun Kuang (also known as Xunzi), witnessing the violence of the Warring States period, argued that humanity's base impulses necessitated rigorous self-cultivation and discipline. Among devout Confucians, such ideas spawned a constant search for internal self-improvement and concern

for the well-being of others and society as a whole. During this period, Zhou kings presided over rites to honor royal ancestors, but they also made greater use of written works to magnify their prestige and power. *Yijing*, or *The Book of Changes*, presented a new system of divination later included as a seminal text in the Confucian canon.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### *The Analects of Confucius*

Over many decades following Confucius's death, his students and followers collected his words of wisdom in *The Analects*. *The Analects* consists of twenty short books, each of which includes a series of short quotations on a particular theme. Confucius's main concern was to teach people how to become *junzi*, compassionate and moral beings more concerned with doing what was right than with satisfying their own desires. The *junzi* understood their duties to others and fulfilled all the ancient ritual obligations. Confucius believed *junzi* could be created through education, and that society would be harmonious and peaceful if the government was guided by *junzi*. The following are some excerpts from Book 2.

CHAP. I. The Master [Confucius] said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."

CHAP. II. The Master said, "In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—Having no depraved thoughts."

CHAP. III. 1. The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. 2. "If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."

CHAP. IV. 1. The Master said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. 2. "At thirty, I stood firm. 3. "At forty, I had no doubts. 4. "At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. 5. "At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. 6. "At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."

—Confucius, *The Analects*, translated by James Legge

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- Why would Confucius think it important to be able to feel shame?
  - How would the values expressed here help make a person a better leader?
  - What connection, if any, can you see between the teachings of Confucius and the Zhou concept of the Mandate of Heaven?

#### LINK TO LEARNING

You can read the full text of [\*The Analects\*](https://openstax.org/l/77Analects) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Analects>) at the Project Gutenberg website.

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A mystical indigenous religion that venerated nature, **Daoism** borrowed from various ideological systems, such as the dualism of *yin-yang* with its emphasis on the complementary poles of light and dark cosmological forces. Daoism's thousands of texts, temples, and priests did not flower until the later Han dynasty, but during the Zhou era, this school emerged as a major influence thanks to teachers like Laozi and Zhuang Zhou (commonly known as Zhuangzi) and the circulation of the books attributed to them, the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi*. From them, Daoists learned a litany of poems, sayings, parables, and folktales teaching that *dao* (or "the way") was an underlying influence that shaped and infused all humans, the natural world, and the cosmos. Daoists encouraged dwelling on the beauty of the natural world, exploring mystic rituals, and

contemplating the comparative insignificance of the individual against the vastness of time and space. Perhaps the most important political concept introduced by Daoists was the idea of *wuwei* (or “nonaction”), implying to those in power that the best form of governance was a minimalist approach that avoided interfering in the lives of their subjects.

Counter to the Daoist tradition and Confucianism ran the school of thought known as **Legalism**, the focal point of which was the accumulation of power. Legalists argued that governments drew power from a written legal code backed by an expansive system of rewards and punishments to ensure enforcement and order. A few of its exponents, like the thinker Han Feizi, studied Confucianism first, but came to see its proponents and teachings as too idealistic and naïve. Legalists downplayed the need for morality and asserted that the bedrock of a good government was a “rich country and a strong army.”

While Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism remained distinct, they borrowed liberally from each other and incorporated values, themes, and terminology to round out their own philosophies. All were open, eclectic systems reacting to historical circumstances and conditions. Moreover, each of these schools of thought and even the more minor traditions formed a common frame of reference within which Chinese rulers, philosophers, scribes, and even hermits expressed their own views. Confucianism and Legalism encouraged the study of texts over mystic rites, or society and its history over the supernatural and the afterlife, while other thinkers continued to ponder the yin and yang and work out principles applicable to astronomy, medicine, and the calendar. The world of spirits, ancestor worship, and folktales was no less prevalent than before. Still, it was the emergence of these new systems and their contributions that make this era an “axial age,” a critical stage in the evolution of not just Chinese civilization but the world.

### The Warring States Era and Qin Unification

Over the course of the long Eastern Zhou era (771–256 BCE), the means and methods of warfare changed, with dramatic consequences for ancient China. Initially war was regulated by chivalrous codes of conduct, complete with rituals of divination conducted before and after battle. Battles were fought according to a set of established rules by armies of a few thousand soldiers fighting for small Chinese states. The seasons and the rhythms of agricultural life limited the scope of campaigns. Victorious armies followed the precedent set by the early Zhou conquerors, sparing aristocratic leaders in order to maintain lines of kinship and preserve an heir who would perform rites of ancestor worship.

With the advent of the Warring States era (475–256 BCE), these rules were cast aside, and values such as honor and mercy went out of fashion. New military technologies provided the catalyst for these changes. The invention of the crossbow made the advantages once owned by cavalry and chariots nearly obsolete. The result was ballooning conscript armies of hundreds of thousands, making military service nearly universal for men. Protected by leather armor and iron helmets, soldiers skilled in the art of mounted archery trickled into Chinese states from the steppes. Discipline, drilling, logistics, organization, and strategy became paramount to success. Treatises on deceptive military maneuvers and the art of siege craft proliferated among the various states of the Zhou.

Not all the changes wrought by war in the late Zhou period were unwelcome. For example, common farmers gained the right to include their family names on registration rolls and pressure sovereigns for improvements to their lands such as new irrigation channels. Iron technology was developed for weapons, but was also used for new agricultural tools. Together, increasing agricultural productivity and advancements in iron technology were part of a late Zhou surge in economic growth. Mobilization for war stimulated a cross-regional trade in furs, copper, salt, and horses. And with that long-distance trade came increased coinage. The destruction of states through war also created social volatility, reducing the status of formerly great aristocratic families while giving rise to new forms of gentry and a more powerful merchant class. The only way back up the social ladder was through merit, and many lower-level aristocrats proved themselves as eager bureaucrats in the service of new sovereigns.

One of the many warring states in this period, the state of Qin, capitalized on these economic and social changes by adopting Legalist reforms to justify an agenda of power and expansionism. The arrival of Lord Shang, a migrant born in a rival territory in approximately 390 BCE, who soon took the position of prime minister, was the turning point, when Legalism came to dominate the thinking of Qin's elite. Before this, the Qin state had been a marginal area within the lands of the Zhou, a frontier state on the western border charged with defending the borderlands and raising horses. The Qin state leveraged this location by trading with peoples from central Asia. At the same time, their vulnerability on the periphery kept them in a state of constant alert and readiness for war, creating a more militaristic culture and an experienced army that proved invaluable when set against their Chinese neighbors in the east.

To offset their initial disadvantages, the Qin leaders wisely embraced immigrant talent such as Lord Shang and solicited help from advisors, militarists, and diplomats from rival domains. They adopted new techniques of governance, appointing officials and delegates to centralize rule rather than relying on hereditary nobles. Theirs became a society with new opportunities for social advancement based on talent and merit. Under Shang's advisement, the Qin scorned tradition and introduced new legal codes, unified weights and measures, and applied a system of incentives for able administrators that helped create an army and bureaucracy based more on merit than on birth. Over time, these changes produced an obedient populace, full coffers, and higher agricultural productivity.

The Qin state's rising strength soon overwhelmed its rivals, propelling to victory its king Ying Zheng, who anointed himself China's first emperor and was known as Qin Shi Huang, or Shihuangdi, literally "first emperor" (Figure 5.7). The Qin war machine defeated the states of Han, Wei, Zhao, Chu, Yan, and Qi in less than a decade. Under Shihuangdi's rule, the tenets of Legalism fostered unity as the emperor standardized the writing system, coins, and the law throughout northern China. Defeated aristocratic families were forced to uproot themselves and move to the new capital near Xi'an. To consolidate political control and reverse the fragmentation of the Zhou era, officials appointed by the emperor were dispatched to govern on his behalf, which cast aside the older feudal system of governance. Officials who performed poorly were removed and severely punished. Those who did well wrote regular detailed reports closely read by the emperor himself.



**FIGURE 5.7** Qin Shi Huang. This image of China's first emperor was painted by an anonymous eighteenth-century Chinese artist for an album of emperors' portraits. Shihuangdi's reign was typified by expansionist campaigns and

enormous construction projects such as his tomb. (credit: “A portrait painting of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty” by Richard R. Wertz/18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes, British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Qin militarism also turned outward, enlarging the bounds of Chinese territory as far as the Ordos Desert in the northwest. In the south, Shihuangdi's armies ranged into modern-day Vietnam, laying a Chinese claim to the people and territory in this area for the first time in history. These expansions and the need for defense generated new infrastructure, such as fortified towns and thousands of miles of new roads to transport the Qin's armies to the borders. Northern nomadic and tribal civilizations known to Chinese as the Hu (or Donghu) and Yuezhi were seen as formidable threats. To guard against these “barbarians,” hundreds of thousands of laborers, convicts, and farmers were sent to connect a series of defensive structures of rammed earth built earlier by states in northern China. Once completed, the Qin's Great Wall illustrated how fortifying the north and guarding against the steppes became the focal point of statecraft in ancient China. Successive empires in China followed a similar wall-building pattern. The walls commonly referred to as the Great Wall of China today are in fact Ming dynasty walls built between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries CE.

Shihuangdi was also ruthless in defending himself from criticism at home. Informed by his chancellor in 213 BCE that literate Chinese were using commentary on classical texts and literary works to critique his rule, the emperor ordered the destruction of thousands of texts, hoping to leave in print only technical treatises on topics such as agriculture or medicine. An oft-cited story of Shihuangdi's brutality credits him with calling for the execution of hundreds of Confucian and Daoist intellectuals by burying them alive. Recent scholars have scrutinized these tales, questioning how much about his reign was distorted and exaggerated by the scholars of his successors, the Han dynasty, to strengthen their own legitimacy. In studying the ancient past, we must likewise always question the veracity of historical sources and not just reproduce a history “written by the winners.”

Another monumental feat of Shihuangdi's reign was the creation of the **Terracotta Army**, thousands of life-sized clay soldiers fully armed with bronze weaponry and horses. From the time he was a young boy, the emperor had survived a series of assassination attempts, leaving him paranoid and yearning for immortality. Trusted servants were sent in search of paradise and magical elixirs, while hundreds of thousands of others were charged with the years-long process of constructing an enormous secret tomb to protect him in the afterlife. Almost immediately upon ascending the throne in 221 BCE, Shihuangdi began planning for this imperial tomb to be filled with clay replicas of his imperial palace, army, and servants. The massive underground pits, which cover an area of approximately thirty-eight square miles, were discovered with their innumerable contents near Xi'an in the 1970s ([Figure 5.8](#)). Labor for projects such as the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army came from commoners as a form of tax or as a requirement under the Qin's law codes. Penalties for violating the criminal code were severe—forced labor, banishment, slavery, or death.



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 5.8** The Terracotta Army. (a) Discovered in the 1970s, the buried treasures of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, include thousands of life-size clay soldiers, known today as the Terracotta Army. (b) Small details of their dress and facial features distinguish the individual soldiers. (credit a: modification of work “Terracotta Soldier Panorama” by Walter-Wilhelm/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “Terracotta warriors exhibit” by “scott1346”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

## **LINK TO LEARNING**

Shihuangdi's mausoleum has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Use the tabs at the UNESCO website to view pictures and to access the videos of the [Terracotta Army](https://openstax.org/l/77Terracotta) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Terracotta>) to learn more.

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The Qin Empire quickly collapsed in the wake of the emperor's death in 210 BCE. Conspiracy within the royal court by one of the emperor's sons led to the deaths of his rightful heir, a loyal general, and a talented chancellor. Beyond the court, the Legalist philosophy and practices that had helped the Qin accrue strength now made them brittle. Imperial power exercised in the form of direct rule and harsh laws inspired revolts by generals and great families calling for a restoration of the aristocratic feudal society of the Zhou.

The armies of the Qin's second emperor failed against Liu Bang, a commoner who rose to become Emperor Gaozu of the newly formed Han dynasty. The Han's early emperors distanced themselves from Shihuangdi's legacy by reducing taxes and burdens on the common people. But the Qin's imperial blueprint—uniform laws, consistent weights and measurements, a centralized bureaucracy, and early focus on expansionism to ward off “barbarians” in the north—provided the scaffolding for the Han's greatness.

## **5.2 The Steppes**

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the role climate played in the ancient history of the steppes
- Describe the daily life of people who lived in the region of the steppes
- Analyze the relationship between the people of the steppes and nearby civilizations

The Eurasian Steppe is a vast stretch of grassland running from Eastern Europe over the top of central Asia and China into Mongolia. For much of human history, the area was home to traveling bands of nomadic pastoralists who grazed herds and collided with settled agricultural societies in Persia, Russia, and China. Geographers divide the Eurasian Steppe into two zones: One is in the west near Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, and the other is in the east, close to China and Mongolia (Figure 5.9). In both areas, the vastness of the land supported large herds of goat, cattle, and sheep. The prevalence of horses enabled powerful warriors of many cultures to rule from the saddle but also gave their people the freedom to roam, migrate, and resist absorption into a large unified state. While much of their history is still debated, these various tribes of the steppes provided the origins for a great number of Turkic, Iranian, Mongolic, Uralic, Tibeto-Burman, and multiethnic peoples today.



**FIGURE 5.9 The Eurasian Steppe.** The Eurasian Steppe, consisting of a western and an eastern half and shown here in light blue, reaches from the Caspian Sea in Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Its distinctive climate and vegetation are well-suited to pasturing livestock but less welcoming to settled agriculture. (credit: modification of work "Approximate extent of the Eurasian Steppe grasslands ecoregion, and Eurasia cultural region" by "Mdf"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### The Nomadic Culture of the Steppes

The eastern half of the Eurasian Steppe, sometimes referred to as the **Inner Asian Steppe**, now contains vast grasslands, mountains, and deserts not suitable to agriculture and only sparsely populated. Its history has been shaped to a great extent by climate change. Rainfall across the grasslands in Mongolia once supported pasturing herds of sheep, camels, goats, and horses, but in periods of a cooling climate, the grasslands could shrink, forcing nomads to roam in search of new pastures. Or droughts could drive them to desperate measures: If nearby societies were unwilling to trade, the nomads were often left with no choice but to make raids on farms and cities as a means to survive. Scholars now theorize that shifts to a colder, drier climate around 1500 BCE forced many peoples living here to abandon agriculture for livestock herding. However, grazing animals required mobile human communities that could readily find new pastures and protect their herds from predators. Thus the need to care for livestock forced cultural adaptation as people mastered the art of horseback riding.

As livestock herders, many people of the Inner Asian Steppe consumed a great deal of meat and dairy and made products from animal flesh and furs that could be traded in agricultural villages. They spoke languages unrelated to Chinese, such as Turkic or Mongolic, but a few such as the Jie may have even spoken Indo-European tongues. Due to the constraints set on pastoralism by a changing climate, the peoples of the steppes

were in constant contact with agrarian civilizations such as the Chinese, who often looked on the nomads and their herds as a pestilence and threat to their own livelihoods. Yet while Chinese and Koreans for centuries tried to erect physical and cultural barriers between their civilizations and the “foreign” groups on the steppes, the ethnic and ancestral lines between Asia’s nomads and their neighbors were porous.

Prizes taken by peoples of the steppes during raids, such as silk, lacquerware, grain, and war captives, were distributed by chieftains to their loyal supporters, who in turn conferred upon their leaders new titles such as *chanyu*, or **khan**, signifying a supreme leader with claims to spiritual and military supremacy. The khans’ command over thousands of horses in an age of cavalry warfare further enhanced their power. Tribal confederations of the steppes wielded control over the **Silk Roads**, a series of trade routes circulating luxury goods to and from China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East. To a mobile society, manufactured and luxury goods had material, social, and political value of enormous worth. Silk, for example, was treasured by nomads because its lightness was ideal for clothing in hot summers and its softness was desirable for lining beds. Powerful generals and khans who amassed huge quantities of the fabric used it as an indicator of their power. The same was largely true of other luxury goods such as wine.

## THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

### China’s New Silk Road

For hundreds of years, the Silk Roads connected China to central Asia, India, and the Middle East and made prized Chinese goods such as silk available to the people of the steppes. The Silk Roads also created great wealth for China. Although trade over these routes ended in the fifteenth century, in 2013, China laid plans for creating a “New Silk Road,” better known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is a development project that includes the building of highways, railroads, and energy pipelines across central Asia, Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia as part of a Silk Roads economic belt. When completed, it is meant to integrate the nations of central Asia—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan—into the global economy, just as the Silk Roads established during the Han dynasty connected the Turkic and Mongolic nomads of the steppes to the wealth of China and the Middle East. Together with a plan by China to develop ports on the Indian Ocean (a project known as the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road), the BRI is intended to increase exports for Chinese companies, provide China with a secure connection to the oil of the Middle East, and assist in the economic development of the country’s western regions, which are poorer than other parts of the country.

Critics in the West as well as in India and Japan claim that the New Silk Road will also allow China to expand its political influence around the world. And not all the nations that China hopes will participate in the project have greeted it with open arms. Some have claimed it is too expensive. Chinese development assistance often comes in the form of loans, and some countries fear ending up in debt. This is especially likely if they are required to do business with Chinese companies that charge inflated prices for their goods and services. There is also concern about China’s record on human rights. In 2019, crowds in Kazakhstan protested Chinese plans to build factories in their country partly because of China’s much-criticized treatment of Uyghurs, an ethnic minority group in Xinjiang province.

- Why might leaders in China want to encourage an association between the modern economic initiatives and the older Silk Roads?
- Is it fair to suggest, as some have, that the Belt and Road Initiative and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road are imperialist in nature? Why or why not?

Most nomadic groups in Asia lived in small units of families or in a **clan**, a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together. Clans were united by loyalty to a chieftain selected for

prowess as a mounted warrior. Compared with many other cultures in the ancient world, however, the societies of the steppes were more egalitarian. Role and status differences between men and women were more muted than in cities or farming settlements. Recent archaeological discoveries of female skeletons from the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Turkic peoples of the steppes show evidence that women engaged in horseback riding and combat skills such as archery. They likely formed the historical basis for folktales about legendary female warriors such as Mulan that began circulating in Chinese society in the sixth century. Mobile lifestyles put a limit on the acquisition of wealth and its display in the form of architecture and clothing, which might explain why the development of written scripts was less common as well. Conversely, it was also true that most cultures of the Inner Asian Steppe readily absorbed technologies, goods, and ideas from neighboring civilizations.

Where the peoples of the steppes pioneered was in domesticating the horse, giving them a significant military advantage over their neighbors. Horseback riding and hunting provided the education in martial arts needed for war, and people began both activities at an early age. Hunting was a fixture of nomadic culture and the core of rituals that marked progress from child to adult, or from lowly member of society to one of the higher ranks. Touching both Europe and Asia, the steppes formed a bridge from which developments such as the chariot and cavalry warfare slowly spread to the rest of Asia. Chariots and mounted warriors in turn sparked the development of confederations that constituted a formidable military threat. Campaigns led by conquerors from the steppes—such as Modun, who came to power in 209 BCE—thus marked a turning point in the relationship between the Inner Asian Steppe, the rest of China, and the developing Silk Roads as arteries of exchange across the ancient world.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

This site provides an [extensive history of the various nomadic tribes](https://openstax.org/l/77NomadicTribes) (<https://openstax.org/l/77NomadicTribes>) of the Eurasian Steppe. Consult the section about the Silk Roads to understand how these routes influenced the formation of tribal confederations and larger empires led by nomadic groups.

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### **Tribes, Confederations, and Settled Neighbors**

The earliest written records about many non-Chinese people living along the steppes come from Chinese sources, which referred to these people collectively as the Hu (or Donghu) and divided them into five large groups. These were the Xiongnu, the Di, the Qiang, the Xianbei, and the Jie. Later inhabitants of the steppes in the ancient world included the Khitan and many smaller groups.

Among the more powerful confederations noted by Chinese scribes were the Xiongnu, who controlled the lands near Mongolia from the third to the first century BCE. The Xiongnu became the dominant military confederation after forcing their rivals the Yuezhi to migrate west. In many periods, the relationship between the Xiongnu and Chinese dynasties such as the Han was complicated. Sometimes the Xiongnu and the Chinese were natural trading partners, exchanging horses for grain and silk. Access to Chinese civilization normally demanded that the Xiongnu submit tribute, accepting inferior status in return for trade rights and other rewards such as Chinese brides to establish stronger ties between the two cultures. At other times, the Xiongnu preferred to assert military and cultural dominance by raiding China and inciting war as well as constructing defenses such as the many northern fortification walls built by successive dynasties. At several points in their history, the Xiongnu were strong enough militarily to force the Chinese to adopt a policy of appeasement, exacting huge sums of silk, rice, and cash for peace. As a result, the tribute flowing between Xiongnu and Han Chinese often became a bribe meant to appease the nomadic tribes.

Simultaneously, tribal chieftains could often be employed as vassals of the Chinese, acting as a buffer to protect their border with the steppes or to sow division and conflict between various other bands of the Xiongnu. Chinese officials and soldiers also often found it convenient to defect to the Xiongnu, marrying into powerful families who sought their skills and expertise as administrators. For all these reasons, the border

between the steppes and China was fluid and constantly changing, even as Han historians began to refer to groups such as the Xiongnu as “barbarians” and the antithesis of what it meant to be Chinese. Conversely, the nomads and tribes of the steppes often looked on Chinese farmers as lowly, weak, and servile peoples, in contrast to their own identity and values.

Critical to the struggle between the two were the Silk Roads. The balance of power, which initially favored the Xiongnu, shifted as two Han military expeditions went in search of allies in central Asia. These campaigns succeeded in subjugating the Xiongnu and gaining control over the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads. The Xiongnu were later weakened by years of civil war over their system of succession during the middle of the first century BCE. Less powerful groups in these wars tended to move toward the frontier of the Chinese empire and try to secure Chinese support against their rivals.

Thus the Southern Xiongnu, with their homeland threatened by natural disasters and resource scarcity, became vassals of the Han fighting against the Northern Xiongnu. Acceptance of tributary status required sending an aristocratic prince as hostage to live in the Han capital and be given a classical Chinese education, part of the continued cultural exchange between the Inner Asian Steppe and China. Channels between the two cultures widened as the later Han moved settlers west and tried to create military colonies along the frontiers for defense, staffed by non-Chinese auxiliary forces. Hundreds of thousands of Xiongnu lived inside the borders of China’s empire, often becoming more settled and assimilated in their lifestyles and cultural practices.

Following the collapse of the Han dynasty, various branches of the Xiongnu tribes founded dynastic states across northern China during a period known as the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). With innovations such as the stirrup and new forms of armor covering the whole of the mounted warrior and his horse, heavy cavalry units made these nomadic groups the supreme fighting force in Asia for the next two centuries. During this time, much of northern China and the Inner Asian Steppe was dominated by large, multiethnic conquest states ruled by chiefs claiming mixed ancestry from both Chinese and nomadic groups. Dynasties such as the Later Zhao and the Han Zhao were founded by powerful Xiongnu chiefs such as Shi Le and Liu Yuan, respectively. However, these dynasties often invoked claims to legitimacy staked in their ancestral and cultural ties to the Han dynasty. The ethnic markers and identity of the Xiongnu as distinct from Chinese and other groups on the steppes slowly melted away in these centuries. At the same time, an economy rooted in ranching and herding spread from the Inner Asian Steppe to northern China in a period that saw long-distance trade and grain agriculture decline.

Meanwhile, another ethnic nomadic group known as the Xianbei also emerged as a powerful force in the world of East Asia in this period. Originally hailing from southern Manchuria, the Xianbei were once subordinate to larger nomadic groups on the steppes such as the Xiongnu. After the fall of the Han, the Xianbei grabbed territory inside China proper by conducting raids for horses, war captives, and herds of cattle and sheep. Their military might forced a massive reshuffling of populations in northern China, while many Chinese sought employment with the Xianbei as advisers and administrators.

Drawing on the wealth of Chinese farmers, a branch of the Xianbei known as the Tuoba clan founded the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE). Adopting the imperial title of emperor, Xianbei rulers such as Xiaowen in the late fifth century tried to remake their society into a true Chinese dynasty along the blueprint of the Han ([Figure 5.10](#)). During Xiaowen’s reign, for example, elite Xianbei families arranged marriages between their daughters and wealthy, well-educated Chinese from the Southern dynasties. Such reforms proved dangerous. The opulence and culture of the courtly center of the Northern Wei alienated Xianbei soldiers of the garrisons along its frontier, who rebelled in 524 CE. The result was years of civil war and the sack of the capital in Luoyang. Still, the Xianbei proved a considerable force in the affairs of East Asia well into the later Sui and Tang dynasties.



**FIGURE 5.10 Northern Wei Dynasty.** Xiaowen's reign over the Northern Wei dynasty marked a dynamic period of cultural exchange and assimilation between Xianbei and Han Chinese royals and nobility, but it also led to rebellion and violence by nomadic warriors charged with guarding the kingdom. (credit: modification of work “Map of the Eastern Hemisphere 500 CE” by Thomas Lessman/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

While the Xianbei and Xiongnu faded, after the fourth century another group known as the Khitan began a slow steady ascent toward power on the steppes and beyond. Organized for centuries as small clans of hunters, fishers, herders, and warriors in an area stretching from Mongolia to Siberia, the Khitan later founded the Liao dynasty (907–1125). Even more impressive were later empires that conquered the entirety of the Inner Asian Steppe and all of China, founded by the Mongols and Jurchen.

## 5.3 Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss how geography and climate change influenced the early history of Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- Describe the cultural exchanges between ancient Korea and Japan
- Compare daily life in ancient Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were notable in the ancient world as homes to cultures uniquely engaged with the wider world. Via trade, religion, and diplomacy, Korea and Japan borrowed and adapted from Chinese civilization, but even more importantly from each other. Ties between Southeast Asia and India likewise proved formative in the eras in which many cultures evolved from small cities and agrarian villages into trade-post empires with monumental architecture. Conversely, geography, climate, and the early cultural forms produced by the first migrants meant that each area also produced its own indigenous systems. For example, Buddhist missionaries traveled from the Indian subcontinent across the Silk Roads and pilgrims trekked to temples to study and eventually bring home tools to convert their native cultures, but in each destination the faith was transformed into hundreds of new sects and interpretations of the path to enlightenment.

## Ancient Korea

The earliest humans to reach the Korean peninsula did so around thirty thousand years ago. The land is very hilly, and mountains in the north form a barrier with Manchuria. Important rivers include the Daedong, the Han, and the Yalu. Winters are cold and snowy in the north, while summer months in the south feature blistering heat and torrential rains. Archaeologists have found evidence of bronze weapons dating back to 1300 BCE, but no clear proof that Korea at that time produced a Bronze Age civilization. The earliest written records of the first Koreans come from China, where the *Book of Documents* recounts the creation of a fief known as Joseon, located in northern Korea and awarded to a Chinese noble referred to as Gija. Later records in Chinese documents from 200 BCE to 313 CE provide descriptions of various small states in areas of Korea and Manchuria.

Seen from the vantage point of Chinese authors, our picture of ancient Korea begins to take shape during China's Han dynasty, when the peninsula was home to a number of small tribes, cultures, and communities living near the borders of the Chinese empire. From these Chinese records it is also clear that the earliest Koreans were in constant contact and exchange with not just the Chinese but also Inner Asian Steppe peoples like the Xiongnu as well as settlers in Japan. Thus, ethnicity in ancient Korea was quite fluid and prone to change. Groups borrowed liberally from each other's cultures, traded, and were absorbed and transformed by conquest.

The transformation of Korea into a unified culture and civilization is a story with many stops and starts. Historians often begin with the narrative of the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian, which tells of the dynasty's efforts to suppress the Xiongnu by invading northern Korea and establishing four garrisons there, from the Liao River to near today's Seoul. The presence of Chinese generals, troops, and settlers spurred exchange with societies on the Korean peninsula, which borrowed from Chinese culture the ideas of coins, seals, artwork, and building techniques to make roads and mounded tombs. Adopted by tribal chieftains and aristocratic warrior families, Chinese culture provided a wealth of material needed to engineer the first Korean states by controlling large areas of the northern half of the peninsula.

When unable to trade, Korean tribal societies mimicked the Xiongnu and raided the Chinese settlements, drawing strength and forging their own war bands. Among the early Korean polities noted in Chinese records in the north were Joseon, Goguryeo, and Buyeo, a frequent ally of the Han. With the collapse of the Han, each of these Korean societies lost a valuable partner and source of weapons, technology, and wealth. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, all three struggled to defend themselves against rising powers in the north, such as the Xianbei.

In roughly the same time frame, in the central and southern parts of the Korean Peninsula, and therefore beyond the reach of Chinese administration, three groups known collectively as the **Three Han** established their territories. Chinese sources from the time refer to people in the southwest as the Mahan, those in the southeast as Jinhan, and between them a group known as the Byeonhan. These societies were ruled by aristocratic families that chose a chief and controlled the lives of lower-ranking commoners, servants, and enslaved people.

The Three Han were far less formidable military powers than their counterparts to the north, in part because they lacked horses and fought primarily on foot. On the other hand, they showed considerable cultural fluidity and knowledge of their neighbors. In Jinhan, many tattooed their bodies in decorative patterns like those found on the bodies of the Wa living in Japan, not surprising given that groups moved relatively freely between Japan and Korea in this age. Residents of Korea traveled to Japan, sometimes as traders and fishers and other times as migrants and permanent settlers. In Mahan, clothing and hairstyles mimicked a style used by the Xianbei on the Inner Asian Steppe, even as their lifestyles revolved around farming rather than a nomadic culture lived on horseback. Indeed, it appears that early Korean societies were quite selective in their borrowing.

Practices such as the *levirate*, in which a young male marries his elder brother's widow, were used widely by Inner Asian Steppe peoples and adopted by a number of early Korean ruling families. But the decision whether to emulate the Chinese, Japanese, or other neighbors presented a range of options and cultural choices for chieftains and elite families to build on in this age.

The decline of Chinese power in the fourth century unleashed a wave of refugees that proved pivotal in speeding up the process of state-building in Korea, opening an age known as the Three Kingdoms (313–668 CE). The three kingdoms in question were Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla ([Figure 5.11](#)). Chinese immigrants resettling within the bounds of Korea provided a source of knowledge about political practices that strengthened the rule of elites, transforming them into kings. These kings commanded large armies, drawing legitimacy from their military prowess and creating mounded tombs that required vast resources and labor. From the struggles against groups such as the Khitan and Xianbei in the north emerged the kingdom of Goguryeo. In the late fourth century, under the leadership of King Gwanggaeto, this kingdom drove southward in a series of expansionist wars against its main rival, the Korean kingdom of Baekje and its allies from Japan, the Wa. In doing so, Goguryeo managed to make the third of the Three Kingdoms, Silla, a vassal by the early fifth century.



**FIGURE 5.11 Ancient Korea.** Three pivotal kingdoms—Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla—dominated trade and cultural exchange with China and Japan and vied to unify all of Korea under their rule. A fourth kingdom, Gaya, remained relatively weak in this period and in 532 CE was absorbed by Silla. (credit: modification of work “Map of Goguryeo (476)” by “solicitatia”/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0)

Beyond Goguryeo’s militarism, its expansion was marked by two other critical developments. The first was its skillful use of diplomacy and regional politics to manage alliances and threats, playing off groups within and around the Korean peninsula to secure its power. The second was the adoption of a written script from China, evidenced by 414 CE in a stone slab inscribed to note the accomplishments of King Gwanggaeto upon his death. Goguryeo’s elites also learned from the Chinese the art of adorning their large, mounded tombs with colorful murals depicting the lives of royals surrounded by dancers, servants, and enslaved people. Images of large battles, wrestling matches, and mythical creatures such as the phoenix in other mural scenes suggest the emergence of a rich courtly life.

During the Three Kingdoms era, the Chinese writing system spread throughout Korea, allowing those excluded from the ranks of aristocratic families a chance to seek appointment as scribes. The literacy necessary to study Confucian texts or Buddhist sutras, teachings of the Buddha, was a rare and very valuable skill. Knowledge of Chinese culture was another means to a life within the Korean courts, especially when writing poetry became a favorite pastime of Korean royalty and composing an eloquent verse was a critical sign of nobility and refinement. Many kingdoms sent royals, aristocrats, traders, scholars, and monks to China as apprentices to acquire skills and expertise they could bring home. These groups had an indelible impact on early Korean culture and society, particularly as Buddhism developed and grew into distinct sects and traditions. A few Korean Buddhist monks even traveled as far as India and central Asia, while others worked as teachers in the Three Kingdoms, inspiring new forms of painting, sculpture, and jewelry, and later the famed Buddhist monument, the first-century Seokguram Grotto ([Figure 5.12](#)).



**FIGURE 5.12** The Seokguram Grotto. Created in the eighth century CE, this Buddhist monument lies in an enormous temple complex on the slopes of Mount Toshan, an architectural marvel and exemplar of Buddhist motifs that modern Koreans consider a national treasure. (credit: “Front view of Seokguram from front chamber” by Cultural Heritage Administration/Wikimedia Commons, Korea Open Government License Type I: Attribution)

These changes to the Korean political, social, and spiritual landscape also powered Goguryeo’s rival state Baekje. The kingdom of Baekje emerged from its home near the Liao River in Manchuria to conquer and absorb the Mahan territory in 369. To consolidate their control over the southwestern area of the peninsula, Baekje’s rulers created a Chinese-style bureaucracy with a chief minister and carried on a successful maritime trade with China and Japan. Demand for Chinese culture, weapons, and Buddhism gave Baekje influence and prestige in Japan. However, a military defeat by Goguryeo and Silla in 475 kept Baekje hemmed in below the Han River. Afterward, Baekje turned its energy to upsetting the balance of power on the Korean peninsula by entreating Silla to rise against Goguryeo, its protector and overlord.

Ultimately, however, it was Silla that emerged from these plots to unify a larger share of today's Korea than any kingdom that preceded it. The smallest kingdom at the beginning of the era, located in the southeastern corner of the peninsula, Silla was ruled by powerful families that, like their neighbors, eventually copied models from China to wield power. Silla's rulers created Chinese-style ministries and codes of law and supported the practice of Buddhism to enhance their prestige and legitimacy. Maritime trade later proved a channel for Silla to form an alliance with a reunified China under the Sui and then the Tang dynasties. Conflict between Goguryeo and the Sui began in the 590s and lasted for decades. Later, the Tang supplanted the Sui and renewed Chinese ambitions to dominate the Korean peninsula.

By the 640s, the skillful diplomacy of Queen Seondeok of Silla (Figure 5.13) had leveraged the hostility between Goguryeo and the Chinese into the means for a Silla alliance with the Tang. Her kingdom's ships proved invaluable in ferrying Chinese armies onto the peninsula to lay conquest. Together, Silla and the Tang first subjugated Baekje and then eliminated Goguryeo in the north. Then, while the Tang set up bureaucracies to administer Korea, Seondeok's successors in Silla conspired with the defeated forces of their rivals to evict the invaders. Together, the remnants of the Baekje and Goguryeo's armies under the sway of Silla expelled Chinese forces in 676, ushering in a new era of unified rule over much of the peninsula that lasted from 668 to 892 CE. For a time, Silla severed its relations with the Tang, forgoing a critical resource that had powered its survival for centuries. But by the eighth century, new threats to both the Tang and Silla had emerged in the north. As a result, Silla once again sent tribute to the Chinese in return for protection and trade.



**FIGURE 5.13** The Gold Crown of Silla. The kingdom of Silla left behind examples of its impressive and famous gold working skill. This gold crown, likely owned by a queen in the fifth century BCE, was found in a tomb in the early twentieth century in Gyeongju, the capital of Silla. While we can't know for sure, Queen Seondeok likely wore a similar crown. (credit: "Gold Crown of Silla Kingsom" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Part of Queen Seondeok's legacy was a period of unprecedented female rule, during which new art forms emerged that in later centuries became distinctive Korean traditions. In ancient Korea, women wielded power as royal princesses, and affluent women often served as advisors and regents. But Queen Seondeok's reign paved the way for future queens of Silla, Jindeok, and Jinseong, to inherit the throne. Over time, Korean artisans learned from China how to make celadon ceramic, known for its lustrous green glaze, creating exquisite vases, jugs, bowls, and even pillows with Buddhist motifs such as cranes and clouds. In later centuries these works helped support a robust trade network running from China through Korea to Japan.

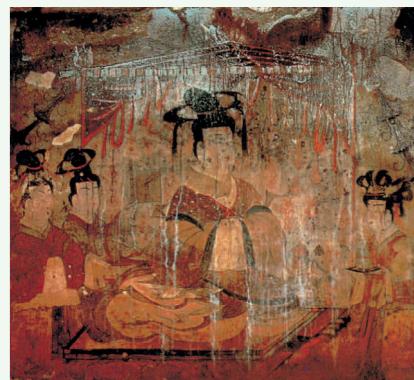
### BEYOND THE BOOK

#### The Tombs of Goguryeo

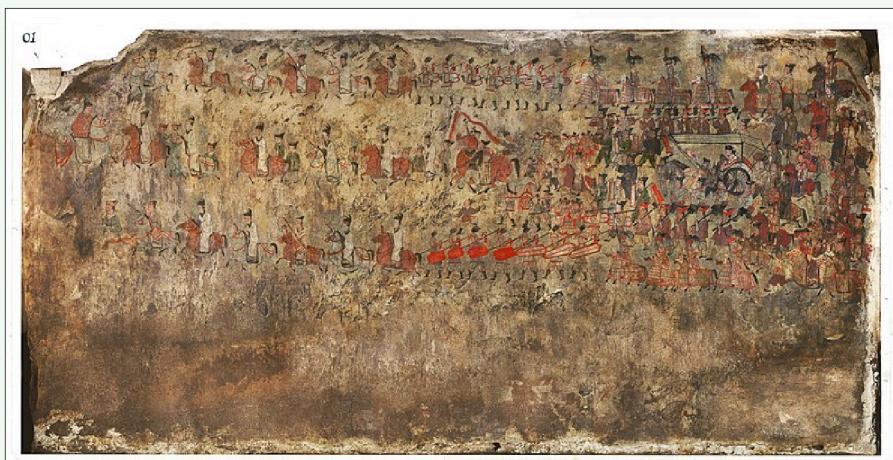
Chinese rulers were not the only ones to build tombs that provide us with clues about what they valued in life. The rulers of the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo also constructed tombs decorated with murals depicting everyday scenes, presumably representing the lives they had lived and the lives they hoped to have after death. Shown here (Figure 5.14) are murals from the tomb of a Goguryeo man who was buried in the fourth century CE, not long after the end of China's Qin dynasty. As you study the images, consider what they tell us about life among the Goguryeo elite at this time.



(a)



(b)



(c)

**FIGURE 5.14** A Tomb of Goguryeo. (a) The tomb's owner is depicted. (b) A woman, most likely his wife, is shown, which was painted on the wall close to the image of the man so that she faces him. Image (c) shows a procession, complete with carts and mounted soldiers, from the tomb's corridor. (credit a: modification of work

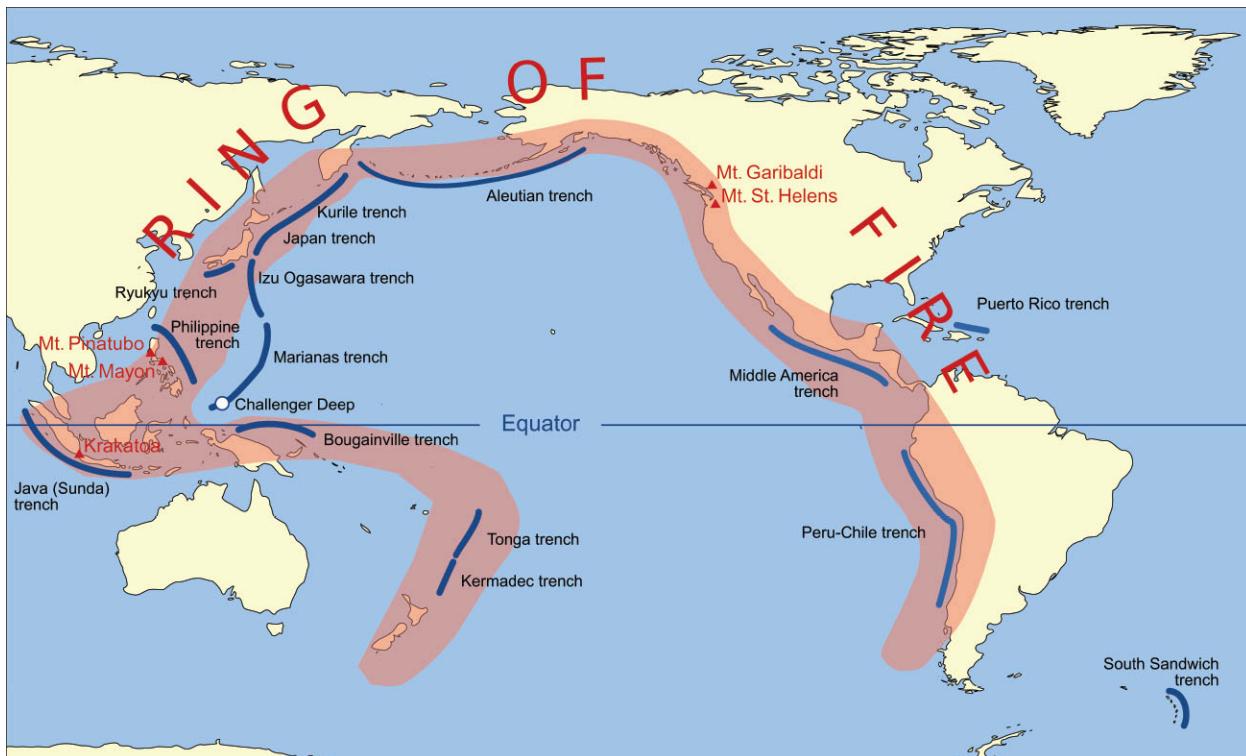
"A drawing in one of the chambers of the Goguryeo tombs. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Mural Art in Anak Tomb No. 3. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of work "Preserved wall mural of Anak tomb 3 (procession scene)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What do these murals tell you about the lives of Goguryeo's elite? What did they value and what were their concerns?
- Do you see any Chinese influences in these depictions? If so, where are they?

## Ancient Japan

As in Korea, geography shaped much of Japan's early development and history. Four main islands make up Japan. The northernmost is Hokkaido. Then comes Honshu, which is home to Tokyo and the largest present-day population. Continuing south, the next island is Shikoku, and finally Kyushu, which is closest to the Asian mainland. Japan today also includes the islands of Okinawa and thousands of others strewn across the Pacific. But much of the story of ancient Japan concerns only the main isles, the inland Sea of Japan, the country's countless mountains, and a few fertile plains fed by monsoon rains that sustain agriculture.

Critical to the formation of the main islands and their geographical features is the belt known as the **Ring of Fire** (Figure 5.15), mapped by a horseshoe-shaped line drawn around the rim of the Pacific Ocean to mark a zone of frequent earthquake and volcanic activity that has generated countless tsunamis in Japan's distant past and modern day.



**FIGURE 5.15 The Ring of Fire.** A horseshoe-shaped line running around the rim of the Pacific Ocean marks the Ring of Fire, an area where frequent shifts of tectonic plates cause earthquakes, volcanic activity, and tsunamis that have plagued Japan for centuries. (credit: "Pacific Ring of Fire" by "Gringer"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The story of prehistoric Japan is typically divided into two halves: the era of Jōmon hunters, ranging from 14,500 to 300 BCE, and that of the Yayoi agriculturalists who emerged after them to dominate the centuries

from 300 BCE to 300 CE. These groups had no concept of themselves as “Japanese” in a sense recognizable to us today. But they left their imprint on the main isles via migration, settlement, and the development of practices for making the fertile plains, mountainous forests, and innumerable ocean bays and rivers their homes. Without written records, our knowledge of the Jōmon and Yaoyi is almost wholly based on the archaeological evidence and contemporary theories about the pathways humanity followed out of Africa and across the world. Early hominids likely made their way to the Japanese archipelago when it was still connected to the Asian continent, perhaps over 100,000 years ago. Hunting giant mammals such as elephants, wolves, and enormous deer, many of these early hunters moved to an area near today’s Sea of Japan. Much later, changing climates led ocean levels to slowly rise and cover the stretches of land that connected Japan to the Asian mainland.

Linguists theorize that ultimately three early waves of foragers and hunters made their way overland or across the Tsushima Strait that separates the four main isles from the Asian mainland. These groups were descended from Ural-Altaic, Chinese, and Austro-Asiatic peoples. The climate shift that severed Japan from the Asian continent around twelve thousand years ago transformed the newly formed isles and the game these people once hunted. Grasslands for bison disappeared, for example, and wolves became smaller.

But the early inhabitants adapted, inventing new technologies to enhance their chances for survival. In the caves of Kyushu, archaeologists have found evidence of one of the world’s earliest technological breakthroughs, the development of pottery. Known for its elaborate handles and distinctive cord patterns around rims, this pottery allowed Japan’s inhabitants to become more sedentary and less dependent on finding wild game and foraging for edible plants. First used to store vegetables and boil water from the sea to make salt, the pottery called Jōmon was likely later used for rituals to promote unity and cooperation ([Figure 5.16](#)). The increasingly sophisticated culture of the people, also called Jōmon, was characterized by settlements with shared spaces for burials, food storage, and elaborate ceremonies. Among the important cultural symbols were earthenware figurines known as *dogu*.



**FIGURE 5.16** Jōmon Artifacts. (a) This Jōmon pottery food container (c. 3500–2500 BCE) is among the earliest examples of the craft of pottery found in the world. (b) The *dogu* figurine (c. 1000–300 BCE) likely represents a female god, hinting at the spiritual life of the early inhabitants of Japan’s main isles. Such figures are thought to have served as forms of sympathetic magic that healed illness and helped with childbirth. (credit a: modification of work “Deep Vessel” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Dogū (Clay Figurine)” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris

Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Skeletal remains of the Jōmon people suggest that despite their diverse diet of fruits, nuts, and seafood such as clams and fish, they lived with the constant threat of starvation and malnutrition. Another shift in the region's climate produced a deadly drop in temperatures that led to a decline in the populations of game such as deer and boar. To survive, many Jōmon moved to the coastal areas to supplement their food supply by fishing. Others likely began experimenting with early forms of agriculture; evidence suggests the cultivation of yams and lily-bulbs in the years from 3000 to 2400 BCE. Further evidence of early agriculture comes from traces of rice found in jars dated to the later years of the Jōmon era.

### Agriculture and the Yayoi

The next phase of Japan's prehistory is marked by the leap into agriculture and is known by the name of a separate people and culture, the Yayoi. Beginning in 300 BCE, a new wave of migrants descended from groups in northern Asia began arriving on the southern island of Kyushu. They brought with them knowledge about cultivating barley, buckwheat, and later rice, and gradually they overwhelmed and replaced the Jōmon. Later, the Yayoi built impressive storehouses for grain and domesticated horses and dogs. Other archaeological sites show that, as Yayoi culture spread, the people developed the capacity to engineer the landscape for farming by creating irrigation canals, wells, and pits. Agriculture brought stability and growth, and the Yayoi population is estimated to have ballooned to more than half a million people by the first centuries of the common era.

The Yayoi period marked a turning point in Japan's prehistory. From this point forward, Korea, China, and Japan were in more consistent contact than in the centuries before. This was especially the case because in the Bronze Age, with copper in short supply on the islands of Japan, the Yayoi were forced to import much of the material. The Yayoi period also marked the beginning of a written record of Japan.

Han conquests and the construction of garrisons on the Korean peninsula began a period of trade in bronze mirrors, iron weapons, and agricultural practices transmitted via Korea to Japan. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and later the kingdom of Cao Wei (220–265 CE) also sent occasional envoys to Japan (which the Han called the Wa kingdom). These envoys left behind the first written records of the lives and cultures of the Yayoi. Their observations show a slow but gradual transformation of society and politics. Despite increasing food surpluses and material abundance, the Yayoi people at first remained largely communal, sharing wooden tools and public spaces. Over time, the appeal of certain areas and sites for agriculture led to competition and increasing warfare and, by extension, the emergence of states to provide for defense.

Chinese records also note the distinctive style of dual governance—in which power was shared between male and female rulers—that developed in early Japanese states at the end of the Yayoi era. Among the notable rulers was Queen Himiko, who ruled in the early third century and, in return for paying tribute to the Chinese emperor, was recognized as an ally and given a golden seal. Ruling alongside Himiko was her younger brother, who handled the administration of her realm. The Cao Wei's records show that Himiko was at war with a neighboring king and staked the legitimacy of her rule on her spiritual powers, expressed in elaborate burials, the practice of divination, and other sacred rituals. Through such specialization, ancient Japanese women exercised political power and influence, possibly built upon the legacy of the Jōmon, whose *dogu* figurines depicted women as deities ensuring fertility and safety.

Chinese envoys noted that Japan was also home to an increasingly stratified society that included aristocratic families, merchants, skilled divers and fishers, farmers, and other commoners. With warfare constant, palaces looked more like garrisons, but granaries and markets were full and lively. And while these early Japanese lacked a written script, the Yayoi did develop a rich art form literally written on their bodies, as the practice of tattooing patterns to denote rank, status, and family was widespread in this era.

### The Dawn of the Yamato Age

Records of Queen Himiko's era also suggest a growing concentration of political power and control over territories held by a loose confederation of states and powerful families. This period, known as the Yamato era, was marked by the construction of tombs for deceased royals like Himiko, who were buried with an impressive array of treasures and human sacrifices to accompany them in the afterlife.

It may be that the onset of the Yamato era was produced by a changing climate and constant turmoil in Japan, as a result of which many of the island's inhabitants despaired and abandoned deities who seemed negligent in their duty to protect them. Instead, new gods associated with an imported technology—mirrors from China and Korea—arose to take their place. Powerful rulers and a new military class forged from warfare associated themselves with these new gods, or more importantly, with the female god of the Sun, Amaterasu, who soon became the ancestral figurehead of the imperial household. Yamato kings further accrued power by brokering alliances, managing trade, giving symbolic gifts, and presiding over ceremonies designed to forge a common culture across Japan.

As co-rulers of a kingdom or heads of households, women continued to wield political clout by using expertise in sorcery via items such as mirrors and often expressing their triumphs in gold jewelry and earrings. Many spiritual practices were imported from earlier Chinese dynasties such as the Shang dynasty. For example, during the burial of Queen Himiko, Chinese envoys recorded that Japanese employed the art of divining the future with heated bones by reading their cracks to foretell the outcome of harvests and wars. Other burial practices such as water purification were more indigenous to Japan and left an imprint on later religions such as Shintoism. Later, new foreign religions such as Buddhism were used by women such as Empress Suiko, who ruled in the early seventh century CE and sought to preserve women's role in politics through practices such as piety, rigorous study of sutras, and the construction of shrines and temples.

Regardless, it was the construction of large keyhole-style tombs and control over the burial rituals that brought the Yamato rulers power over the area stretching from western Honshu to northern Kyushu. Employing laborers and skilled artisans such as blacksmiths, the Yamato tomb makers showed their wealth and organizational capacity, skills they used later to create capital cities with large markets and highways to the countryside and the coastal ports. To centralize power, kings soon began issuing law codes, such as Prince Shotoku's Seventeen Article Constitution in 604. The emphasis on law as the basis for rule, the creation of a bureaucracy to help rulers govern, and Confucian values embedded in the document show the Yamato's reliance on Chinese culture as a source of ideas and inspiration. Borrowing from the Chinese model for imperial statecraft, the Yamato strengthened their rule with mythology and bejeweled regalia, elevating kings to godlike status and eventually transforming them into emperors. Later legal codes such as the Kiyomihara Codes in 689 organized monasteries, created a judiciary, and managed relations between the king's advisors and vassals. These set the stage for the evolution of Japan's culture and political system in the later Heian and Nara periods.

### LINK TO LEARNING

Prince Shotoku's "Seventeen Article Constitution" was an effort to reform the Japanese state along the lines of the Chinese imperial model. Read the [translated law codes \(https://openstax.org/l/77LawCodes\)](https://openstax.org/l/77LawCodes) at Columbia University's Asia for Educators site.

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To the north, beyond the lands of the Yamato, was another group descended from the early Jōmon foragers who had lived on and resisted the sweep of Yayoi settled agriculture. Later, they continued to forage and hunt and practice their own spiritual beliefs, rejecting the Yamato cultural sphere and its borrowings from China, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and the idea of large states governed by kings and emperors. While the later Japanese imperial courts in Nara and Heian deepened ties with China's Tang dynasty, these northern people existed in another orbit defined by contact with smaller northern Asian cultures, such as the Satsumon people

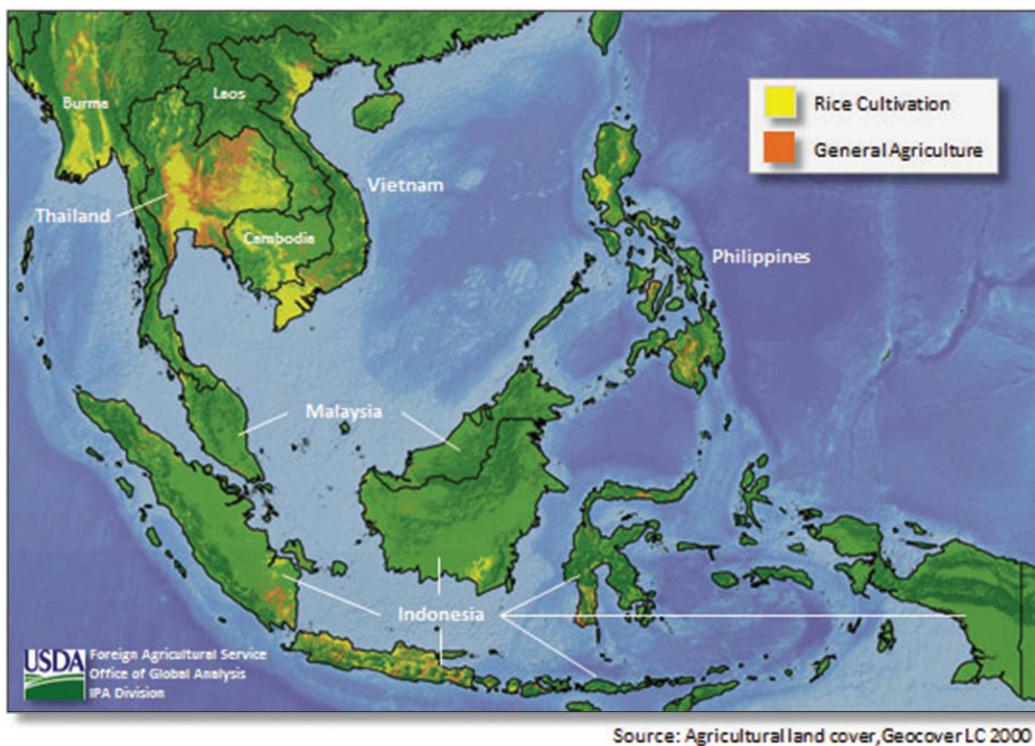
of Hokkaido. Relations with the descendants of the Yamato to the south soured over these centuries, as Nara and Heian came to call the northerners *Emishi*, or “barbarians.” The Emishi survived from the seventh to the eleventh century despite repeated attempts by emperors and militarists from the south to subjugate them. They resisted via war, moved to remote areas, and used other forms of evasion, but the culture of Japan’s south moved inexorably north, and the smaller remnants of the Emishi were subdued by the end of the ninth century.

### Southeast Asia

The term “Southeast Asia” describes a large area in subtropical Asia that can also include thousands of islands in the Pacific. Today it often refers to Brunei, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. For much of human history, travel across this area was far easier by boat along the shore and between islands than overland. Lands were more sparsely populated than in India, China, Japan, and Korea, and most communities were isolated from their closest neighbors by forests and mountains. Early on, however, they became able to engage with other peoples through the sea lanes.

In general, communities in Southeast Asia settled first along coastlines near rivers, lakes, and the oceans and seas. But archaeological sites in Thailand, Burma, and Laos prove that many chose to make upland regions their homes as well. As in India, early agriculture was driven by the rhythms of monsoon season. Farmers developed rainwater tanks to manage their supply of water and learned how to grow rice in paddies. A reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture meant that many Southeast Asians had to migrate after the soil had been exhausted, making the population fluid as people moved from one area to the next. The social structure, too, was less stratified than in India and China. Only with the later arrival of new religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism did priestly and kingly classes start to form and play a central role in religion and politics.

Despite its great territorial expanse and varying climates and topography, the region does have broad commonalities that make it useful to see Southeast Asia as one geographic and cultural zone ([Figure 5.17](#)). For example, its location between India and China led to the growth of royal courts that borrowed from foreign traditions to develop rituals and diplomatic relations, assert control over ordinary farmers and fishers, and create trading-post empires. The region’s geography and climate also made sailing a universally efficient craft. For centuries, merchants and adventurers traveling from the Indian landmass along the coastlines of Asia have exploited monsoon winds from June to November that easily push boats all the way to the Malaysian peninsula. Return voyages were made possible by a second set of monsoon winds blowing in the opposite direction from December to May. The holdover period between the two monsoon seasons proved ample time for merchants and missionaries to transplant customs, religion, and art from India to new environs in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the arrival of boats and merchants traveling from Vietnam and Malaysia to China and back as early as 300 BCE meant residents of Southeast Asia enjoyed a rich marketplace of ideas, goods, and cultures at a very early stage in world history.



**FIGURE 5.17 Southeast Asia.** The expanse of Southeast Asia includes varied topographies and climates but also some common historical and cultural features, such as the practice of wet-rice agriculture and religions such as Buddhism. (credit: “SE Asia: Distribution of Agricultural Lands” by Agricultural land cover, Geocover LC 2000”/USDA: Foreign Agricultural Service, Public Domain)

While the influx of foreign ideas was critical to the development of societies across Southeast Asia, each local community made selective adaptations and preserved its indigenous customs. For example, the importance of the individual family was a point of commonality for many societies in Southeast Asia, in contrast to the weight given extended families and clans in India and China. Most peasant communities in Southeast Asia also afforded women higher status than their counterparts in China were allowed under the stricter Confucian values system.

Archaeological remains of the region’s prehistory show that inhabitants of northeast Thailand used bronze and mastered agriculture as early as 3000 BCE. Evidence found at Non Nok Tha shows that they grew rice and cast bronze in factories using molds, later producing iron objects. The spread of rice cultivation produced densely populated centers along the region’s smaller fertile plains. Expanding populations were often forced into hilly regions, which they made suitable for farming by creating terraces. Migration chains and artifacts such as simple tools suggest that by the time the inhabitants of India began making contact with Southeast Asia, the islands and coastline settlements there were dominated by peoples related to Malays, who had made their way from southern China. Expert sailors working with finished stone tools and navigating by the stars, these peoples developed long, narrow boats that navigated Southeast Asia’s water with speed and grace. Moreover, they left behind cultures with maritime traditions that echo today with Malaysians, Indonesians, and the people of Singapore.

The archaeological record of Southeast Asia’s prehistory is less clear than that of many other areas of the world, however, and its study has been hampered by many circumstances, including the political volatility of countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia after 1945. As a result, historians often look to the region’s villages and families for insights into its remote past. For example, cultivating rice in terraced rice paddies requires skill and cooperation among many families, likely making this task the basis for village leadership and unity. Elders with experience in selecting breeds, transplanting young plants, and negotiating water resources likely

used their authority to foster consensus around values and politics oriented toward giving deference to seniority. It is also possible that growing rice is particularly suited to cultures with animist religions, which venerate deities and spirits thought to inhabit nature. Rites and festivals to honor grains and timber and to appease forces that control wind and rain are still important to local cultures in Southeast Asia today, even as many people also participate in universal religions such as Buddhism.

Occupations offer another important point of continuity. Fishing, farming, and craftwork in fabrics are depicted in carvings found in caves, temples, and mountainsides and remain the primary labor activities of rural peoples today. For example, in Brunei many people still live much of their life on the water—at work as fishers and divers as well as at play when racing boats and swimming. Houses and many other buildings are still situated in the hills or on stilts to protect them from flooding, and many people share a diet of fish, simple grains, and coconut, just as their ancestors did.

In early Southeast Asia, trade and the arrival of outside religion were critical to the development of larger states and powerful kingdoms. Even in the interior, Buddhist artwork and texts flowed in steadily from 300 to 600 CE. The mouths of great rivers linked the interiors and the coasts, and capitals and small principalities that developed there taxed the trade on goods traveling to and from the wider world. During these centuries, Southeast Asians also traveled to India to trade and learn Sanskrit. When Indian elites and literate Buddhists arrived, they came to be known as *purohita*, advisers to Southeast Asia's powerful chiefs and nobility. Other immigrants became teachers and founded temples across the region's landscape, critical hubs that promoted travel, learning, and commerce.

As they did in India, Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted with local religions in much of Southeast Asia. In areas such as the kingdom of Srivijaya, which ruled over the island of Sumatra and southern Malaya Peninsula from the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE, Indian merchants and missionaries were welcomed, while the people retained their own religious traditions rooted in the worship of spirits that inhabited trees, rocks, water, and various physical features of the land. Proclaiming themselves "Lord of the Mountains," Srivijaya's rulers patronized Buddhism to foster trade relations across the Malaccan Straits and Indian Ocean.

Other communities, such as nearby Borobudur, which controlled central Java in Indonesia, were more firmly devoted to Buddhism. There, Buddhism inspired countless converts and the later Shailendra Kings (775–860 CE) to erect the world's largest Buddhist monument, a structure more than one hundred feet above the ground and adorned with magnificent artwork ([Figure 5.18](#)). Buddhists from all over Southeast Asia made pilgrimages to Borobudur, leaving behind thousands of clay tablets and pots as offerings. Wreckage from a nearby ship dated to the ninth century shows that the people of Borobudur were engaged in commerce that connected them to Islamic and Arabic cultures in the Middle East. Like many heads of Southeast Asian states, Borobudur rulers staked their political legitimacy on setting a pious example for their subjects and thrived economically by opening their ports to the wider world. Thus India's centrality to much of Southeast Asia in the ancient world was founded on trade, religion, and art. India was a repository of desired goods and a source of inspiration for religion and state-building, but also a bridge to the wider Eurasian world.



**FIGURE 5.18 Borobudur.** This 1913 photograph of the temple of Borobudur shows one side of the massive Buddhist structure with the local mountains in the background. In the upper left, one can see several of the seventy-two perforated stupas surrounding the central dome. Behind and to the left of the man posing for the photograph are just some of the over 2,600 decorated relief panels that adorn the site. (credit: modification of work “A terrace on the temple of Borobudur, Java, Indonesia, 1913” by State Library of New South Wales, PXD 162/150/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While much of Southeast Asia faced west toward India as the center of trade, culture, and religion, the area near today’s Vietnam fell within the orbit of China’s cultural sphere emanating from the east. The natural geography of Vietnam creates three distinct zones that shaped the evolution of the country from ancient times to the present: one area in the north surrounding the Red River delta; below that, in the south, another densely populated center on the Mekong River delta; and lastly, a long narrow land bridge along the coast squeezing between mountains to join the other two areas together. Humans practicing wet-field rice agriculture developed settlements in the northern zone sometime around 2500 BCE, and a millennium after, there is evidence of bronze-making by the region’s inhabitants. But the most notable contribution to world history from this area in northern Vietnam came from the Dong Son culture (c. 600 BCE–200 CE), defined by its remarkable bronze drums decorated with cords and images of animals such as frogs. Dong Son drums have been found at sites all over Southeast Asia.

Whether the Dong Son culture and its drums originated in Vietnam or inside China near Yunnan province is the subject of debate. Evidence suggests that southeast China below the Yangtze River was once home to peoples who were more strongly linked, culturally and linguistically, to Southeast Asia than to the dynasties in the north such as the Shang and Zhou. During the Zhou dynasty, many non-Chinese societies and kingdoms inhabiting provinces such as Fujian and Yunnan were known as the Yue, the Mandarin version of “Viet.” These areas and groups remained independent of Chinese control for centuries. Chinese records of the Yue demonstrate their sophistication and diversity. They were known for practicing wet-field rice cultivation, adorning their bodies with tattoos, and traveling widely by boat along the seas and the Red River that linked China to Vietnam.

These Chinese records further indicate that many early Vietnamese groups spoke a multitude of languages and were divided into as many as one hundred small polities, kingdoms, tribal clans, and autonomous villages. Unlike in northern China, there appears to have been no successful drive to centralize power under a unified dynasty in Vietnam’s prehistory. In later centuries, many Vietnamese accepted the mythological lore of a mighty king known as Van-Lang, who in the seventh century BCE united the various tribes of the Yue and

established a dynastic line of Hung kings. This origin tale eventually evolved to include a divine origin for the Vietnamese people, telling of a union between a dragon lord and a female mountain deity that produced the Hung royalty.

At best, Vietnam's prehistoric record can only validate the idea that chiefdoms grew increasingly large around 258 BCE. By then, the rulers of a new kingdom known as Au Lac had constructed an impressive capital arranged in the shape of a widening spiral near today's Hanoi. Later, around 179 BCE, Au Lac was conquered by another kingdom, Nam Viet, an offshoot of China's Qin dynasty. The area was later retaken by the Han dynasty, which attempted to establish permanent control by dividing its territory spanning southern China and northern Vietnam into nine administrative units. In 40 CE, Han control of the Red River delta ran afoul of two rebellious daughters of a Vietnamese general known as Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The uprising launched by these women rallied native resistance from southern China to central Vietnam ([Figure 5.19](#)). Briefly victorious, the Trung sisters' rebellion was eventually squashed. Their legacy was indelible, however, and stories of their exploits riding elephants into battle became a source of Vietnamese nationalist pride and rejection of encroachment by outsiders such as the Chinese and, much later, the French.



**FIGURE 5.19** Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The sisters Trung Trac and Trung Nhi launched a short-lived rebellion against Chinese domination that has lived on popular memory as a potent symbol of Vietnamese national identity. Images such as this folk painting of them riding elephants into battle have long been a source of inspiration for resistance to foreign empires and, more recently, helped promote a role for women in politics and the military. (credit: "Hai ba trung Dong Ho painting" by "LuckyBirdie"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The end of the Trung sisters' uprising began a period of more direct Chinese governance, with the aim of assimilating the region and its inhabitants. Over time, however, the families of the Han generals and officials who were sent as administrators took on many local habits and customs, blurring the boundaries between Chinese and Vietnamese culture in the ancient world. By that time, the area around the Red River delta had become critical to the Han's maritime trade in Southeast Asia. Thus, even after the dynasty collapsed, China's political dominance of northern Vietnam lasted into the next few centuries. Sporadic uprisings continued, occasionally resulting in independence for rulers in northern Vietnam. But the Sui and Tang relaunched campaigns to reabsorb the Red River delta. Thus, northern Vietnam remained on the border of the Chinese imperial frontier for centuries.

Farther south, an area known in the ancient world as Champa was settled by a wave of people arriving from the sea around 500 BCE. Distinct from the Dong Son culture, these people engaged in trade across the waterways of Asia, from India to the Philippines. Chinese records of a civilization in this central region of Vietnam describe a unique people who reserved a higher status for women than for men, and who used an Indian script written on leaves from trees. Indeed, all the remaining inscriptions on artifacts found within this region until the ninth century are written in Sanskrit.

Another import from India to central Vietnam was the idea of a society led by a priestly Brahman class and deities such as Shiva, identified with the Champa kings. Still, indigenous spirits and ancestors were worshipped as well, coexisting alongside the Indian imports whose foreignness faded slowly over the centuries. Lacking a large agricultural region to supply a powerful state, Champa may have been a region with many centers, loosely knit by trading networks exchanging rice, salt, horns, and sandalwood.

Even farther to the south, people known as the Khmers had made the Mekong River delta their home by the early centuries of the common era. Chinese texts referring to this region named it Funan, and its history shows many similarities to that of Champa, its neighbor to the north. Funan too was engaged in wide trade. Archaeological remains show items that made their way to Vietnam from India, the Middle East, and Rome. Funan's inhabitants and rulers imported features of Indian culture such as Sanskrit to help create royal courts, but little writing survived until the development of the powerful Khmer empire in the ninth century.

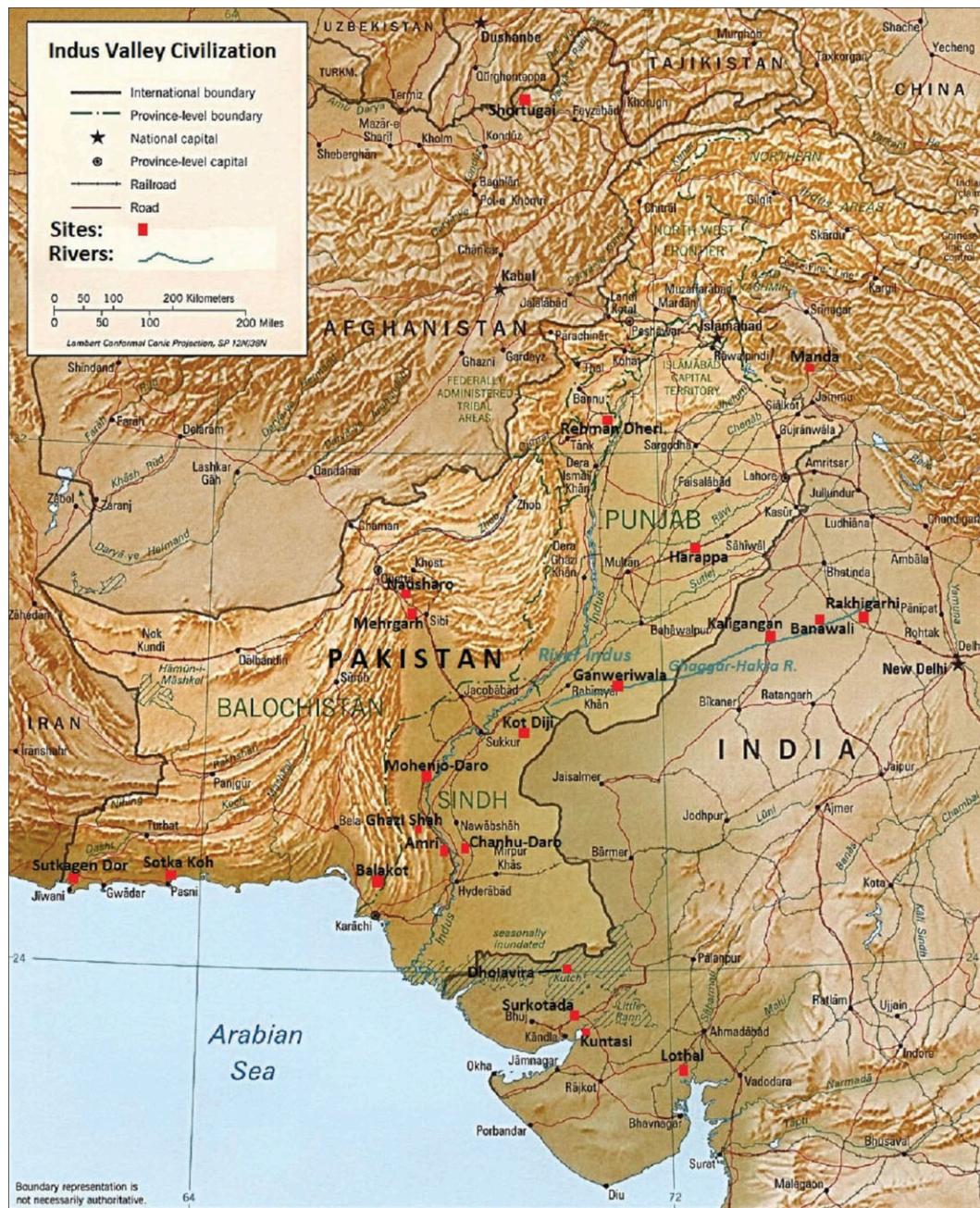
## 5.4 Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the caste system and the way it functioned in Indian society
- Identify the main elements of Buddhism
- Describe India's faith traditions: Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

Few areas of the world are as important to our understanding of the emergence of human civilizations as India. Occupying an enormous subcontinent in South Asia, India has three distinct geographic zones: a northern area defined by the Himalayas that forms a natural barrier to the rest of the Asian mainland, the densely populated river valleys of the Indus and Ganges Rivers that lie to the south and northwest of that area, and lastly the tropical south, cut off from those valleys by many mountains and thick forests ([Figure 5.20](#)).



**FIGURE 5.20** The Indian Subcontinent. This map outlines the major features of the Indian subcontinent, where the Himalayas stand as a northern border with the rest of Asia. (credit: “The major sites of the [Indus Valley Civilization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indus_Valley_Civilization) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indus\\_Valley\\_Civilization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indus_Valley_Civilization)) fl (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/fl>) 2600–1900 BCE (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BCE>) in [Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan>), [India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India>) and [Afghanistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan>)” by US Federal Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Early humans traveled into Asia in waves around sixty thousand to eighty thousand years ago, moving from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula into India and beyond, on routes that hugged the coast. Some of the earliest evidence of this migration was found at Jwalapuram, India. Here, hundreds of stone tools dating to 74,000 BCE were discovered that resemble those of roughly the same age found in Africa, Laos, and Australia. But the roots of India’s ancient civilizations lie in the north, amid the archaeological remains of two ancient cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

## Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro

Unlike ancient cultures in Mesopotamia (3500–3000 BCE), Egypt (3500–3000 BCE), and China (2200–2000 BCE), the Indus valley civilization shows little evidence of political power concentrated in the hands of hereditary monarchs. Yet its culture and technology spread, in an area running from parts of present-day Afghanistan into Pakistan and western India. There, early human communities capable of agriculture flourished near the fertile plains around the Indus River and other waters fed annually by the region's monsoons.

Farmers harvested domesticated crops of peas, dates, and cotton, harnessing the power of draft animals such as the water buffalo. The archaeological record shows few traces of any kind of elaborate monumental architecture, burial mounds, or domination by warriors and kings. Instead, a common culture grew that was defined by urban planning, complete with advanced drainage systems, orderly streets, and distinctive bricks made in ovens. Equipped with those tools, the Indus River valley produced two of the ancient world's most technologically advanced cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Within them, residents developed a highly urban society and rich spiritual life, with altars featuring fire and incense, practices such as ceremonial bathing, and a symbolic vocabulary using elephants and bulls as revered animals. Dedicated artisans made jewelry and fabrics. All these aspects of the Indus valley culture left an imprint on later Indian civilizations.

How did a civilization with a high degree of labor specialization and the coordination necessary for irrigated agriculture and large urban centers manage such complexity without a powerful centralized state? There is no consensus answer, though the Indus valley civilization may have developed as a series of small republic-like states, dominated by religious specialists such as priests presiding over an intensely hierarchical class system. It does seem likely, however, that the environmental toll the civilization inflicted upon the surrounding areas led to its decline. Over time, irrigation replaced fertile soil with soil having greater quantities of salt, lowering crop yields. The use of wood as a fuel source, such as for making the oven-fired bricks, led to rapid deforestation and even greater soil erosion. It appears that most communities in and around Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro abandoned the sites around 1700 BCE, when they became unable to feed and supply themselves. Before their decline, however, the two cities housed perhaps as many as forty thousand residents each, most of whom lived in comparatively luxurious homes of more than one story that featured indoor plumbing and were laid out in an orderly pattern along grid-like streets. Public buildings such as bathhouses were quite large, as were the protective city walls and citadels.

The development of a written script, found on clay seals and pottery at the sites, likely made such feats possible. The written language of the Indus valley civilization featured more than four hundred symbols that functioned as pictures of ideas, words, and numbers. While many of the symbols have yet to be deciphered, one of the primary functions of writing appears to have been commerce because many finished goods were stamped with written seals. Writing used as a means of communication and recordkeeping probably also helped the Indus valley civilization profit from long-distance trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Merchants from Sumer traveled to the Indus River valley to establish trade in luxury items such as lapis lazuli. In return, it appears that traders and merchants from cities such as Harappa took up residence in cities in Mesopotamia to facilitate exchange. In this way, Mesopotamia exerted a recognizable influence on India's art and culture. Scholars have identified aspects of Greek naturalist art in sculptures found in Harappa, combined with local preferences for representing human bodies in motion rather than adopting the Greek emphasis on anatomical correctness. Art from these early cities helped usher in artistic styles and motifs that created a continuous tradition ingrained within Indian culture. Stone seals with fantastic beasts and anthropomorphic deities were later associated with Indian traditions such as yoga and Hindu deities.

Significant archaeological evidence suggests that urban women in the Indus valley were influential figures who functioned as specialists in rituals. More figurines were found depicting female than male deities, and women were typically buried with female relatives—their mothers and grandmothers—and not with their husbands. This is not to suggest that all women were equals. The prevalence of contrasting hairstyles and clothing on

many surviving figurines indicates that women were differentiated by a great number of class and ethnic markers.

Among the more intriguing clues to the way women fared in the Indus valley is a tiny artifact from Mohenjo-Daro called *Dancing Girl*, a bronze and copper figurine about 4.5 inches tall and dating from around 2500 BCE ([Figure 5.21](#)). Created by a method of casting bronze known as the “lost wax” method, the nude figure appears in a confident and relaxed pose, with her hair gathered in a bun. She may have represented a royal woman, a sacred priestess of a temple, or perhaps a lower-born tribal girl. That scholars can draw such a wide array of plausible conclusions speaks to the fact that the Indus valley likely had a very fluid class structure and a highly complex society.



**FIGURE 5.21** Dancing Girl. A bronze and copper figurine from India, the tiny *Dancing Girl* found at Mohenjo-Daro stands as one of the most enigmatic artifacts from ancient Asia. (credit: modification of work “Bronze ‘Dancing Girl,’ Mohenjo-daro, c. 2500 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

### The Aryans and Brahmanism

The Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent as conquerors beginning in 1800 BCE. With them came a new religion, Vedic, named for their hymns called Vedas. Vedas were sung in rituals to celebrate a pantheon of gods representing various aspects of nature and human life and were a useful way of teaching, given that the Aryans were illiterate. Gods such as Varuna ruled the sky, while Indra was the god of war. The Aryans offered ritualistic sacrifices to their gods and built enormous altars of fire, imposing a hierarchy on the people they conquered that emphasized strict observance of the law. The Vedas, along with poems and prayers, were first transmitted orally from one generation to the next; later they were recorded in the written language of Sanskrit. Over time, the Indian peoples added new dimensions to the Vedic religion, changing the nature of Aryan society as well. New gods such as Soma, associated with magical elixirs, storehouses for grain, and the moon, grew in importance as the practice of ritual became ever more meaningful.

A later series of treatises known as the *Upanishads*, written by a priestly class called Brahmins, developed new expressions of the Vedic religion, gradually transforming it into what many scholars refer to as Brahmanism. These new expressions include **samsara** and **karma**. Samsara was a view of humanity and the universe in

which the soul left the body after death to be reborn. Karma represented the idea that all human actions, moral and immoral, were counted and weighed, ultimately governing whether a person was reborn higher on the spiritual ladder in the next life, perhaps as a king or priest, or—if ruined by immoral acts—as a lower life form, perhaps a detested reptile, to try again. The ultimate goal of a person's earthly life was to achieve union with Brahman, the ultimate and universal reality. Even gods needed to perform good acts such as penance or meditation to transcend to a higher plane of existence. Belief in reincarnation supported the idea that a person's status in the present life came about not by chance, but rather as a consequence of past lives. Thus the authority of elites such as the Brahmins was sanctified as reflecting the divine will of the cosmos.

In this way, the Vedic religion of the Aryans produced the *varna*, a strictly hierarchical society based on inherited status. At the highest level were the Brahmins, who exerted authority by virtue of their knowledge of the sacrificial rituals and their role as guardians of the poems, hymns, and later texts that carried on the Vedic traditions. Below them were aristocratic warriors, Kshatriya, members of noble families who fought in small but effective armies to protect their kingdoms and carry conquest into new areas. Members of the third class living in the upper half of society were merchants and Aryan commoners, Vaishya, who along with the other two enjoyed privileges based on the idea that in their late childhood they underwent a rebirth.

The fourth major group were the Shudras, non-Aryan servants and peasants who were denied the opportunity to read or listen to Vedic hymns and accounted for more than half the population. At the bottom of society were the Dalits, a class of “untouchables,” who were likely the descendants of the populations that lived in parts of south India before the arrival of the Aryans. They were effectively outside and hierarchically below the four-tiered caste system. Prohibitions against marrying Indians from another caste were just one element of a constellation of provisions designed to keep everyone locked in their inherited class from birth to death. Taxes on the lower classes ensured that wealth remained at the top. In truth, the Indian subcaste system was quite complex. Distinctions between groups within each caste mattered a great deal as well, creating sub-castes that came with separate privileges, obligations, and social circles that fixed where people lived and who they could marry.

The caste system reflected Hindu religious beliefs by ensuring that people performed their proper role in this life based on their actions in the past. The laws preventing upward mobility and protecting the privilege of elites were seen as guaranteeing order. They kept the low-born from escaping the divine plan and the cosmic justice that allowed for a slow, steady advancement up the spiritual scale over a series of lives. The ultimate goal was release from the wheel of life, the never-ending transmission of the soul to ultimate peace. Thus the arrival of Aryans and the gradual emergence of Brahmanism created a new social blueprint for India.

## Buddhism

Indian culture, religion, and art were forever transformed with the life of Buddha Sakyamuni around 563 BCE. The son of a royal family living near India's eastern border with Nepal and sometimes known as Siddartha or Gautama, Sakyamuni abandoned a life of luxury in his family's palace after experiencing an awakening, upon which he embarked on a spiritual journey that lasted the rest of his life. He came to be called the Buddha, meaning “enlightened,” because his teachings offered an alternative to the then-dominant Brahmanist values.

Buddhism explores the depths of human suffering, desire, envy, decadence, and death, offering adherents a way out of an eternal cycle of misery if they adopt the Four Noble Truths leading to the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths acknowledge that pain and disappointment are an unavoidable part of life and that by focusing on spiritual matters via the Eightfold Path, pain and suffering can be overcome. By adopting Buddha's teachings about how to think, speak, and act with respect for all life, and many other practices, followers eventually arrive at an enlightened salvation called *nirvana*. Nirvana is a state of ultimate peace found in the extinction of all desire and transcendence of the person's very being. Without nirvana, upon death the soul is reincarnated into a new life that will again run the gamut of suffering, misery, and the search for enlightenment.

The teachings of Buddha and his followers issued a direct challenge to the status quo in ancient India. In his time, Buddha relished criticizing the Brahmins, questioning their authority and their dependence on ritualism. Continued generations of teachers, missionaries, and lay Buddhists used his teachings to assail the Brahmanist-based caste system. Female Buddhists were attracted by ideas promoting the opportunity for women to achieve enlightenment on an equal basis with men.

Before Buddhism, Brahmanist teachings had supported a system of gender that in the first centuries of the common era pronounced women's genitalia foul, leading women to be excluded from public rituals and worship. Buddhism protected women from being seen as spiritually unclean, promising them an elevated status and greater participation in the community's spiritual life. The same was true for members of the lower castes despite their inherited class. Both women and lower castes were drawn to Buddhism by the greater independence and freedom they found in it. But women adopting Buddhism often found the religion just as patriarchal: Buddhist monasteries were segregated into spheres for male monks and female nuns, and women were given lower positions and fewer privileges.

Buddhism never supplanted Brahmanism as the dominant religion in India. In later centuries, Buddhist thought and institutions were influenced by Brahmanism, incorporating deities such as Shiva and concepts such as karma. Boundaries between the two religions became blurred, a development that helped followers of Brahmanism and Buddhists find a means for coexistence and even cooperation. Buddhism arose in a historical context dominated by a Brahmanist society, and many Buddhist teachings and practices such as meditation reflect the influence of Brahmanism. Likewise, Brahmanism was greatly influenced by Buddhism and its popularity with certain classes in India. As a result, over several centuries between around 400 BCE and 200 CE, Brahmanism evolved into more of a devotional religion, allowing individual practitioners to communicate directly with the gods, not just through the Brahman priests. Worship became more personalized and private, centered on prayer and songs within the home. In this way, Brahmanism emerged as Hinduism, which retained the caste system and belief in the Vedas while also offering a prescription for common followers seeking to live a moral and fulfilling life. What emerged as the central text of Hinduism was called the *Bhagavad Gita*. Finished around 300 CE, it taught that commoners, not just Brahmins, could lead exemplary moral lives by abandoning bodily desires and seeking inner peace.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism were and remained diverse, branching into hundreds of schools of thought and sects that were each quite adaptable to local contexts. As it became institutionalized, however, Buddhism lost some of its early character as a means for liberation of the lowly of India. Instead it attracted the patronage of elites, who elevated it into Asia's most influential source of inspiration for monumental architecture and high art. Buddhism made inroads across all of Asia, coming to be adopted by millions in China, Korea, Thailand, Japan, and many other communities in Southeast Asia.

### DUELING VOICES

#### Hinduism and Buddhism in Ancient India

The first excerpt, concerning the Hindu tradition, is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, titled "Perform Action, Free from Attachment." The second, "Basic Teachings of the Buddha," includes a version of Buddhism's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Notice how each spiritual system conceived of immorality, the proper way to demonstrate right conduct and living, and the purpose of life.

8. Perform thou action that is (religiously) required;  
For action is better than inaction.  
And even the maintenance of the body for thee  
Can not succeed without action.
9. Except action for the purpose of worship,  
This world is bound by actions;

Action for that purpose, son of Kunti,  
 Perform thou, free from attachment (to its fruits)  
 10. Therefore unattached ever  
 Perform action that must be done;  
 For performing action without attachment  
 Man attains the highest. . . .  
 21. Whatsoever the noblest does,  
 Just that in every case other folk (do);  
 What he makes his standard,  
 That the world follows.  
 35. Better one's own duty, (tho) imperfect,  
 Than another's duty well performed;  
 Better death in (doing) one's own duty;  
 Another's duty brings danger.

—*Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Franklin Edgerton

What, now, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; Decay is suffering; Death is suffering; Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief, and Despair, are suffering; not to get what one desires, is suffering. . . .

What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to fresh rebirth, and, bound up with pleasure and lust, now here, now there, finds ever fresh delight.

What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this desire, its forsaking and giving up, the liberation and detachment from it. . . .

It is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way that leads to the extinction of suffering, namely: 1. Right Understanding, 2. Right Mindedness, which together are Wisdom. 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Living, which together are Morality. 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Attentiveness, 8. Right Concentration, which together are Concentration. This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One has found out, which makes one both to see and to know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nirvana.

...

—*Buddha, the Word*, edited by Nyanatiloka

- Based on these excerpts, what does it mean for one to lead a moral life in each of these distinct traditions?
- How is the Eightfold Path in the Buddhist excerpt similar to or different from the call for action in the Hindu excerpt?

## The Mauryan Empire

The initial spur to Buddhism's migration across Asia occurred with the rise of the Mauryan Empire (326–184 BCE). This entity grew out of the smaller Indian kingdom of Magadha once its ruler, Chandragupta Maurya, managed to unify much of north India from a capital near the city of Patna and pass it on to his descendants, founding the Maurya dynasty. A Greek historian named Megasthenes visited the seat of Chandragupta's power around the end of the fourth century BCE, marveling at its palaces replete with grottoes, bathing pools, and gardens filled with jasmine, hibiscus, and lotus.

Ruling over a population nearing fifty million, Chandragupta's successors conquered all but the southern tip of the subcontinent in a series of military campaigns. The Mauryan Empire's political structure employed a large and well-run army, administered by a war office with branches for a navy and for raising horses and elephants for cavalry warfare. A civilian bureaucracy ran the ministries overseeing industries such as weaving, mining, and shipbuilding as well as organizing irrigation, road construction, and tax collection. The Mauryan rulers

lived in constant fear of assassination and intrigue against their rule, however, which forced them to rely on an elaborate network of spies to monitor officials throughout the empire.

The high point of Mauryan greatness came with the ascension of Emperor Ashoka in approximately 268 BCE, opening a period of monumental architecture that left its mark on the ancient world. Ashoka's personal grandeur came from the story of his transformation from a ruthless warrior general to a devout man of peace with a universal mission ([Figure 5.22](#)). As the head of the Mauryan army laying siege to the kingdom of Kalinga, he won a great battle that caused an estimated 100,000 deaths. The carnage brought an awakening that led Ashoka to Buddhism and to reforms intended to promote harmony and compassionate rule throughout India. To that end, he supported missionary efforts to spread Buddhism to Burma and Sri Lanka. His new law code gave protections to the vulnerable—the ill and diseased, the poor and powerless, and travelers making their way across the empire. His ministers put their sovereign's will into action by building hospitals, digging wells, setting up rest-houses along India's roads, and sending out traveling magistrates to resolve disputes and bring justice to remote areas.



**FIGURE 5.22** Ashoka in Splendor. This stone representation of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka visiting a Buddhist pilgrimage site with his entourage is from a large commemorative monument begun in his lifetime to house relics of Buddha. It illustrates the many strategies he adopted to magnify his rule. (credit: modification of work "King Asoka visits Ramagrama" by Anandajoti Bhikkhu/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Ashoka also had a lasting influence on the world of art. He decreed that his sayings and teachings on morality be inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout India ([Figure 5.23](#)). The Pillars of Ashoka demonstrate the Indian empire's character as a spiritual and political system. Through Buddhism, patronage of the arts, and monumental architecture, the Mauryans wished to demonstrate morality and benevolence to their subjects and exercise less direct rule. Leaders such as Ashoka hoped the people's loyalty and duty in turn would be motivated by admiration of their achievements, if not by the money and other gifts given to reward the virtuous and charm supporters. The Pillars of Ashoka also demonstrate the flexibility of the Mauryan system of rule. Those closest to the capital were inscribed with detailed summaries of the Mauryan codes for behavior

and an orderly society. Farther away, in newly won territories, the pillars promoted very simple teachings, a mark of the ruler's intent to allow room for local autonomy and customs to prevail as long as his subjects met certain universal norms and tax obligations.



**FIGURE 5.23** The Pillars of Ashoka. The incised stoned pillars with Ashoka's decrees about morality were erected throughout the Mauryan Empire and demonstrate how his message and role as sovereign were conditioned by local customs. (credit: "Asoka's Pillar, Monolith in Fort, Allahabad" by Thomas A. Rust/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the end of Ashoka's reign, the Mauryans left a legacy for future generations of Indian rulers to try to emulate so as to rule a diverse society. When the Mauryan Empire finally collapsed in 185 BCE, India entered another period of fragmentation and rule by small competing states and autonomous cities and villages. By the early centuries of the common era, it was a multitude of smaller regional kingdoms that shared with each other a common culture linked by Hinduism, Buddhism, a canon of Sanskrit texts, and the caste system.

### The Gupta Dynasty

From the fourth to the seventh centuries, an empire founded by the Gupta dynasty (320–600 CE) ruled over northern India. As revealed by the name he took, Chandragupta, the founder, emulated the Mauryans and its famous founder, Chandragupta Maurya. He hired scribes working in Sanskrit to promote learning and the arts, and during this age, Sanskrit became the basis for a classical literature that influenced generations of Indians and the world. Texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* glorified ideas about duty, valor, and performing a proper role in society (Figure 5.24). The first was a collection of thrilling poems featuring feuding rulers and powerful families, the other an epic tale of a warrior prince's journey to recover his honor.



**FIGURE 5.24 The Humiliation of Draupadi.** The *Mahabharata* is possibly the longest poem even written, with over 200,000 verse lines describing the lives and conflicts of several noble families. One of the main women featured in the stories is Draupadi, known for her beauty and morality. This eighteenth-century watercolor painting depicts a story in the epic when Draupadi's enemies attempt to humiliate her by stripping her naked. However, she's saved by the Hindu god Krishna who miraculously clothes her anew each time her dress is removed. (credit: “The disrobing of Draupadi” by Howard Hodgkin Collection, Purchase, Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, by exchange, 2022/Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In *Ramayana*, Rama, an avatar for the Hindu deity Vishnu, triumphs over the demon Ravana on the island of Sri Lanka and rescues his wife Sita before going on to found a perfect Indian society from his capital of Ayudha. His noble virtues and ideal society became models for Hindus to aspire to as rulers and aristocrats, while his exploits were retold for centuries in countless paintings, sculptures, carnivals, plays, and shadow theatres.

The Sanskrit classics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* soon spread far and wide in Southeast Asia, where they became part of the cultural fabric for a multitude of non-Indians as well. Other intellectuals of the Gupta era proved themselves in the field of mathematics by using decimals and a mark to denote the concept of zero for precise measurements and recordkeeping. Among the more notable was the astronomer Brahmagupta, who in the seventh century CE pioneered the use of multiplication and division and the idea of negative numbers.

### LINK TO LEARNING

You can read a [brief synopsis of the \*Ramayana\* and a description of the epic's major characters](https://openstax.org/l/77RamayanaSyn) (<https://openstax.org/l/77RamayanaSyn>) at the British Library website.

An [animated English-language version of the epic](https://openstax.org/l/77RamayanaVid) (<https://openstax.org/l/77RamayanaVid>) is also available.

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In politics the Guptas were innovators as well. In return for their loyalty, rulers granted tracts of land as gifts to powerful families, Brahmans, and temple complexes, guaranteeing these followers a share of the harvest and consolidating their own control. In return, the Brahmans elevated the Gupta rulers to new heights in rituals honoring Vishnu and Shiva. Yet as these deities became more important, worship among the commoners turned more personal and private; singing as a form of prayer and ritualism inside the home became essential to daily lives. Many Indians began to believe in the sanctity of *bhakti*, a direct personal relationship between a follower and the deity. This idea bypassed the role of Brahmans as intermediaries, displeasing the Brahmans

but gaining popularity in southern India, where poems written in the Tamil language became foundational to the new practice of personalized worship among Hindus.

The Gupta's dynasty marked a flourishing of art and religion and the heyday of Buddhism in India. Painted caves with beautiful sculptures found in the Ajanta caves illustrate the sophistication of the artists patronized by the dynasty. While Hinduism remained the official religion of the state and the Guptas, Buddhist universities such as Nalanda were among the first of their kind in the ancient world and attracted throngs of students and pilgrims from China. India's educated classes ranked among the most learned and knowledgeable of the ancient world, and at times they turned their attention from math and morality to explore the depths of passion, love, and eroticism. During this period, the *Kama Sutra*, a treatise on courtship and sexuality, became a seminal piece of Indian literature, inspiring and titillating generations worldwide ever since.

The opulence and stability provided by the Guptas dissipated under the threat of invaders from the north known as the Huns. While northern India fractured into smaller states after this point, southern India's ties and trade with South Asia deepened and matured. By the eleventh century, the region's profitable exports of goods such as ivory, pepper, spices, Roman coins, and even animals like the peacock had led to the formation of notable southern kingdoms, such as the Tamil Chola dynasty. But the most influential exports from India to the rest of South Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and the art and learning each inspired—long outlived these states.

## Key Terms

- “Mandate of Heaven”** the favor of the gods that conferred a right to rule but could be lost by those less worthy
- clan** a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together and formed the basic social unit of the seminomadic peoples of Eurasia
- Confucianism** a Chinese school of philosophical thought shaping morality, governance, education, and family life
- Daoism** a Chinese religion that emphasized veneration of nature, the cosmos, and mysticism
- Inner Asian Steppe** the eastern half of the Eurasian Steppe that stretches into Mongolia and runs along the northern border of China
- karma** a Hindu concept emphasizing the influence of good deeds and moral behavior on a person's status in life and rebirth after death
- khan** a title claimed by warrior-kings to unite various tribes into powerful confederations and empires
- Legalism** a school of philosophical thought that helped dynasties such as the Qin use uniform laws and codes to reform and strengthen rulers
- Peking Man** a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China
- Ring of Fire** the boundary line of a zone of intense seismic activity in the Pacific Ocean
- samsara** a Hindu concept explaining the continuance of the soul after death and its transformation
- Silk Roads** a series of trade routes circulating luxury goods to and from China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East
- Terracotta Army** a collection of life-size clay statues of soldiers, officials, servants, and horses of the Qin emperor and buried in his tomb near Xi'an
- Three Han** the three groups (the Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) in southern Korea that were among the earliest with tribal chieftains

## Section Summary

### 5.1 Ancient China

Parts of today's People's Republic of China were home to many migrant groups from disparate cultures who arrived in waves over hundreds of years. But many of these cultures left behind the tools necessary for others to centralize political control and create forms of common culture, such as a written script and schools of thought and religion such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. Together, China's first dynasties—the Shang, Zhou, and Qin—produced an imperial blueprint for harnessing the power of an agrarian civilization that succeeding generations of Chinese adopted and modified to found their own dynasties.

### 5.2 The Steppes

Around 1500 BCE, climate change forced many ethnic groups living in the eastern portion of the Eurasian Steppe to abandon farming and turn to a nomadic lifestyle, herding livestock and hunting from horseback. They alternately traded with and raided the settled agricultural societies of China and Korea. Several formed military confederations. The Xiongnu, for instance, fought with the Chinese for control of the Silk Roads. The Han dynasty first sought to appease the Xiongnu but later sent military expeditions to defeat them.

Following internal dissension within the Xiongnu confederation in the middle of the first century BCE, the Southern Xiongnu became vassals of the Han dynasty and assisted them in their fight against the Northern Xiongnu. After the collapse of the Han dynasty, Xiongnu tribes established their own states in northern China, as did the Xianbei. In 439 CE, the Touba clan of the Xianbei established the Northern Wei dynasty. As the Northern Wei adopted Chinese culture and intermarried with wealthy Chinese families, however, they alienated other members of the Xianbei, who rose against them in 524 CE. Following the collapse of the Xiongnu and Xianbei, the Khitan rose to prominence, establishing their own Liao dynasty in 907.

### 5.3 Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

By the end of the ancient era, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were home to a number of impressive states that channeled written languages, trade, and cultural exchange from their larger neighbors to power distinctive cultures and royal courts. As seafaring cultures, all three areas were also well positioned to engage a wider world than just India and China. Moreover, the achievements of Koreans and Southeast Asians in monumental architecture, such as the Seokgoram Grotto and Borobudur, are some of the richest and most artistically dynamic of the ancient world. At the same time, the geographic constraints these areas faced hindered cultural unity and social stability, as natural disasters, porous borders, and vibrant trade networks brought an array of problems difficult to solve without the machinery of a modern government.

### 5.4 Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

A sophisticated civilization developed in the Indus River valley, centered on cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. These cities were abandoned around 1700 BCE, however, possibly because of deforestation and a decline in soil productivity. India was then invaded by a people called the Aryans, whose social structure was based on hereditary social castes and the Vedic religion. This religion, incorporating a belief in reincarnation and karma, developed into Hinduism.

In the sixth century BCE, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama founded the religion of Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism and taught people how they might escape the suffering of the world. Buddhism spread beyond India following the conversion in the third century BCE of Ashoka, a king of the Mauryan dynasty, which had unified northern India in the preceding century. After the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, a new empire was established by Chandragupta of the Gupta dynasty, and Indian art and culture flourished. Despite their accomplishments, however, the Guptas lost control of northern India when the Huns invaded, and the area was broken into smaller independent kingdoms.

## Assessments

### Review Questions

1. What purpose did jade *not* serve in the early Neolithic cultures of China?
  - a. artwork
  - b. currency
  - c. funeral rites and religious rituals
  - d. jewelry
2. What key piece of evidence convinced scholars that the Shang dynasty was not a mythical dynasty, as was once believed?
  - a. oracle bones
  - b. chariots
  - c. bronze weapons
  - d. agriculture
3. What was one of the major tenets of early Confucian thought?
  - a. the need for clearly defined law codes
  - b. the search for natural beauty and immortality
  - c. the right of sovereigns to rule based on the favor of heaven
  - d. the need for rulers to exhibit moral leadership and virtuous conduct
4. In what way did the mobilization for war during the Warring States Period contribute to economic growth in China?
  - a. Mercenary work became a primary occupation for commoners.

- b. Conquered rulers were forced to pay heavy taxes.
  - c. War encouraged more cross-regional trade in things like copper and horses.
  - d. To avoid fighting, aristocrats transformed themselves into merchants.
5. What Chinese tradition from the Hundred Schools of Thought encouraged “nonaction” as an important political concept?
- a. Confucianism
  - b. Legalism
  - c. Mohism
  - d. Daoism
6. Which was *not* one of the nomadic cultures that lived on the Inner Asian Steppe in the ancient world?
- a. Di
  - b. Xiongnu
  - c. Xianbei
  - d. Yangshao
7. What Inner Asian Steppe peoples founded the Northern Wei dynasty?
- a. Xiongnu
  - b. Xianbei
  - c. Di
  - d. Jie
8. Why do scholars think that the people of the Inner Asian Steppe began to abandon agriculture for livestock herding around 1500 BCE?
- a. climate change
  - b. war between clans
  - c. introduction of the horse
  - d. pressure from the Shang dynasty
9. What early culture was known for its bronze drums that spread widely across Southeast Asia?
- a. Yayoi
  - b. Dong Son
  - c. Emishi
  - d. Baekje
10. What climatic condition supported the transfer of culture between India and Southeast Asia?
- a. warm summers
  - b. torrential rains
  - c. monsoon winds
  - d. dust storms
11. What group in Japan invented new technologies like pottery in an effort to adapt to the climate changes occurring around twelve thousand years ago?
- a. the Jōmon
  - b. the Yayoi
  - c. the Yamato
  - d. the Silla
12. Which of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, though originally the smallest and least powerful, came to

- dominate the others with the help of China?
- Goguryeo
  - Baekje
  - Silla
  - Mahan
- 13.** What imported technology from China and Korea seems to have been connected to the religious transformations occurring in Japan during the beginning of the Yamato era?
- mirrors
  - rice cultivation
  - bronze
  - gold jewelry
- 14.** What cultural practice of the people in Jinhan (Korea) suggests they were in contact with Japan?
- They tattooed their bodies.
  - They practiced Buddhism.
  - They used Chinese script.
  - They built stone temples.
- 15.** What is the name of the hymns the Aryans brought to India?
- Bhakti
  - Ashoka
  - Vedas
  - Brahmans
- 16.** What Indian ruler promoted the spread of Buddhism after his own conversion?
- Chandragupta
  - Megasthenes
  - Rama
  - Ashoka
- 17.** What do Buddhists call the state of ultimate peace found in the extinction of all desire?
- brahman
  - karma
  - nirvana
  - samsara
- 18.** What group occupied the highest tier in the Indian caste system?
- Kshatriya
  - Vaishya
  - Shudra
  - Brahman

### Check Your Understanding Questions

- What were some of the legacies or characteristics of each of the three dynasties of ancient China?
- What effect did the Warring States period have on the development of Confucianism and Legalism?
- How did Daoist concepts help the Chinese people deal with the chaos of the Warring States period?
- Describe a few of the ways in which nomadic cultures and societies differed from their agrarian neighbors.

5. How would you describe the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han dynasty of China?
6. What role did changing climatic conditions play in the lifestyle of the people of the Inner Asian Steppe?
7. Compare and contrast the roles of women in politics in ancient Korea and Japan, including Queen Himiko (Japan) and Queen Seondeok (Korea).
8. How might climate change have affected the development of early Japanese culture?
9. How did Chinese and Korean culture influence the development of Japanese culture during the Yayoi and Yamato periods?
10. To what extent was Buddhism liberating for women in India?
11. Following the development of Buddhism, how did changes in Brahmanism reduce the influence and prestige of the Brahman class as it evolved into Hinduism?

### Application and Reflection Questions

1. Most scholars today still hold that the Xia dynasty was a mythical dynasty developed during the Zhou dynasty period. Given what you've learned about the Mandate of Heaven, how might the Zhou rulers have benefited from encouraging belief in the Xia?
2. Some scholars mark the end of the Warring States period in 256 BCE with the collapse of the Zhou dynasty, while others use the date for the establishment of the first Chinese empire, 221 BCE. Given what you've learned about the features of the Warring States period, which date seems more appropriate?
3. How would you characterize the relationship between the peoples of the steppes and their neighbors—was it primarily about conflict, war, and competition? Or were its purposes economic exchange and cultural adaptation? Explain your answer.
4. Given what you've learned about the environment of the steppe and the lifestyle practiced there, why was the horse and the use of the horse in battle such an important part of their daily life?
5. What were some of the geographical barriers to the development of agrarian societies in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia? What technologies and social practices allowed each culture to make the transition from hunting, gathering, and fishing to farming?
6. The religion of Buddhism from India ultimately made a huge impact on the people of China, Korea, Japan, and across Southeast Asia. Why do you think Buddhism was so attractive to the people in these different places?
7. Compare Buddhism and Hinduism to Chinese religions such as Daoism and philosophical schools such as Confucianism and Legalism. Are there any ideas or values that made the Chinese traditions more advantageous to political stability and empire? Alternatively, what Buddhist and Hindu teachings promoted local autonomy and regionalism in India?



**FIGURE 6.1 Alexander the Great.** This first-century CE portrayal of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great is part of a large mosaic depicting the Battle of Issus (333 BCE) that was discovered in a home excavated in Pompeii, Italy. (credit: modification of work “Alexander and Bucephalus - Battle of Issus mosaic” by Museo Archeologico Nazionale – Naples/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

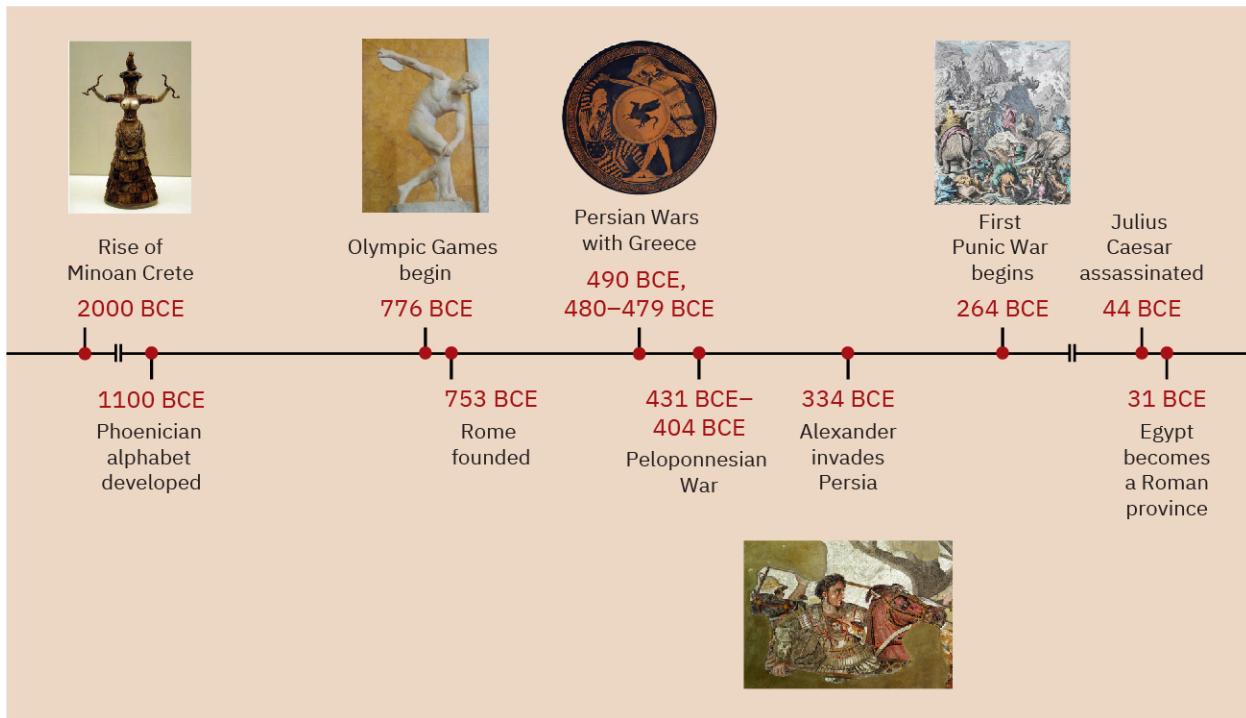
## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 6.1 Early Mediterranean Peoples
- 6.2 Ancient Greece
- 6.3 The Hellenistic Era
- 6.4 The Roman Republic
- 6.5 The Age of Augustus

**INTRODUCTION** In the first century CE, a wealthy Roman in the southern Italian town of Pompeii decorated his home with an elaborate mosaic portraying the decisive victory of the Macedonians, led by Alexander the Great, over the Persian Empire at the Battle of Issus (in modern Turkey) in 333 BCE ([Figure 6.1](#)). Why would a Roman invest in such expensive decoration to commemorate the three hundred-year-old victory of a foreign king in a distant land?

Beginning approximately 3,500 years before our time, the lands that border the Mediterranean Sea became increasingly linked by commerce and cultural interaction. These links culminated in the emergence of the Roman Empire, which had united all these regions by the first century CE. Greek colonists had settled the region of Pompeii some seven hundred years before this mosaic was produced, and Alexander, the hero of the battle, was a champion in Greek culture. With his iconic victory over the Persian “barbarians,” he represented the shared cultural legacy of Greeks and Romans. The history of the ancient Mediterranean world shows how

this common culture developed over time.



**FIGURE 6.2 Timeline: Mediterranean Peoples.** (credit “2000 BCE”: modification of work “Figurine of the Snake Goddess. Archaeological Museum of Herakleion” by O.Mustafin/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “776 BCE”: modification of work “Discobolus side 2” by Ricky Bennison/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “490 BCE, 480–479 BCE”: modification of work “Persian Warrior (Left) and Greek Warrior (Right) in a Duel” by National Museums Scotland/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “334 BCE”: modification of work “Alexander and Bucephalus - Battle of Issus mosaic” by Museo Archeologico Nazionale – Naples/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “264 BCE”: modification of work “Heinrich Leutemann - Hannibals Übergang über die Alpen (cropped)” by Musée Dauphinois Grenoble/Wikimeida Commons, Public Domain)



**FIGURE 6.3** Locator Map: Mediterranean Peoples. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 6.1 Early Mediterranean Peoples

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the regional peoples of the Mediterranean before 500 BCE
- Discuss the technological achievements of the early Mediterranean peoples
- Describe the interconnectedness of the early Mediterranean peoples

During the Bronze Age (c. 3300–1200 BCE), trade connected the peoples and cultures of Greece and the Aegean islands such as Crete. By the third millennium BCE, the inhabitants of these lands were already producing wine and olive oil, products in high demand in ancient Egypt and the Near East. The Aegean Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1100 BCE) thus shared in the economic prosperity and cultural interaction that linked the eastern Mediterranean with the ancient cultures of western Asia.

The eventual collapse of the Late Bronze Age world coincided with the development of new technology that allowed people to devise iron tools and weapons. During the new Iron Age, the Phoenicians not only preserved Bronze Age cultural traditions but they also developed a revolutionary new communication tool, the alphabet, that vastly expanded literacy. They established trading posts across the Mediterranean as far as Spain, often in search of new sources of iron ore and other metals such as tin. The arrival of the Phoenicians and Greek traders in the western Mediterranean brought them into contact with the Etruscans in the Italian peninsula. Thus, the period from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age witnessed the development of numerous cultures across the Mediterranean.

### The Late Bronze Age World

Egypt was the dominant economic and military power of the Late Bronze Age, for the most part a time of economic prosperity and political stability. Other powerful kingdoms included Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, the Hittites of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the Mitanni and Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia, and

the Kassites and Elamites in southern Mesopotamia and western Iran (Figure 6.4). While each maintained its own unique culture, their interactions created a shared Late Bronze Age culture.



**FIGURE 6.4** The Bronze Age World. While Egypt was the dominant power in the relatively peaceful Late Bronze Age, many other cultures thrived during this time. (credit: modification of work “Near East and Mediterranean in 2000 BCE” by “Briangotts”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

For instance, they all used a redistributive economic system in which agricultural goods were collected from local farmers as taxes, stored in the palace or temple, and redistributed to urban artisans, merchants, and officials who could not grow food. They all possessed military forces of elite warriors trained to fight from horse-drawn chariots. They interacted using a common set of diplomatic practices: Official correspondence was often written in Akkadian cuneiform, military alliances were sealed by arranged marriages between the royal families of allied states, and vassal states paid tribute to dominant states to avoid military assault.

These civilizations also exchanged prized goods, such as wine and oil from Greece, cedar logs from the **Levant** (modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria), and copper from the island of Cyprus. Great cultural achievements resulted from their interaction. For example, in the small maritime kingdom of Ugarit (now Syria), scribes modified Egyptian hieroglyphics to suit their local Semitic Canaanite language, creating an ancestor of our alphabet. They used this script to record traditional epic poetry featuring myths of their main deity, the storm god Baal.

#### Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece

By 2000 BCE, a unique culture had developed on the Aegean island of Crete, reaching the height of its power at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age around 1600 BCE. The later Classical Greeks told the myth of King Minos of Crete, who built a giant maze known as the Labyrinth and imprisoned there a half-man, half-bull called the Minotaur (the “Bull of Minos”). To avenge his own son’s death, Minos forced young men and women from Athens in Greece to enter the Labyrinth and be eaten by the monster. Historians see in the myth a distant memory of the earlier civilization on Crete and use the term Minoan, derived from Minos, to describe it.

The Minoans built spacious palaces on Crete, the largest at Knossos. Since these were usually unfortified,

historians believe Crete was generally peaceful and united under a single government with Knossos as the capital. The Minoans also established settlements and trading posts on other Aegean islands such as Thera and along the Anatolian coast. Their palaces were huge complexes that served as economic and administrative centers. To keep records for these centers the Minoans developed their own script, written on clay tablets and known to scholars as **Linear A**. It has not yet been deciphered.

A common weapon and symbol in these palaces was the *labrys*, or double ax, from which the word “labyrinth” arose. In the courtyards, young men and women participated in bullfights that may be the basis for the myth of the Minotaur. Frescoes on the palace walls depict these fights as well as sea creatures and scenes from nature (Figure 6.5). The Minoan religion revered bulls and a goddess associated with snakes, nature, and fertility. The abundance of figurines of this snake-wielding female deity and other artistic depictions of women may mean that at least some women enjoyed high social status in Minoan society. Religious rituals were practiced in small shrines as well as on mountain tops and in caves and sacred forests.



**FIGURE 6.5 A Leaping Bull.** This small Minoan fresco (c. 1600–1450 BCE) shows a leaping bull with one acrobat on its back and two others alongside. It is one of five discovered in the Knossos palace on Crete. (credit: “Toreador Fresco (Bull-Leaping Fresco)” by “Jebulon”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

### LINK TO LEARNING

For a thorough examination of the art and archaeology of the Aegean Bronze Age, visit [Dartmouth University's Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology](https://openstax.org/l/77AegeanPre) (<https://openstax.org/l/77AegeanPre>) website.

Sometime around 1500 BCE, the palaces on Crete were destroyed. Knossos was rebuilt, and scribes there began employing a new script scholars call **Linear B**, apparently derived from Linear A and found to be an early form of Greek. Linear B clay tablets discovered on the Greek mainland led historians to conclude that Greeks from the mainland conquered Crete and rebuilt Knossos.

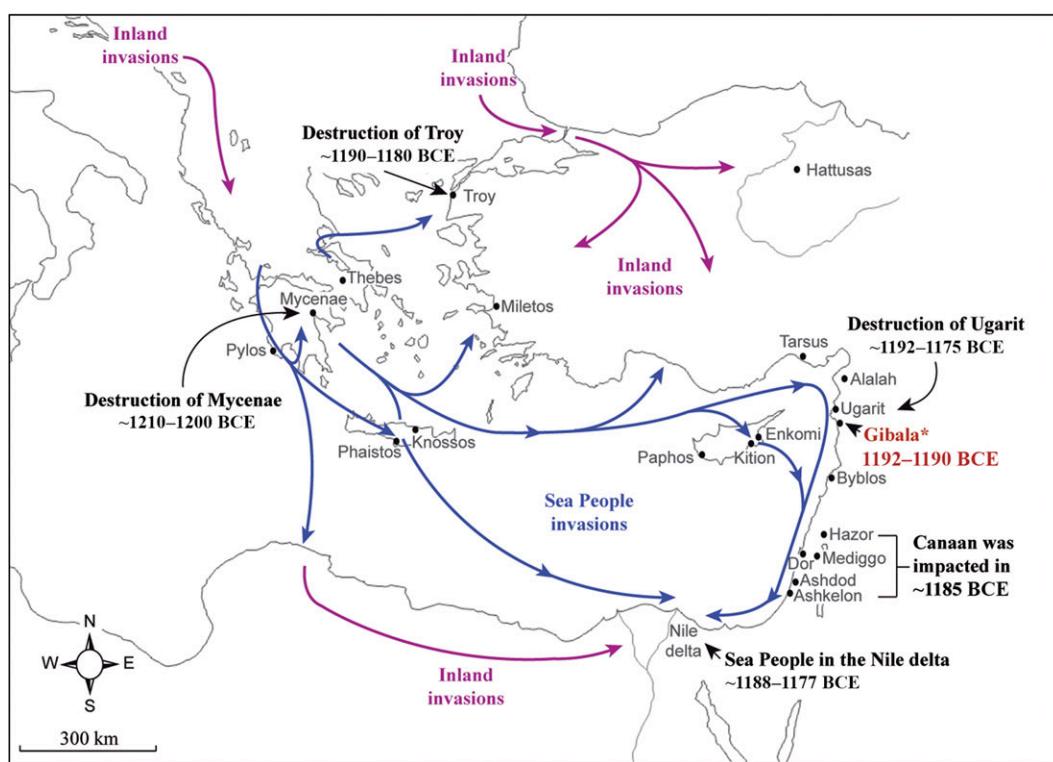
The Bronze Age culture that produced Linear B is called Mycenaean since the largest Bronze Age city in Greece was at Mycenae. Bronze Age Greeks appear to have migrated from the Balkans into mainland Greece around 2000 BCE and adopted Minoan civilization around the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, in 1600 BCE. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaean Greeks were divided into a number of separate kingdoms. Immense palace complexes like those at Knossos have been found at Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos, and Sparta, sometimes

surrounded by monumental fortifications. These locations correspond to the powerful kingdoms described in the later Greek epic poem the *Iliad*, attributed to the poet Homer. This poem tells the story of the Trojan War, in which the Greek kingdoms, led by King Agamemnon of Mycenae, waged war against the city of Troy. Archaeologists have also uncovered the Bronze Age city of Troy in western Turkey, which suggests the *Iliad* was loosely based on oral traditions that preserved the memory of these ancient Bronze Age kingdoms. The Linear B tablets indicate that the ruler of these palaces was known as the *Wanax* or “lord,” the same word used to describe the heroic kings of the *Iliad*.

### The Collapse of the Bronze Age World

The last century of the Late Bronze Age, after 1200 BCE, was a period of wars and invasions that witnessed the collapse of many powerful states. The palaces of Mycenaean Greece were destroyed, perhaps following revolts by the lower class and natural disasters like climate change and earthquakes. In the centuries that followed, the population declined drastically, writing and literacy disappeared, and Greece entered a “Dark Age.”

Later ancient Greek historians reported that Greek-speaking tribes known as the Dorians migrated from northwest Greece to the south after the Trojan War. The instability in Greece and the Aegean resulted in much migration by people in search of new homes. For instance, ancient Egyptian inscriptions tell us that the “Sea Peoples” destroyed the Hittite Empire and numerous kingdoms in the Levant to the north of Egypt. One particular group known as the Philistines (Peleset), who attacked Egypt, eventually settled just north of Egypt along the coast of the southern Levant. But there were many others, including the Akawasha, Lukka, Shardana, Tursha, and more who washed across the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age Collapse (Figure 6.6).



**FIGURE 6.6** The Path of the Sea Peoples. The “Sea Peoples,” as they were called in Egyptian records, came largely from the Aegean region. By studying the remains of pottery and other archaeological traces, scholars have concluded that these groups moved through Greece and Crete and into North Africa, Cyprus, and the Levant (as shown by the blue arrows) at the close of the Late Bronze Age. (credit: modification of work “Map of the Sea People invasions in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age” by David Kaniewski, Elise Van Campo, Karel Van Lerberghe, Tom Boiy, Klaas Vansteenhuyse, Greta Jans, Karin Nys, Harvey Weiss/“The Sea Peoples, from Cuneiform Tablets to Carbon Dating”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Other groups were also on the move. Libyans, who inhabited the North African coastal region west of Egypt, invaded the northern Nile River valley and settled there. The attacks of the Sea Peoples and Libyans contributed to the later collapse of Egypt's central governments after 1100 BCE, ending the New Kingdom period. Phrygians, who inhabited the Balkans in southeast Europe, migrated into Asia Minor (Turkey). The Aramaeans, nomadic tribes who spoke a Semitic language and inhabited the Arabian Desert, migrated into Syria and Mesopotamia.

These wars and invasions coincided with an important technological innovation, the birth of sophisticated iron-making technology. For thousands of years, bronze had been the metal of choice in the ancient world. But the disruptions caused by the Late Bronze Age Collapse made it difficult for metal workers to access tin, a crucial ingredient in bronze. Without a sufficient supply of tin, artisans experimented for centuries with iron ore. In the process, they developed the techniques of steeling (adding carbon to the iron to make it stronger), quenching (rapidly cooling hot iron with water), and tempering (heat treating) to produce a metal far superior in strength to bronze. By around 900 BCE, the Iron Age had begun in the eastern Mediterranean.

### Phoenicians, Greeks, and Etruscans

The Phoenicians were descended from the Bronze Age Canaanites and lived in cities like Sidon and Tyre (in today's Lebanon), each ruled by a king. They were great sailors, explorers, and traders who established trading posts in Cyprus, North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain. They sailed along the west coast of Africa and to the British Isles in search of new markets and goods such as tin (See [Figure 6.7](#)).



**FIGURE 6.7** Phoenician Cities and Colonies. The Phoenicians were great mariners and explorers. This map shows the many cities and colonies they founded across the Mediterranean Sea. (credit: modification of work “Mediterranean at 218 BC” by “Megistias”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Around 1100 BCE, the Phoenicians also invented the world's first known alphabet, using symbols that represented consonant sounds. Strung together, these consonants created words in which vowel sounds were interpreted by the order of the consonants. Because the Phoenician alphabet simplified the earlier script of the Canaanites, more people could now become literate, not just a small, specialized group of scribes. The Phoenicians' commercial success was undoubtedly partly a result of their better, more efficient record-keeping system that a larger population could learn and employ. Other cultures like the Aramaean peoples and the Israelites quickly adapted the new script to their own languages. By the eighth century BCE, the Greeks had also adopted and later adapted the Phoenician alphabet to write their language.

Beginning with the Assyrian Empire's expansion in the eighth century BCE, the Phoenician kingdoms became subjects of the successive Iron Age empires of western Asia: the Assyrians, the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonian),

and the Persians. The Phoenicians continued to flourish, however. The Assyrians valued Phoenician artists, and finely crafted Phoenician wares such as jewelry and furniture became popular among the ruling elites. The Persians relied largely on Phoenician sailors and ships to serve as the naval forces, especially in their campaigns to conquer Greece in the early fifth century BCE. When Phoenician city-states such as Sidon and Tyre became subject to foreign rule, many Phoenicians immigrated to the city of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia), founded by Phoenician merchants around 700 BCE as a stopping place on the long but profitable voyage to Spain. Given this influx of immigrants, Carthage grew large and wealthy, and by the fifth century BCE the southern Italian peninsula was the dominant power in the western Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians were not the only people establishing colonial outposts around the wider Mediterranean world. Beginning in the eighth century, Greeks began founding colonies in North Africa, in coastal Spain and France, on the shores of the Black Sea, and on the Italian peninsula. Many of these colonies were built in resource-rich areas and commonly produced grain, tin, or timber for export back to Greece. Others served more mercantile interests, trading with major and minor powers across the Mediterranean. It was through these colonial ventures that Greeks and Phoenicians came into contact with the Etruscans of the northern Italian peninsula.

The Etruscans were organized into independent city-states such as Veii and Vulci, much like the Greeks were, and each city was ruled by its own king and council of elders. In their art and architecture, the Etruscans followed Greek models ([Figure 6.8](#)). They modified the alphabet the Greeks had acquired from the Phoenicians to write their language, which scholars have not yet fully deciphered. By 600 BCE, they had expanded beyond their base in modern Tuscany and colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city. They also founded new colonies in northern and southern Italy. The Etruscan states remained the dominant power in the Italian peninsula until 474 BCE. In that year, at the Battle of Cumae off the coast of southern Italy, the naval forces of the Greek city-state of Syracuse won a decisive victory over the Etruscan fleet and emerged as the chief power in the region, along with Carthage.



**FIGURE 6.8 Greek Influence in Etruria.** This Etruscan antefix (roof tile) was created in the fourth century BCE and found in the Italian city of Cerveteri, northwest of Rome. The almost twenty-inch-tall piece of terracotta art depicts a maenad, a Greek mythological figure associated with the Greek god Dionysus. In its style and symbolism, it reflects the cultural exchange between the Etruscans and the Greeks. (credit: “Terracotta antefix (roof tile) with head of a maenad” by Purchase by subscription, 1896/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Since ancient Rome began as an Etruscan city-state, the Etruscans strongly influenced the development of Roman culture. For example, Roman priests divined the will of the gods by examining a sacrificed animal's entrails, a custom adopted from the Etruscans. The Etruscans honored their dead with elaborate tombs, and

the Romans did the same, maintaining that the spirits of their ancestors watched over them. Gladiatorial contests in Rome had origins among the Etruscans, who at funerals forced prisoners of war to fight to the death as human sacrifices to their dead. The *fasces*, a bundle of rods and an ax that symbolized the authority of Roman magistrates, originally denoted the authority of Etruscan kings. Finally, the Roman alphabet, still used in western and central Europe today, was based on Etruscan modifications to the Greek alphabet.

## 6.2 Ancient Greece

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the historical factors that shaped the development of the Greek city-state
- Describe the evolution of the political, economic, and social systems of Athens and Sparta
- Discuss the alliances and hostilities among the Greek city-states during the Classical period
- Identify the major accomplishments of Ancient Greek philosophy, literature, and art

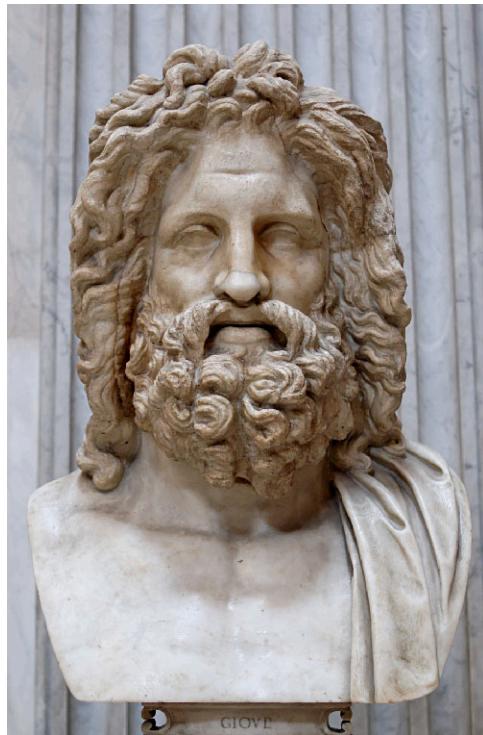
In the centuries following the collapse of the Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms around 1100 BCE, a dynamic new culture evolved in Iron Age Greece and the Aegean region. During this period, the Greek city-states developed innovative consensual governments. Free adult males participated in their own governance and voted to create laws and impose taxes. This system of government contrasted with the earlier monarchies of the ancient Near East, in which rulers claimed to govern their subjects through the will of the gods.

The degree of political participation in the Greek city-states varied from monarchy and oligarchy, or government by a small group of wealthy elites, to democracy, literally “rule by the people,” a broader-based participation that eventually included both rich and poor adult males. These systems influenced Ancient Roman and European political thought through the centuries. The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) witnessed constant warfare among rival city-states, yet it was marked by the creation of enduring works of literature and art that inspired centuries of European artists and writers. Greek philosophers also subjected the human condition and the natural world to rational analysis, rejecting traditional beliefs and sacred myths.

### Archaic Greece

The Greek Dark Ages (1100–800 BCE) persisted after the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization but began to recede around 800 BCE. From this point and for the next few centuries, Greece experienced a revival in which a unique and vibrant culture emerged and evolved into what we recognize today as Classical Greek civilization. This era, from 800 to 500 BCE, is called Archaic Greece after *arche*, Greek for “beginning.”

The Greek renaissance was marked by rapid population growth and the organization of valleys and islands into independent city-states, each known as a **polis** (Greek for city-state). Towns arose around a hill fortress or *acropolis* to which inhabitants could flee in times of danger. Each polis had its own government and religious cults, and each built monumental temples for the gods, such as the temple of Hera, wife of Zeus and protector of marriage and the home, at the city-state of Argos. Though politically disunited, the Greeks, who began to refer to themselves as Hellenes after the mythical king Hellen, did share a common language and religion. The most famous of their sacred sites were Delphi, near Mount Parnassus in central Greece and seat of the oracle of Apollo, the god of prophecy, and Olympia in southern Greece, sacred to Zeus, who ruled the pantheon of gods at Mount Olympus (Figure 6.9). Beginning in 776 BCE, according to Aristotle, Greeks traveled to Olympia every four years to compete in athletic contests in Zeus’s honor, the origin of the Olympic Games.



**FIGURE 6.9 Zeus.** This larger-than-life marble bust of the Greek god Zeus is believed to be a Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE Greek original. It was found in Otricoli, Italy, in 1775. (credit: "So-called "Zeus of Otricoli". Marble, Roman copy after a Greek original from the 4th century" by "Jastrow"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

#### The Olympic Games

Postponed a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Games of the XXXII Olympiad in Japan included more than three hundred events in thirty-three sports, including new entries like skateboarding, rock climbing, and surfing. Modern games have been held since 1896, when the new International Olympic Committee started the tradition, but as the name suggests, the inspiration came from Ancient Greece.

Athletic events in Ancient Greece were important displays of strength and endurance. There were contests at the sanctuaries at Delphi and Nemea (near Argos), but none was as renowned as the Olympic Games, held at the sanctuary in Olympia that was dedicated to Zeus. Contestants came from all over the Greek world, including Sicily and southern Italy.

Unlike the skateboarding and surfing of modern games, the ancient games focused on skills necessary for war: running, jumping, throwing, and wrestling. Over time, sports that included horses, like chariot racing, were also incorporated. Such events were referenced in Homer's *Iliad*, when the hero Achilles held athletic contests to honor his fallen comrade Patroclus and awarded prizes or *athla* (from which the word "athlete" is derived). The centerpiece of the ancient games was the two-hundred-yard sprint, or *stadion*, from which comes the modern word "stadium" ([Figure 6.10](#)).



**FIGURE 6.10** The Original Olympic Track. These are the ruins of the original Olympic *stadio* at Olympia. The track was made of hard-packed clay for a race to be won by the fastest athlete in the Greek world. (credit: “Olympic Race Track in modern Olympia, Greece” by “Dwaipayanc”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Unlike the modern games, where attendees pay great sums to watch athletes compete, admission to the ancient games was free—for men. Women were forbidden from watching and, if they dared to attend, could pay with their lives. Competitors were likely locals with proven abilities, though over time professional athletes came to dominate the sport. They could earn a good living from prizes and other rewards gained through their talent and celebrity, and their statues adorned the sanctuary at Olympia. The poet Pindar in the early fifth century BCE was renowned for composing songs to honor them when they returned home as victors. The Olympic Games continued to be celebrated until 393 CE, when they were halted during the reign of the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius.

- Why might the organizers of the modern Olympic Games have named their contest after the ancient Greek version?
- How are the ancient games similar to the modern Olympic Games? How are they different?

The start of the Archaic period also witnessed the reemergence of specialization in Greek society. Greek artists became more sophisticated and skilled in their work. They often copied artistic styles from Egypt and Phoenicia, where Greek merchants were engaging in long-distance trade. At the site of Al-Mina, along the Mediterranean coast in Syria where historians believe the Phoenician alphabet was first transmitted to the Greeks, Greek and Phoenician merchants exchanged goods. Far to the west, on the island of Ischia off the west coast of Italy, Greeks were competing with Phoenician merchants for trade with local peoples, whose iron ore was in strong demand. Thanks to their contact and trade with the Phoenicians, Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet to their own language, making an important innovation by adding vowels (a, e, i, o, u). The eighth century BCE thus witnessed the return of literacy and the end of the Aegean world's relative isolation after the

interlude of the Greek Dark Ages.

The eighth century BCE was also the period in which the epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed, traditionally attributed to the blind poet Homer. While historians debate whether Homer was a historical or a legendary figure, they agree the epics originated in the songs of oral poets in the Greek Dark Ages. In the eighth century BCE, using the Greek alphabet, scribes wrote these stories down for the first time.

As the population expanded during the Archaic period, a shortage of farmland brought dramatic changes. Many Greeks in search of land to farm left their homes and founded colonies along the shores of the Black Sea and the northern Aegean, in North Africa at Cyrene in Libya, and in southern Gaul (modern France) at Massalia (Marseille). The largest number were on the island of Sicily and in southern Italy, the region the Greeks referred to as Magna Graecia or “Greater Greece.” When Greeks established a colony, it became an independent polis with its own laws. The free adult males of the community divided the colony’s land into equal lots. Thus, a new idea developed in the colonies that citizenship in a community was associated with equality and participation in the governing of the state.

In the society of Archaic Greece, the elite landowners, or *aristoi*, traditionally controlled the government and the priesthoods in the city-states. But thanks to the new ideas from the colonies, the common people, or *kakoi*, began demanding land and a voice in the governing of the polis. They were able to gain leverage in these negotiations because city-states needed troops in their wars for control of farmland. The nobility relied on the wealthier commoners, who could afford to equip themselves with iron weapons and armor. In some city-states, the *aristoi* and the *kakoi* were not able to resolve their differences peaceably. In such cases, a man who had strong popular support in the city would seize power and rule over the city. The Greeks referred to such populist leaders as tyrants.

In the sixth century BCE, the difficulties caused by the land shortage were relieved by the invention of coinage. A century before, adopting a practice of the kings of Lydia in western Asia Minor (Turkey), Athens stamped silver pieces with the image of an owl, a symbol of wisdom often associated with the goddess Athena (See [Figure 6.11](#)). Instead of weighing precious metals to use as currency or arguing over the value of bartered goods to trade, merchants could use coins as a simple medium of exchange. The *agora*, or place of assembly in each city-state, thus became a marketplace to buy and sell goods. In the sixth century BCE, this rise of a market economy stimulated economic growth as farmers, artisans, and merchants discovered stronger incentives to produce and procure more goods for profit. For example, farmers learned how to produce more food with the land they already possessed rather than always seeking more land. The economic growth of this period is reflected in the many new temples the Greek city-states constructed then.



**FIGURE 6.11** Athenian Money. This Athenian silver coin from the fifth century BCE depicts Athena on one side and an owl, Athena’s symbol, on the other. (credit: “Athens owl coin” by “yuichi”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

## Sparta and Athens

In the Archaic period, Athens and Sparta emerged as two of the most important of the many Greek city-states. Not only did their governments and cultures dominate the Greek world in the subsequent Classical period; they also fired the imaginations of Western cultures for centuries to come. Athens was the birthplace of democracy, whereas Sparta was an oligarchy headed by two kings.

### The Rise and Organization of Sparta

Sparta in the eighth century BCE was a collection of five villages in Laconia, a mountain valley in the Peloponnese in southern Greece. Due to the shortage of farmland, the citizens (adult males) of these villages, the *Spartiates*, all served in the military and waged war on neighboring towns, forcing them to pay tribute. The Spartiates also appropriated farmland for themselves and enslaved the inhabitants of these lands, most famously the Messenians, who became known as the *helots*. Just as Greek colonists at this time divided land among themselves into equal lots, the Spartiates likewise divided the conquered land equally and assigned to each landowner a certain number of helot families to work it. Helots, unlike enslaved people in other parts of Greece, could not be bought or sold but remained on the land as forced laborers from generation to generation. In the seventh century BCE, Sparta conquered the land of Messene to its west and divided its farmland equally among the Spartiates.

By the late sixth century BCE, the wealth from the rich agricultural land that Sparta then controlled had made it the most powerful state in the Peloponnese. Sparta also organized the city-states of this region and parts beyond into a system of alliances that historians refer to as the Peloponnesian League. Its members still had self-government and paid no tribute to Sparta, but all were expected to have the same friends and enemies as Sparta, which maintained its dominance in the league. Sparta also used its army to overthrow tyrants in the Peloponnesian city-states and restore political power to the *aristoi*.

The Spartans were proud of their unique system of government, or constitution, which was a set of laws and traditional political practices rather than a single document. It was said to have been created by a great lawgiver named Lycurgus around 800 BCE, but modern historians view its development as an evolutionary process during the Archaic period rather than the work of a single person.

Sparta had two hereditary kings drawn from rival royal families. Their powers were very limited, though both sat as permanent members of the Council of Elders and were priests in the state religion. On occasion, the Spartan kings also led armies into battle. The Assembly of Spartiates passed all laws and approved all treaties with the advice of the Council of Elders. This Assembly also elected five judges every year who administered the affairs of state, as well as the members of the Council of Elders.

The unique element of Spartan culture was the *agoge*, its educational system. At the age of seven, boys were separated from their families and raised by the state. To teach them to live by their wits and courage, they were fed very little so they had to learn how to steal food to survive. At the age of twelve they began an even more severe regimen. They were not allowed clothes except a cloak in the wintertime, and they bathed just once a year ([Figure 6.12](#)). They also underwent ritual beatings intended to make them physically strong and hardened warriors. At the age of eighteen, young men began two years of intense military training. At the age of twenty, a young Spartan man's education was complete.



**FIGURE 6.12 Spartan Youth.** The design of this nineteenth-century painting by French impressionist Edgar Degas was based on a passage from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* and depicts Spartan girls encouraging and challenging Spartan boys. Here the boys prepare to compete in running and wrestling exercises. (credit: "Young Spartans exercising" by National Gallery, 1924: purchased from Courtauld Fund/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Women of the Spartiate class, before marrying in their mid-teens, also practiced a strict physical regimen, since they were expected to be as strong as their male relatives and husbands and even participate in defending the homeland. Spartan women enjoyed a reputation for independence, since they managed the farms while men were constantly training for or at war and often ran their family estates alone due to the early deaths of their soldier husbands. The state organized unmarried women into teams known as *chorai* (from which the term *chorus* is derived) that danced and sang at religious festivals.

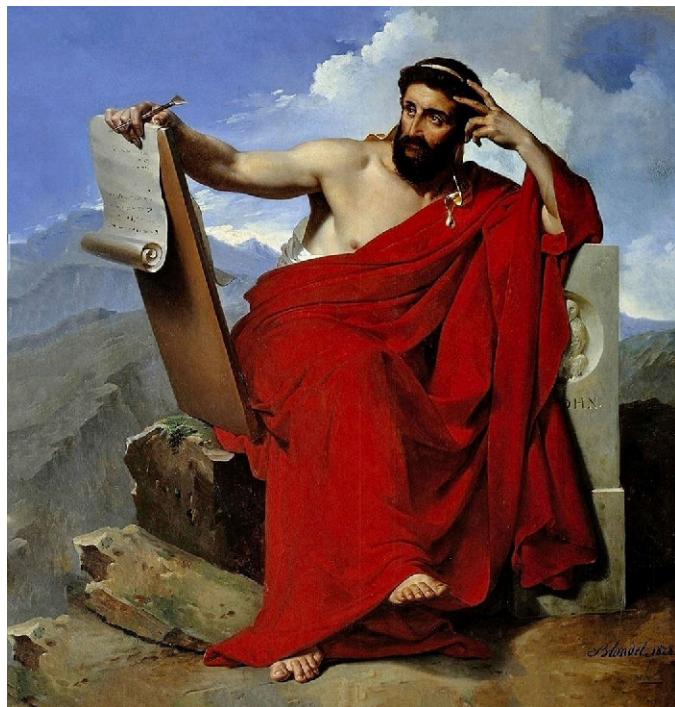
When a Spartiate man reached the age of thirty, he could marry, vote in the Assembly, and serve as a judge. Each Spartiate remained in the army reserve until the age of sixty, when he could finally retire from military service and became eligible for election to the Council of Elders. Spartan citizens were proud to devote their time to the service of the state in the military and government; they did not have to work the land or learn a trade since this work was done for them by commoners and helot subjects.

#### The Rise and Organization of Athens

Athens, like Sparta, developed its own system of government in the Archaic period. Uniquely large among Greek city-states, Athens had long enclosed all the land of Attica, which included several mountain valleys. It was able to eventually develop into a militarily powerful democratic state in which all adult male citizens could participate in government, though “citizenship” was a restricted concept, and because only males could participate, it was by nature a limited democracy.

The roots of Athenian democracy are long and deep, however, and its democratic institutions evolved over centuries before reaching their fullest expression in the fifth century BCE. It was likely the growing prosperity of Athenians in the eighth century that had set Athens on this path. As more families became prosperous, they demanded greater say in the functioning of the city-state. By the seventh century BCE, Athens had an assembly allowing citizens (free adult males) to gather and discuss the affairs of the state. However, as the rising prosperity of Athenians stalled and economic hardship loomed by the end of the century, the durability of the fledgling democracy seemed in doubt. Attempts to solve the economic problems by adjusting the legal code, most notably by the legislator Draco (from whose name we get the modern term “draconian”), had little effect, though codifying the law in written form brought more clarity to the legal system.

With the once-thriving middle class slipping into bankruptcy and sometimes slavery, civil war seemed inevitable. Disaster was avoided only with the appointment of Solon in 594 BCE to restore order. Solon came from a wealthy elite family, but he made it known that he would draft laws to benefit all Athenians, rich and poor. A poet, he used his songs to convey his ideas for these new laws ([Figure 6.13](#)).



**FIGURE 6.13** Solon. This idealized portrait in oils represents Solon, poet and legislator of Athens. It was made in the early nineteenth century by Merry-Joseph Blondel, a French painter of the Neoclassical school. (credit: “Portrait of Solon Legislator and Poet of Athenes” by Musee de Picardie/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

One of Solon's first measures was to declare that all debts Athenians owed one another were forgiven. Solon also made it law that no Athenian could be sold into slavery for failure to repay a loan. These decrees did much to provide relief to farmers struggling with debt who could now return to work the land. Under Solon's new laws, each of Athens's four traditional tribes chose one hundred of its members by lot, including commoners, to sit in the new Council of Four Hundred and run the government. There were still magistrates, but now Solon created the jury courts. All Athenians could appeal the ruling of a magistrate in court and have their cases heard by a jury of fellow citizens. Solon also set up a hierachal system in which citizens were eligible for positions in government based on wealth instead of hereditary privilege. Wealth was measured by the amount of grain and olive oil a citizen's land could produce. Only the wealthiest could serve as a magistrate, sit on the Council, and attend the Assembly and jury courts. Citizens with less wealth could participate in all these activities but could not serve as magistrates. The poorest could only attend the Assembly and the jury courts.

Solon's reforms were not enough to end civil unrest, however. By 545 BCE, a relative of his named Pisistratus had seized power by force with his own private army and ruled as a tyrant with broad popular support. Pisistratus was reportedly a benevolent despot and very popular. He kept Solon's reforms largely in place, and Athenians became accustomed to serving in Solon's Council and in jury courts. They were actively engaged in self-government, thus setting the stage for the establishment of democracy. Pisistratus also encouraged the celebration of religious festivals and cults that united the people of Attica through a common religion. To further help the farmers Solon brought back, Pisistratus redistributed land so they could once again make a living.

After Pisistratus's death, his sons tried to carry on as tyrants, but they lacked their father's popularity. Around 509 BCE, an Athenian aristocrat named Cleisthenes persuaded the Spartans to intervene in Athens and

overthrow these tyrants. The Spartans, however, set up a government of elites in Athens that did not include Cleisthenes. Consequently, he appealed to the common people living in the villages, or *demes*, to reject this pro-Spartan regime and establish a “democracy.” His appeal was successful, and Cleisthenes implemented reforms to Solon’s system of government. He replaced the Council of Four Hundred with one of five hundred and reorganized the Athenians into ten new tribes, including in each one villages from different parts of Attica. Every year, each tribe chose fifty members by lot to sit in the new Council. This reform served to unite the Athenians, since each tribe consisted of people from different parts of Attica who now had to work together politically. Each tribe’s delegation of fifty also served as presidents for part of the year and ran the day-to-day operation of the government.

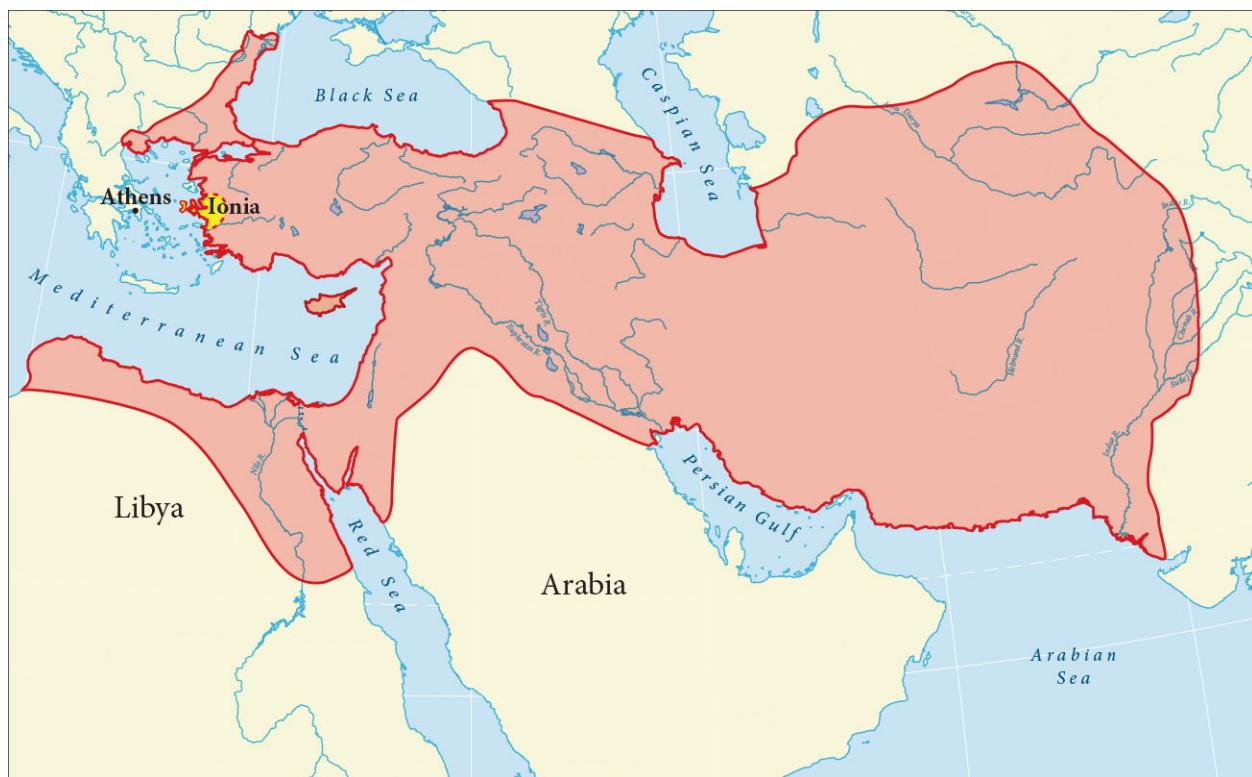
By the end of the Archaic period, Athens had developed a functioning direct democracy, which differs from modern republics in which citizens vote for representatives who sit in the legislature. All citizens could sit in the Athenian Assembly, which then was required to meet at least ten times a year. All laws had to be approved by the Assembly. Only the Assembly could declare war and approve treaties. Athens had a citizen body of thirty to forty thousand adult males in the Classical period, but only six thousand needed to convene for meetings of the Assembly. Citizens could also be chosen by lot to sit in the Council. Since they were permitted to serve for just two one-year terms over a lifetime, many Athenians had the opportunity to participate in the executive branch of government. All citizens also served on juries, which not only determined the guilt or innocence of the accused but also interpreted the way the law was applied. Women, enslaved people, and foreign residents could not participate. However, women of the citizen class were prominent in the public religious life of the city, serving as priestesses and in ceremonial roles in religious festivals.

### Classical Greece

The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) was an era of great cultural achievement in which enduring art, literature, and schools of philosophy were created. It began with the Greek city-states uniting temporarily to face an invasion by the mighty Persian Empire, but it ended with them locked in recurring conflicts and ultimately losing their independence, first to Persia and later to Macedon.

### The Persian Wars

The Persian Wars (492–449 BCE) were a struggle between the Greek city-states and the expanding Persian Empire. In the mid-sixth century BCE, during the reign of Cyrus the Great, Persian armies subdued the Greek city-states of Ionia, located across the Aegean from Greece in western Asia Minor (Turkey) ([Figure 6.14](#)). To govern the cities, the Persians installed tyrants recruited from the local Greek population. The resident Greeks were unhappy with the tyrants’ rule, and in 499 BCE they rose in the Ionian Rebellion, joined by Athens and the Greek cities on the island of Cyprus. But by 494 BCE Persian forces had crushed the rebellions in both Ionia and Cyprus. For intervening in Persian affairs, the Persian king Darius decided that Athens must be punished.



**FIGURE 6.14 Persia and the Greeks in 499 BCE.** The Greek world was on the edge of the massive Persian Empire at Persia's height around 500 BCE. Persian rulers likely thought little of the Greeks, but that changed in 499 BCE when Athens intervened in the rebellion in Ionia, a region located just across the Aegean Sea from Athens. (credit: modification of work "Persian Empire, 490 BC, showing route of Cyrus the Younger, Xenophon and the 10.000" by The Department of History - United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 490 BCE, Darius assembled a large fleet and army to cross the Aegean from Asia Minor, planning to subdue Athens and install one of Pisistratus's sons as tyrant there. These Persian forces landed at Marathon on the west coast of Attica. They vastly outnumbered the Athenians but were drafted subjects with little motivation to fight and die. The Athenian soldiers, in contrast, were highly motivated to defend their democracy. The Persians could not withstand the Athenians' spirited charge in the Battle of Marathon and were forced back onto their ships. Leaving the battle, the Persians then sailed around Attica to Athens. The soldiers at Marathon raced by land across the peninsula to guard the city. Seeing the city defended, the Persians returned to Asia Minor in defeat.

In 480 BCE, Xerxes, the son and successor of Darius, launched his own invasion of Greece intended to avenge this defeat and subdue all the Greek city-states. He assembled an even larger fleet as well as an army that would invade by land from the north. At this time of crisis, most of the Greek city-states decided to unite as allies and formed what is commonly called the Hellenic League. Sparta commanded the armies and Athens the fleet. A small band of the larger land forces, mostly Spartans, decided to make a stand at Thermopylae, a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea in northeastern Greece. Their goal was not to defeat the invading Persian army, which vastly outnumbered them, but to delay them so the rest of the forces could organize a defense. For days the small Spartan force, led by their king Leonidas, successfully drove back a vastly superior Persian army, until a Greek traitor informed the Persians of another mountain pass that enabled them to circle around and surround the Spartans. The Spartan force fought to the death, inspiring the Greeks to continue the fight and hold the Hellenic League together.

After the Battle of Thermopylae, the Persian forces advanced against Athens. The Athenians abandoned their city and withdrew to the nearby island of Salamis, where they put their faith in their fleet to protect them. At the naval Battle of Salamis, the allied Greek fleet led by Athens destroyed the Persian ships. Xerxes then

decided to withdraw much of his force from Greece, since he no longer had a fleet to keep it supplied.

In 479 BCE, the reduced Persian force had retreated from Athens to the plains of Boeotia, just north of Attica. The Greek allied forces under the command of Sparta advanced into Boeotia and met the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea. The Persian forces, mostly unwilling draftees, were no match for the Spartan troops, and the battle ended in the death or capture of most of the Persian army.

### The Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian War

After the Persian Wars, the Athenians took the lead in continuing the fight against Persia and liberating all Greek city-states. In 477 BCE, they organized an alliance of Greek city-states known today as the Delian League, headquartered on the Aegean island of Delos. Members could provide ships and troops for the league or simply pay Athens to equip the fleet, which most chose to do. Over the next several decades, allied forces of the Delian League liberated the Greek city-states of Ionia from Persian rule and supported rebellions against Persia in Cyprus and Egypt. Around 449 BCE, Athens and Persia reached a peace settlement in which the Persians recognized the independence of Ionia and the Athenians agreed to stop aiding rebels in the Persian Empire.

Over the course of this war, the money from the Delian League enriched many lower-class Athenians, who found employment as rowers in the fleet. Athens even began paying jurors in jury courts and people who attended meetings of the Assembly. Over time it became clear to the other Greeks that the Delian League was no longer an alliance but an empire in which the subject city-states paid a steady flow of tribute. In 465 BCE, the city-state of Thasos withdrew from the league but was compelled by Athenian forces to rejoin. Around 437 BCE, the Athenians began using tribute to rebuild the temples on the Acropolis that the Persians had destroyed. Including the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena Parthenos, these were some of the most beautiful temples ever built and the pride of Athens, but to the subject city-states they came to symbolize Athenians' despotism and arrogance (See [Figure 6.15](#)).



**FIGURE 6.15** The Parthenon. The large and sumptuous Parthenon, seen here as it is today, was built on the Athenian Acropolis in the fifth century BCE in honor of Athena. Following the temple's destruction in the Persian War, Athens set out to rebuild it using tribute money, which angered some of the other Greek city-states. (credit: "The Parthenon Athens" by Steve Swayne/Flickr, Public Domain)

The wealth and power of Athens greatly concerned the Spartans, who saw themselves as the greatest and noblest of the Greeks. The rivalry between the two city-states eventually led them into open conflict. In 433 BCE, the Athenians assisted the city-state of Corcyra in its war against Corinth. Corinth was a member of the

Peloponnesian League and requested that Sparta, the leader of this league, take action against Athenian aggression. Thus, in 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War began with the invasion of Attica by Sparta and its allies (See [Figure 6.16](#)).



**FIGURE 6.16** The Peloponnesian War. Athens and its allies controlled the coasts and islands of the Aegean, making it a powerful naval force to contend with. Sparta and its allies were largely land based, though they eventually were able to outmaneuver the Athenians at sea in some important battles. (credit: modification of work “The Alliances of the Peloponnesian War” by U.S. Army Cartographer/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The political leader Pericles persuaded his fellow Athenians to withdraw from the countryside of Attica and move within the walls of Athens, reasoning that the navy would provide them food and supplies and the wall would keep them safe until Sparta tired of war and sought peace. Pericles’s assessment proved correct. In 421 BCE, after ten years of war, the Spartans and Athenians agreed to the Peace of Nicias, which kept the Athenian empire intact. The cost of the war for Athens was high, however. Due to the crowding of people within its walls, a plague had erupted in the city in 426 BCE and killed many, including Pericles.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

We know of the 426 BCE plague in Athens from the writings of Thucydides, the ancient chronicler and historian of the Peloponnesian War. But what was the mysterious illness? And how did it affect Athenian society and politics? Take a look at [this article about the plague in Athens from The National Geographic](#) (<https://openstax.org/l/77AthensPlague>) for some modern answers.

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Several years later, arguing that the empire could thrive only by expanding, an ambitious young Athenian politician named Alcibiades (a kinsman of Pericles) inspired a massive invasion of Sicily targeting Syracuse, the island’s largest city-state. Just as the campaign began in 415 BCE, Alcibiades’s political enemies in Athens accused him of impiety and treason, and he fled to Sparta to avoid a trial. Without his leadership, the

expedition against Syracuse floundered, and in 413 BCE the entire Athenian force was destroyed. In exile, Alcibiades convinced the Spartans to invade Attica again, now that Athens had been weakened by the disaster in Syracuse. In the years that followed, the Spartans realized they needed a large fleet to defeat Athens, and they secured funds for it from Persia on the condition that Sparta restore the Greek cities in Ionia to Persian rule. In 405 BCE, the new Spartan fleet destroyed the Athenian navy at the Battle of Aegospotami in the Hellespont. The Athenians, under siege, could not secure food or supplies without ships, and in 404 BCE the city surrendered to Sparta. The Peloponnesian War ended with the fall of the city and the collapse of the Athenian empire.

The conclusion of the Peloponnesian War initially left Sparta dominant in Greece. Immediately following the war, Sparta established oligarchies of local aristocrats in the city-states that had been democracies under the Delian League. And it set up the Era of the Thirty Tyrants, a brief rule of oligarchs in Athens. With regard to Persia, Sparta reneged on its promise to restore the Greek city-states in Ionia to Persian control. Persia responded by funding Greek resistance to Sparta, which eventually compelled Sparta to accept Persia's terms in exchange for Persian support. This meant turning over the Ionian city-states as it had previously promised.

Now with Persian backing, the Spartans continued to interfere in the affairs of other Greek city-states. This angered city-states like Thebes and Athens. In 371 BCE, the Thebans defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Leuctra in Boeotia. The next year they invaded the Peloponnese and liberated Messene from Spartan rule, depriving the Spartans of most of their helot labor there. Without the helots, the Spartans could not support their military system as before, and their Peloponnesian League collapsed. Alarmed by the sudden growth of Thebes's power, Athens and Sparta again joined forces and, in 362 BCE, fought the Thebans at the Battle of Mantinea. The battle was inconclusive, but Thebes's dominance soon faded. By 350 BCE, the Greek city-states were exhausted economically and politically after decades of constant warfare.

### **The Classical “Golden Age”**

Many historians view the Greek Classical period and the cultural achievements in Athens in particular as a “Golden Age” of art, literature, and philosophy. Some scholars argue that this period saw the birth of science and philosophy because for the first time people critically examined the natural world and subjected religious beliefs to reason. (Other modern historians argue that this position discounts the accomplishments in medicine and mathematics of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.) For example, around 480 BCE, Empedocles speculated that the universe was not created by gods but instead was the result of the four material “elements”—air, water, fire, earth—being subjected to the forces of attraction and repulsion. Another philosopher and scientist of the era, Democritus, maintained that the universe consisted of tiny particles he called “atoms” that came together randomly in a vortex to form the universe.

Philosophers questioned not only the traditional views of the gods but also traditional values. Some of this questioning came from the sophists (“wise ones”) of Athens, those with a reputation for learning, wisdom, and skillful deployment of rhetoric. Sophists emerged as an important presence in the democratic world of Athens beginning in the mid-fourth century BCE. They claimed to be able to teach anyone rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, for a fee, as a means to achieve success as a lawyer or a politician. While many ambitious men sought the services of sophists, others worried that speakers thus trained could lead the people to act against their own self-interest.

Many thought Socrates was one of the sophists. A stonemason by trade, Socrates publicly questioned sophists and politicians about good and evil, right and wrong. He wanted to base values on reason instead of on unchallenged traditional beliefs. His questioning often embarrassed powerful people in Athens and made enemies, while his disciples included the politician Alcibiades and even some who had opposed Athenian democracy. In 399 BCE, an Athenian jury court found Socrates guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth, and he was sentenced to death ([Figure 6.17](#)).



**FIGURE 6.17** The Death of Socrates. Socrates (center with upraised arm) was forced to drink hemlock, a poison. His last moments were imagined to great dramatic effect in this large oil painting of 1787 by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. (credit: “The Death of Socrates” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0)

Socrates left behind no writings of his own, but some of his disciples wrote about him. One of these was Plato, who wrote dialogues from 399 BCE to his death in 347 BCE that featured Socrates in conversation with others. Through these dialogues, Plato constructed a philosophical system that included the study of nature (physics), of the human mind (psychology and epistemology, the theory of knowledge), and ethics. He maintained that the material world we perceive is an illusion, a mere shadow of the real world of ideas and forms that underlie the universe. According to Plato, the true philosopher uses reason to comprehend these ideas and forms.

Plato established a school at the Academy, which was a gymnasium or public park near Athens where people went to relax and exercise. One of his most famous pupils was Aristotle, who came to disagree with his teacher and believed that ideas and forms could not exist independently of the material universe. In 334 BCE, Aristotle founded his own school at a different gymnasium in Athens, the Lyceum, where his students focused on the reasoned study of the natural world. Modern historians view Plato and Aristotle as the founders of Western (European) philosophy because of the powerful influence of their ideas through the centuries.

Athens in the Golden Age was also the birthplace of theater. Playwrights of the fifth century BCE such as Sophocles and Euripides composed tragedies that featured music and dance, like operas and musicals today (Figure 6.18). The plots were based on traditional myths about gods and heroes, but through their characters the playwrights pondered philosophical questions of the day that have remained influential over time. In Sophocles’s *Antigone*, for example, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, must decide whether to obey the laws or follow her religious beliefs.



**FIGURE 6.18 Dionysus.** This terracotta representation of a theatrical mask a Greek actor might have worn dates from the first or second century BCE and portrays Dionysus, Zeus's son and the god of wine. (credit: “Terracotta figurine of a theatrical mask representing Dionysos” by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

For an example of Greek theatre, watch [this modern performance of \*Lysistrata\*](https://openstax.org/l/77Lysistrata) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Lysistrata>) by the comic poet Aristophanes. In this comedy, first performed in 411 BCE, the women of Greece plot to end the Peloponnesian War. In the Greek original, the actors would have worn masks and sung their parts, as in a modern opera.

The study of history also evolved during the Golden Age. Herodotus and Thucydides are considered the first true historians because they examined the past to rationally explain the causes and effects of human actions. Herodotus wrote a sweeping history of wide geographic scope, called *Histories* (“inquiries”), to explore the deep origins of the tension between the Persian and Greek worlds. In *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides employed objectivity to explain the politics, events, and brutality of the conflict in a way that is similar in some respects to the approach of modern historians.

Finally, this period saw masterpieces of sculpture, vase painting, and architecture. Classical Age Greek artists broke free of the heavily stylized and two-dimensional art of Egypt and the Levant, which had inspired Greek geometric forms, and produced their own uniquely realistic styles that aimed to capture in art the ideal human form. Centuries later, and especially during the European Renaissance, artists modeled their own works on these classical models.

### BEYOND THE BOOK

#### Ancient Greek Sculpture and Painting

In the Archaic period, the Greeks had more contact with the cultures of Phoenicia and Egypt, and artists modeled their work on examples from these regions. For instance, ancient Egyptian artists followed strict conventions in their heavily stylized works, such as arms held close to the sides of the body and a parallel stance for the feet. Greek artists adopted these conventions in their statues of naked youths, or *kouroi*, which were often dedicated in religious sanctuaries ([Figure 6.19](#)).



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 6.19** The Early Influence of Egyptian Sculpture. This basalt statue (a) is one of only seven statues of Cleopatra to survive from the ancient world. Its conventions like arms close to the body and parallel feet are mirrored in a Greek marble statue of a youth from about 580 BCE (b). (credit a: modification of work “Cleopatra statue at Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum” by E. Michael Smith Chieffo/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Marble statue of a kouros (youth)” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1932/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

During the Classical period, Greek sculptors still produced statues of naked youths for religious sanctuaries, but in more lifelike poses that resembled the way the human body appears naturally ([Figure 6.20](#)).



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 6.20** Realism in Ancient Greek Art. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the Greek sculptor Myron produced a lifelike bronze statue of an athlete throwing a discus. Here (a) is a Roman marble copy of his statue. Approximately one century later, the Greek sculptor Praxiteles produced a similarly realistic statue (b), possibly depicting the Greek god Hermes holding Dionysus as a baby. (credit a: modification of work “Discobolus side 2” by Ricky Bennison/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work “Hermes of Praxiteles” by Dottie Day/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Greek painting is most often preserved on vases. In the Archaic period, artists frequently decorated vases with motifs such as patterning, borrowed from Phoenician and Egyptian art ([Figure 6.21](#)).



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 6.21** The Influence of Phoenician Decorative Art. This Phoenician silver bowl from the seventh century BCE (a) features lotus flowers and palm trees, which were Egyptian motifs, and repetitive patterning. A Greek jug from the same period (b) also uses repetitive patterns for decoration. (credit a: modification of work "Dish with Tambourine Players" by Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0; credit b: modification of work "Corinthian jug 620 BC Staatliche Antikensammlungen" by Bibi Saint-Pol/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

By the Classical era, especially in Athens, vase painters were relying less on patterning and instead depicting realistic scenes from myths and daily life ([Figure 6.22](#)).



(a)



(b)

**FIGURE 6.22 Greek Realism in Art.** A Greek terracotta cup from the sixth or fifth century BCE (a) depicts charioteers. A wine jug from the fifth century BCE (b) depicts a scene from Greek mythology. (credit a: modification of work “Red-figured Kylix Greek 6th-5th century BCE terracotta (2)” by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “5th century BC Psykter” by Giovanni Dall’Orto/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

In the Classical period, Greek artists thus came into their own and no longer borrowed heavily from the art of Egypt and Phoenicia.

- What do the many artistic influences on Greece suggest about its connections with other parts of the ancient world?
- Why might Greek art have relied heavily on mythical symbols and depictions? What does this indicate about Greek culture?

## 6.3 The Hellenistic Era

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the events that led to the rise of Alexander the Great
- Analyze Alexander the Great’s successes as a military and political leader
- Discuss the role that Alexander the Great’s conquests played in spreading Greek culture

The Classical period in Greece ended when Greece lost its freedom to the Kingdom of Macedon and Macedon’s king Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. The period that followed Alexander’s death is known as the Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE). Alexander’s empire was divided among his top generals, including Seleucus, Ptolemy, and Antigonus. During this time, Greeks, also called Hellenes, ruled over and interacted with the populations of the former Persian Empire. The resulting mixture of cultures was neither Greek nor non-Greek but “Greek-like,” or **Hellenistic**, a term that refers to the flourishing and expansion of Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean and Near East during this period.

## The Kingdom of Macedon

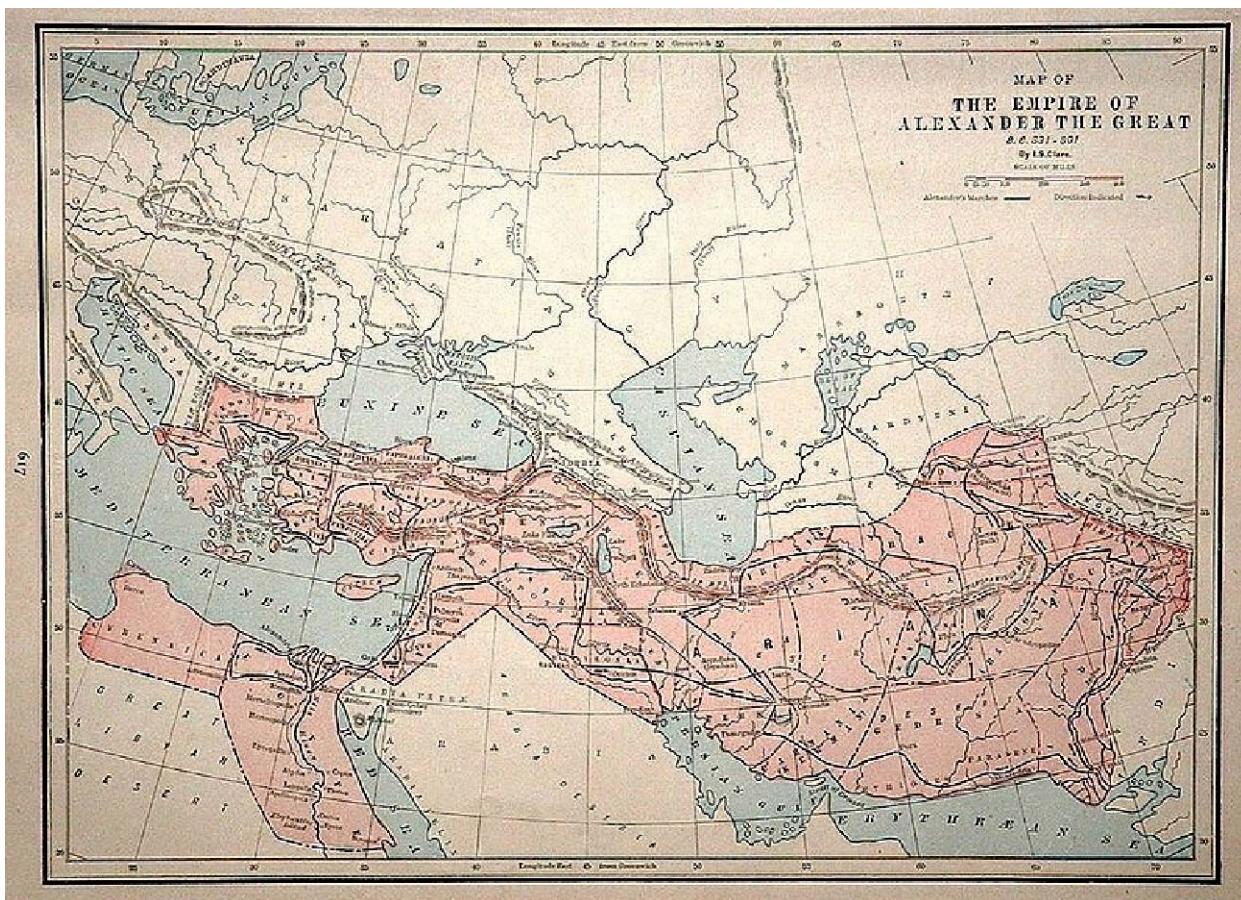
The ancient Kingdom of Macedon straddled today's Greece and northern Macedonia. The Macedonians did not speak Greek but had adopted Greek culture in the Archaic period, and their royal family claimed to be descended from the mythical Greek hero Heracles.

King Philip II of Macedon, who reigned from 359 to 336 BCE, transformed the kingdom into a great power. He recruited common farmers and developed them into a formidable infantry, with trained aristocrats as cavalry. His tactical skills and diplomacy allowed Philip to secure control of new territory in Thrace (modern-day northern Greece and Bulgaria), which provided access to precious metals and thus the economic resources to expand his military power.

In 338 BCE, Athens and Thebes finally put decades of conflict aside to ally against the rising power of Macedon. At the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), the Macedonians crushed this allied army. Philip sought to unite the Greek city-states under his leadership after this victory, and he organized them toward the goal of waging war against the Persian Empire. However, in 336 BCE, Philip was killed by an assassin with a personal grudge.

Philip II was succeeded by his twenty-year-old son Alexander III, later known as Alexander the Great, who immediately faced an invasion by Thracian tribes from the north and a rebellion in Greece led by Thebes and Athens. Within a year, the young king had crushed these opponents and announced he was carrying out his father's plan to wage war against Persia. Darius III, the Persian king, amassed armies to face him, but they were mainly draftees from the subject peoples of the Persian Empire. At the battles of Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (330 BCE), these forces collapsed against the Macedonians, commanded by Alexander himself.

At first, Alexander envisioned his campaign as a war of vengeance against Persia. Although he was Macedonian, he saw himself as a Hellene and often compared himself to the hero Achilles of the *Iliad*, from whom he claimed to be descended through his mother. In 330 BCE, Alexander's forces sacked and later burned Persepolis, the jewel of the Persian Empire. After the assassination of Darius III by disgruntled Persian nobles that same year, however, Alexander claimed the Persian throne and introduced Persian customs to his court, such as having his subjects prostrate themselves before him. To consolidate his control of the Persian Empire, in 330–326 BCE he advanced his army deep into central Asia and to the Indus River valley (modern Pakistan) ([Figure 6.23](#)). In 326 BCE, his exhausted troops mutinied and refused to advance to the Ganges River in central India as Alexander desired. He led his army back to Babylon in Mesopotamia, where he died in 323 BCE at the age of thirty-three, probably due to the cumulative impact of injuries experienced during the campaign.



**FIGURE 6.23** The Conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander advanced his army as far as central Asia and the Indus River, but he was unable to reach the Ganges River as he desired. (credit: “Map of the Empire of Alexander the Great (1893)” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### DUELING VOICES

#### Why Did Alexander Burn Persepolis?

When Alexander reached Persepolis after the Battle of Gaugamela, he saw what was possibly the most beautiful city in the entire Persian Empire. Over the centuries Darius, Xerxes, and others had adorned it with colorful palaces, public buildings, and artwork. Within a few months of his arrival, however, Alexander had reduced the once-stunning imperial city to ashes and ruins. Why?

Historians have pondered this question for thousands of years. Though there are several accounts, the earliest was penned centuries after the actual events. The most common explanation cites a long night of drunken revels and a Greek woman named Thaïs ([Figure 6.24](#)). This account is by the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus:

Alexander held games to celebrate his victories; he offered magnificent sacrifices to the gods and entertained his friends lavishly. One day when the Companions [fellow cavalry soldiers] were feasting, and intoxication was growing as the drinking went on, a violent madness took hold of these drunken men. One of the women present [Thaïs] declared that it would be Alexander's greatest achievement in Asia to join in their procession and set fire to the royal palace, allowing women's hands to destroy in an instant what had been the pride of the Persians.

—Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of World History*



**FIGURE 6.24** Thaïs Burns Persepolis. This 1890 painting by the French artist Georges Rochegrosse imagines Thaïs, held aloft while brandishing a torch, leading the maddened crowd as they burn the city in a drunken spectacle. (credit: “The burning of Persepolis, 1890, by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Later Roman historians such as Quintus Curtius Rufus and Plutarch provide similar accounts, saying the fire was the result of an out-of-control party and lit at Thaïs’s insistence. But at least one ancient writer disagrees. Relying on sources from Ptolemy and other contemporaries of Alexander, the historian Arrian of Nicomedia makes no mention of Thaïs or a night of heavy drinking. In *Anabasis*, he says the destruction of the city was intentional, the product of calculated revenge “for their invasion of Greece...for the destruction of Athens, the burning of the temples, and all the other crimes they had committed against the Greeks.”

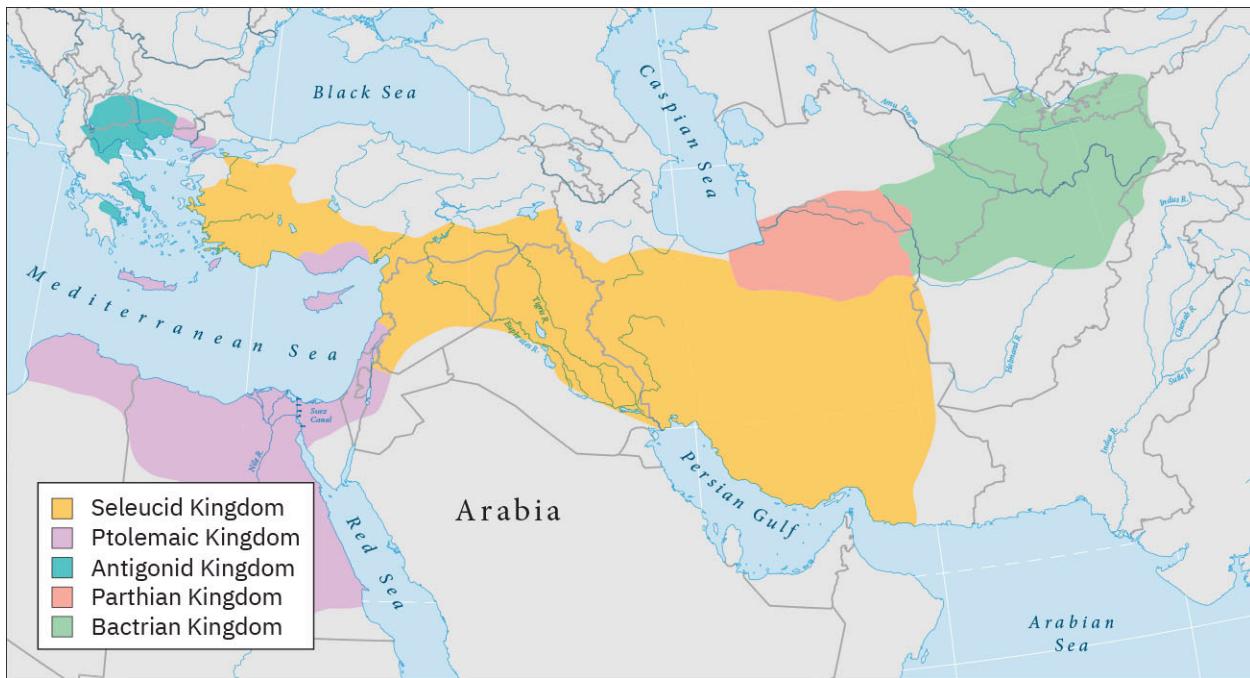
What really happened at Persepolis? Was Thaïs the instigator or merely the scapegoat? Thousands of years later we may be able only to speculate about the cause of this catastrophic event.

- Given what you’ve read, who do you think was responsible for the burning of Persepolis? Why?
- If Thaïs wasn’t responsible, why do you think some ancient historians were convinced of her culpability?

Though his Bactrian wife Roxane was pregnant when he died, Alexander had made no arrangements for a successor. Members of his court and his military commanders thus fought among themselves for control of the empire in what historians refer to as the Wars of the Successors. One of the more colorful contestants was Pyrrhus, who was not Macedonian but was the king of Epirus and Alexander’s cousin. Pyrrhus temporarily seized the throne of Macedon and attempted to carve out an empire for himself in Sicily and southern Italy. He never lost a battle, but he lost so many troops in a campaign defending Magna Graecia in southern Italy from Rome that he was never able to capitalize on his success. (Today the term *pyrrhic victory* refers to a win so costly that it is in effect a loss.) In 272 BCE, Pyrrhus died after being struck by a roof tile thrown at him by an elderly woman during a street battle in the city of Argos. His death marked the end of the wars among Alexander’s generals.

By the middle of the third century BCE, certain generals and their descendants were ruling as kings over

different portions of Alexander's empire (Figure 6.25). Antigonus and his descendants, the Antigonids, ruled Macedon and much of Greece. Some city-states in Greece organized federal leagues to maintain their independence from Macedon. The Achaean League was in the Peloponnese and the Aetolian League in central Greece. Another Macedonian general, Ptolemy, was king of Egypt. To win the support of the Egyptian people, Ptolemy and his successors assumed the title of pharaoh and built temples to Egyptian gods. Yet another Macedonian general, Seleucus and his descendants, the Seleucids, ruled as kings over much of the former Persian Empire, from Asia Minor in the west to central Asia in the east. They adopted many practices of the Persian Empire, including honoring local gods, as revealed by cuneiform records of the offerings they made.



**FIGURE 6.25 The Hellenistic World.** The conquests of Alexander and conflicts over the spoils that raged for decades after his death resulted in the reordering of what had once been the Persian Empire. While the borders regularly shifted over the years, this map provides a snapshot of the Hellenistic kingdoms in about 263 BCE. (credit: modification of work "The Hellenistic World in late 281 BC" by "Cattette"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

The Seleucid Kingdom was an enormous and complicated region, stretching from the Aegean Sea to today's Afghanistan, with a population of some thirty million people of various ethnic and linguistic groups. Keeping control over the vast kingdom proved difficult, and some of the far eastern portions like Bactria and Parthia began to break away around 250 BCE. Both became separate Hellenistic kingdoms, ruled initially by former Greek governors of the areas. Around 200 BCE, the Bactrian kingdom invaded and conquered the Indus River valley. The most famous of the Bactrian kings of India was Menander I, whose kingdom stretched from the Indus River valley to the upper Ganges in central India. Menander converted to Buddhism and became a holy man, known in India as Milinda. The Greek colonists who settled in Bactria and India introduced their art into the region, which influenced Indian sculpture, painting, and architecture. By the end of the second century BCE, however, the Bactrian kingdom had collapsed due to constant civil wars between rival claimants to the throne. We know of their existence only through the coins they issued as kings (Figure 6.26).



**FIGURE 6.26 A Greco-Bactrian Coin.** Even after the Bactrian kingdom split away from the Seleucid Empire in the third century BCE, Greek influence there remained. This Greco-Bactrian coin, likely from the second century BCE, shows a Greek goddess and Greek letters on one side and a humped bull, an Indian symbol, and Kharosthi script (Indo-Persian) on the other. (credit: “Bactrian coin, 1st or 2nd century BC” by Jean-Michel Moullec/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In these Hellenistic kingdoms, where peace treaties and alliances could be secured through arranged marriages, elite women might achieve political power unimaginable in Classical Greece. In Egypt, for example, Ptolemy II married his sister Arsinoe, as was the custom for pharaohs, and installed her as co-ruler. Dynastic queens also often ruled when the designated heir was just a child. In 253 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus II ended his war for control of Syria with a treaty by which he married Berenice, the daughter of his opponent Ptolemy II. However, Antiochus’s former wife Laodice murdered Berenice and her children upon Antiochus’s death in 246 BCE to secure the succession for her own young son Seleucus II. Ptolemy III subsequently declared war to avenge the death of his sister and her children.

In 194 BCE, Antiochus III ended yet another war for control of Syria by giving his daughter Cleopatra I in marriage to Ptolemy V. Upon Ptolemy’s death in 180 BCE, Cleopatra ruled because their sons and daughter were still children. The most famous of the powerful Hellenistic queens was this Cleopatra’s descendant, Cleopatra VII, who reigned from 51 to 31 BCE. The last of the Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII reigned as co-ruler with her brothers Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV, as well as with Ptolemy XV, also called Caesarion, who was her son with the Roman general Julius Caesar.

### Hellenistic Culture

A characteristic cultural feature of the Hellenistic period was the blending of Greek and other cultures of the former Persian Empire. The Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties both employed Greeks and Macedonians as soldiers and bureaucrats in their empires. Alexander the Great and subsequent Hellenistic kings founded Greek cities in the former Persian Empire for Greek and Macedonian colonists, often naming them in honor of themselves or their queens. These cities included the institutions of the Greek cities of their homeland—temples to Greek gods, theaters, *agora* (marketplaces), and *gymnasia*—so the colonists could feel at home in their new environment. At the site of Ai Khanum in modern Afghanistan, archaeologists have uncovered the impressive remains of one such Hellenistic city with a gymnasium.

Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander himself in 331 BCE, was the capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the largest Hellenistic city, with a population that reached one million. There the Ptolemies founded the *Museon*, or “home of the Muses,” from which the term “museum” derives. They modeled this on Aristotle’s Lyceum, as a center for scientific research and literary studies. These same kings also patronized the Alexandrian Library, where they assembled the largest collection of books in the ancient world. Antioch, in today’s southeastern Turkey, was the largest city of the Seleucid kingdom, with a population of half a million. In cities such as Alexandria and Antioch, the Greek-speaking population became integrated with the

indigenous population.

Most Greek cities in this period were no longer independent since they were usually under the control of one of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The city-states of the Achaean and Aetolian Leagues in Greece were the exception, fiercely maintaining their independence against the Antigonid rulers of Macedon. Having lost the right of self-government, many Greeks in cities under the rule of kings no longer focused on politics and diplomacy but turned to the search for personal happiness. New religions emerged that promised earthly contentment and eternal life and combined Greek and non-Greek elements. For example, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis became common in many Hellenistic cities.

Mithras was a Persian sun god worshiped by the Medes, but in the second century BCE, Greeks in Hellenistic cities came to believe Mithras would lead them, too, to eternal life. His followers built special chapels decorated with symbols whose meaning is still disputed. The emphasis on secret religious rituals, or *mysteries*, about which followers were sworn to silence, lends the worship of Isis and Mithras in this period the name **mystery religions** (Figure 6.27).



**FIGURE 6.27 Mithras.** This stone relief from the second century CE depicts the Persian sun god Mithras, who became the center of a mystery religion. (credit: modification of work “Cult Relief of Mithras Slaying the Bull (Tauroctony)” by Yale University Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Another religion practiced in Hellenistic cities was Judaism, whose followers included migrant Jewish people and new converts. By the second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek under the Ptolemies, since ancient Judea was within their control for much of the Hellenistic period and many Jewish people had immigrated to Alexandria.

Some Greeks preferred new philosophies to religion as a means to achieve happiness. Hellenistic philosophy emphasized the search for internal peace and contentment. Stoicism, for example, maintained that the

universe was governed by divine reason (*Logos*), which determined the fate of all people. Happiness therefore resulted from learning how to cope with life and accepting fate while avoiding extreme negative emotions such as fear and anger. Epicureans, however, maintained that the key to happiness was to avoid physical and mental pain by pursuing pleasure. The founders of these two philosophical schools, Zeno and Epicurus respectively, both lived in the early third century BCE and taught in Athens, which continued to be a center of learning in this period. The Stoics were so named because Zeno instructed his students in the *stoa poikile*, or “painted porch” in the Athenian *agora*. The mystery religions and philosophies of the Hellenistic era continued to flourish as these cities became incorporated into the expanding Roman Empire.

## 6.4 The Roman Republic

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

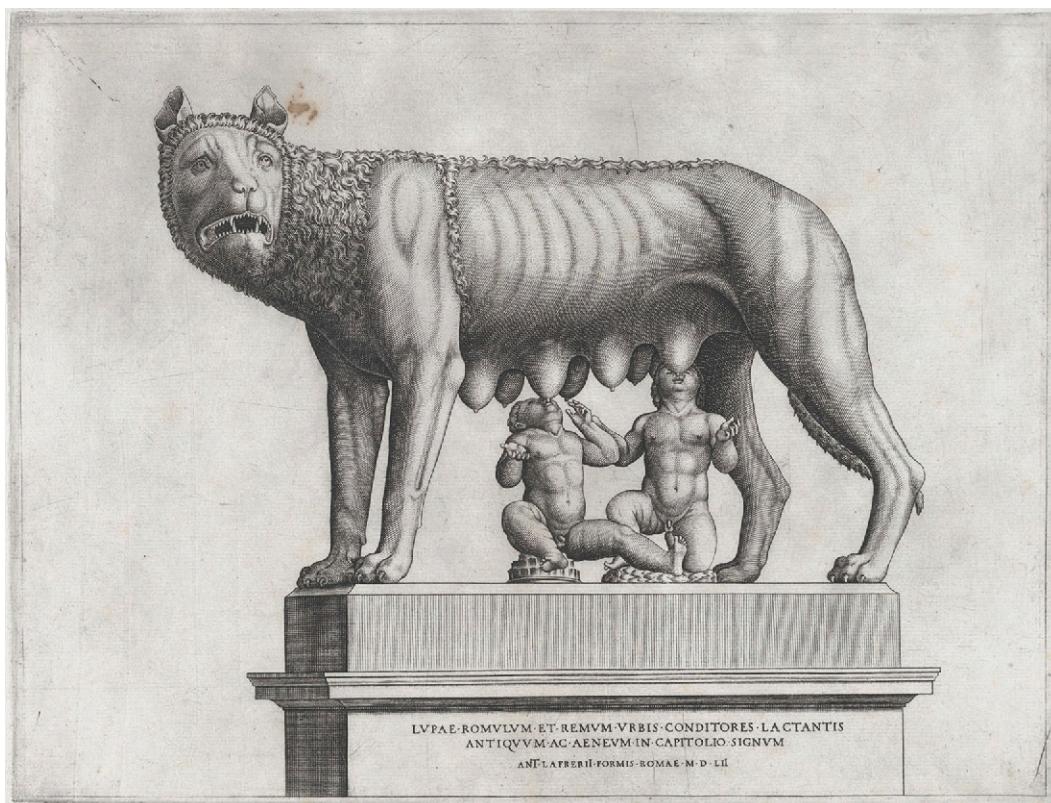
- Identify the key institutions of the Roman Republic
- Discuss class differences and conflict in the Roman Republic
- Analyze the challenges that strained democratic institutions in the Roman Republic, including the Punic Wars

Many elements of early Roman culture and society resulted from Greek influence on the Italian peninsula. Later, when the Roman state expanded and built an empire, its people transmitted their culture—heavily indebted to Ancient Greece—to the Celtic and Germanic tribes of central and western Europe. They also transmitted their language, which is why French, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish are known as “Romance” languages: They are descended from the Latin language spoken by the Romans. The classical civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome were therefore the foundation for what became known as Western civilization.

### The Foundation and Function of the Roman Republic

During the Archaic period, Greeks established colonies on Sicily and in southern Italy that went on to influence the culture of Italy. By around 500 BCE, the inhabitants of central Italy, who spoke Latin, had adopted much of Greek culture as their own, including the idea that citizens should have a voice in the governance of the state. For example, the people of the small city-state of Rome referred to their state as *res publica*, meaning “public thing” (to distinguish it from the *res privata*, or “private thing,” that had characterized oligarchical and monarchical rule under the Etruscans). *Res publica*—from which the word “republic” derives—signified that government happens in the open, for everyone to see. Early Romans also adopted Greek gods and myths as well as other elements of Greek culture.

The Romans passed down many traditions about the early history of their republic, recorded by historians such as Livy in the first century BCE. These stories often reflected the values that the Romans revered. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded in 753 BCE by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war ([Figure 6.28](#)). It was said that Romulus killed his brother when Remus mocked his construction of a wall around the new city and jumped over it. This story brought into focus for Romans their respect for boundaries and private property.



**FIGURE 6.28 Romulus and Remus.** This sixteenth-century engraving illustrates the legend that the infants Romulus and Remus, later the founders of Rome, were suckled by a she-wolf after a jealous king ordered them abandoned to die. (credit: modification of work “Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae: Romulus and Remus” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, Transferred from the Library, 1941/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Romulus assembled a group of criminals and debtors to inhabit his city, and, to secure wives for them, he invited the neighboring Sabines to attend a festival with their unmarried daughters and sisters. The Romans seized the women, and when the Sabines returned with an army to recover them, the women, now Roman wives, said they had been treated with respect and wished to remain. The Sabines and the Romans then joined together in a single city-state. This story showed that a person did not have to be born a Roman to receive the rights of citizenship. It also reflected women's social status in Rome, which was higher than their status in other ancient cultures. They couldn't vote or hold public office, but they could own property and freely participate in public events such as banquets.

These stories also include details of Roman ideas about government. For example, they note that in its early centuries, Rome was a monarchy, with the first king being Romulus. After the passing of the fourth king, the throne was assumed by Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, an Etruscan. The next two kings were also Etruscan. The last of these, Tarquin the Proud, was the final king of Rome, whose son raped a young Roman woman named Lucretia. This act triggered a rebellion against the monarchy, which ultimately ousted the Etruscan king. In 509 BCE, the victorious Romans declared their government to be a republic and vowed never to be subject to tyranny again. This story emphasized the Roman respect for the rule of law. No one, no matter how powerful, was above it.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Lucretia's Sacrifice for Rome

Like many stories about Rome's early history, the story of the rape of Lucretia emphasizes Roman values, in this

case, virtue. Revered as a model Roman woman, Lucretia embodied sexual purity and loyalty to her husband at the expense of her safety, her autonomy, and even her life. According to the story, Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king, is staying at Collatinus and Lucretia's home. During the night, Tarquinius enters Lucretia's chambers with his sword in hand, He threatens her with successive acts of violence and disgrace before raping her. While recounting the events, Lucretia asks her family to pledge that they will avenge her, and then she dies by suicide. Scholars debate the reason for her suicide, with some indicating it was related to shame, others viewing it as Lucretia asserting control, while still others see it as an allegory for the death of the Roman monarchy.

The historian Livy's account of Lucretia's suicide, written in the first century BCE, shows the story's enduring value in Roman culture. It begins as Lucretia's husband and father run to her aid after hearing she has been raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king. Lucretia they found sitting sadly in her chamber.

The entrance of her friends brought the tears to her eyes, and to her husband's question, "Is all well?" She replied, "Far from it; for what can be well with a woman when she has lost her honor? The print of a strange man, Collatinus [her husband], is in your bed. Yet my body only has been violated; my heart is guiltless, as death shall be my witness. But pledge your right hands and your words that the adulterer shall not go unpunished. Sextus Tarquinius is he that last night returned hostility for hospitality, and armed with force brought ruin on me, and on himself no less—if you are men—when he worked his pleasure with me." They give their pledges, every man in turn. They seek to comfort her, sick at heart as she is, by diverting the blame from her who was forced to the doer of the wrong. They tell her it is the mind that sins, not the body; and that where purpose has been wanting there is no guilt. "It is for you to determine," she answers, "what is due to him; for my own part, though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia." Taking a knife that she had concealed beneath her dress, she plunged it into her heart, and sinking forward upon the wound, died as she fell. The wail for the dead was raised by her husband and her father.

—Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita (The History of Rome)*

- Why does Lucretia choose death?
- What does her choice say about Roman values concerning the conduct of women, chastity, and reputation?

Archaeological evidence seems to indicate at least some historical basis for these accounts of Rome's founding. In 1988, a wall was discovered around the Palatine Hill where Romulus reportedly built his fortification. Archaeologists also found Greek pottery from this period at the same location, suggesting trade took place. The city of Rome is located along the Tiber River where it was no longer navigable to sea-going vessels. Greek merchants would have sailed up the Tiber from the Mediterranean Sea and traded with the native peoples there. Greek merchants and colonists arriving in Italy at this time influenced the Iron Age culture in northern and central Italy, which then evolved through Greek influence into the Latin and Etruscan cultures. Around 600 BCE, the Etruscans colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city-state. The story of the Tarquin dynasty reflects this Etruscan period of Roman history. Modern historians maintain that the story of the expulsion of the Tarquins is loosely based on historical events, which saw the Roman city-state free itself from Etruscan domination and establish an independent republic around 500 BCE.

In the early republic, Rome was ruled by elected magistrates instead of kings, and by a Council of Elders or Senate. Roman society was divided into two classes or orders, patricians and plebeians. The patricians were the aristocratic elite, who alone could hold public office and sit in the Senate. From the beginning of the republic through the third century BCE, the plebeians, or common people, worked to achieve equality before the law in Roman society. The political conflict between these two classes is known as the **Struggle of the Orders**.

Rome was located on a coastal plain known as Latium. East of it were the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, inhabited by warlike tribes that made periodic raids. When Rome was under threat, the plebeians could gain leverage with the patricians by refusing to fight until their demands were met. In 450 BCE, the plebeians went on strike for the first time. They feared that patrician judges were interpreting Rome's unwritten laws to take advantage of ignorant plebeians, so they demanded the laws be written down. The patricians agreed. In the **Twelve Tables**, published in the Forum, Rome's laws were written for the first time and were then accessible to all citizens.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Read excerpts from Rome's [Twelve Tables of law](https://openstax.org/l/77TwelveTables) (<https://openstax.org/l/77TwelveTables>) from Fordham University's Ancient History Sourcebook. What do these laws tell us about Roman society in 450 BCE, when they were first written down?

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After 450 BCE, the plebeians met in a Plebian Assembly that annually elected ten officials known as tribunes. These tribunes attended meetings of Rome's assemblies, the Senate, and the law courts. If they saw any public body or official taking action that would bring harm to plebeians, they could say "Veto" or "I forbid" and stop that action. This power to veto gave plebeians a way to protect themselves and put a check on the power of patrician officials.

In the fourth and third centuries BCE, plebeians won more concessions by again seceding from the patrician state. After 367 BCE, one of the two consuls, the highest officials in the republic, had to be a plebian. After 287 BCE, the Plebian Assembly could pass laws for the republic that were introduced to it by the tribunes, and their laws applied to all Roman citizens. By the third century BCE, the Struggle of the Orders had effectively concluded, since it was now possible for plebeians to pass laws, serve as elected officials, and sit in the Senate, equals of the patricians under Roman law. The Struggle of the Orders did not bring equality to everyone in Rome, however. Rather, it gave well-off plebeians access to positions of power.

Romans were a very conservative people who greatly venerated the *mos maiorum* or "way of the ancestors." Their political system was a combination of written laws and political traditions and customs that had evolved since the birth of the Republic. By the third century BCE, this system was being administrated by a combination of public assemblies, elected officials, and the Senate.

The Roman Republic had three main public assemblies—the Plebian Assembly, the Tribal Assembly, and the Centuriate Assembly—that elected various officials every year. Only plebeians could attend the Plebian Assembly, organized into thirty-five regional tribes with a single vote each. It was this assembly that annually elected the ten tribunes, who possessed veto power and could present laws to the assembly for approval. The Tribal Assembly was likewise divided into thirty-five tribes based on place of residence, with each tribe casting one vote, but both plebeians and patricians could attend. Every year, the Tribal Assembly elected the Quaestors, treasurers in charge of public money.

Only the Centuriate Assembly could declare war, though the Senate remained in control of foreign policy. Both plebeians and patricians could attend this assembly, which was organized into blocs. The number of votes assigned to each bloc was based on the number of centuries—meaning a group of one hundred men in a military unit—that bloc could afford to equip with weapons and armor. Wealthier citizens had more votes because they could pay more to support the military. This assembly also elected military commanders, judges, and the censor, whose main task was to conduct the census to assess the wealth of Rome's citizens.

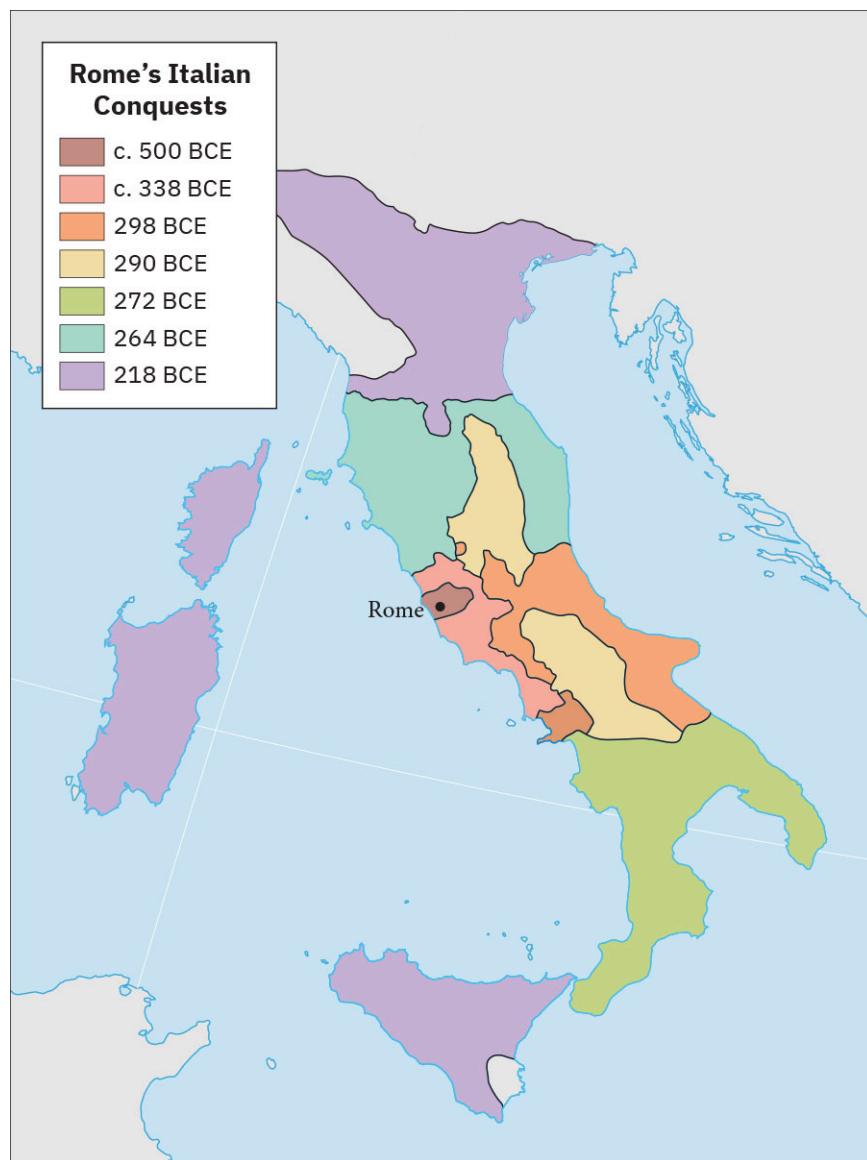
All elected officials joined the Roman Senate as members for life after their term in office. By far the most powerful institution in the Roman state, the Senate decided how public money was to be spent and advised elected officials on their course of action. Elected officials rarely ignored the Senate's advice since many of them would be senators themselves after leaving office.

The patron-client system was another important element in the Roman political system. A patron was usually a wealthy citizen who provided legal and financial assistance to his clients, who were normally less affluent citizens. In return, clients in the Roman assemblies voted as directed by their patrons. Patrons could inherit clients, and those with many wielded great influence in Rome.

### **The Expansion of the Roman Republic**

The early Romans did not plan on building an immense empire. They were surrounded by hostile city-states and tribes, and in the process of defeating them they made new enemies even as they expanded their network of allies. Thus they were constantly sending armies farther afield to crush these threats until Rome emerged in the second century BCE as the most powerful state in all the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Roman Senate developed certain policies in conducting wars that proved quite successful ([Figure 6.29](#)). One was to divide and conquer. The Romans always tried to defeat one enemy at a time and avoid waging war against a coalition. Thus they often attempted to turn their enemies against each other. Another tactic was to negotiate from strength. Even after suffering enormous defeats in battle, Rome would continue a war until it won a major engagement and reach a position from which to negotiate for peace with momentum on its side. Yet another successful strategy was to establish colonies in recently conquered lands to serve as the first line of defense if a region revolted against Rome. Well-constructed roads were also built to link Rome to these colonies, so armies could arrive quickly in a region that rebelled. Thanks to these networks across Italy, the language and culture of Rome eventually spread throughout its empire as well. Romans also transformed former enemies into loyal allies who could enjoy self-government as long as they honored Rome's other alliances and provided troops in times of war. Some even received Roman citizenship.



**FIGURE 6.29** Rome's Conquests in Italy. This map shows the expansion of Rome across Italy over time and its addition of new allies. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Roman conquest of Italy" by "Javierfv1212"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

#### The Roman Conquest of the Mediterranean

After conquering most of the Italian peninsula, Rome came to challenge the other major power in the region, Carthage. A series of wars ensued, called the Punic Wars, in which Rome and Carthage vied for dominance. During the First Punic War (264–241 BCE), Rome and Carthage battled for control of the island of Sicily. Although Carthage had the largest fleet at the time, the Romans won by dropping a hooked plank on the deck of an opposing ship and using it as a causeway to cross over, transforming a sea battle in which they were at a disadvantage into a land battle where they could dominate. After the destruction of its fleet, Carthage sued for peace, and the war ended with Rome annexing Sicily.

Carthage desired revenge. In the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), the Carthaginian general Hannibal marched his army, along with dozens of war elephants, from Hispania (modern-day Portugal and Spain), across southern Gaul, and then over the Alps into Italy. Hannibal hoped Rome's allies would abandon it and leave the city at his mercy. Most of Rome's Italian allies remained loyal, however, even after Hannibal repeatedly defeated Roman armies, and after his decisive victory at the Battle of Cannae. As Hannibal's army

was rampaging through Italy, Rome sent an army across the Mediterranean to Africa to attack Carthage, which summoned Hannibal back to defend his homeland ([Figure 6.30](#)).



**FIGURE 6.30** Hannibal's Invasion of Rome. This map shows the route Hannibal followed from Hispania over the Alps to attack Italy before finally returning to defend Carthage in the Second Punic War. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

At the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE, the Roman army defeated Hannibal, and the Roman commander Scipio earned the nickname “Africanus” ([Figure 6.31](#)). Carthage sued for peace and was stripped of all its overseas territory. Rome thus acquired Carthage’s lands in Hispania.



**FIGURE 6.31 Hannibal and Scipio.** This classical battle scene, painted by the Italian artist Bernardino Cesari in the early 1600s, is believed to represent Hannibal's defeat by the Roman commander Scipio in 202 BCE. (credit: "Hannibal and Scipio Africanus" by Bernardino Cesari/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

During the war, King Philip V of Macedon, concerned by the growth of Rome just across the Adriatic Sea from his own kingdom, made an alliance with Carthage. After Rome's victory against Carthage, Rome declared war against this new enemy. Philip's Macedonian troops won numerous victories over Roman armies, but in 196 BCE at the Battle of Cynoscephalae in northern Greece, Philip suffered a defeat and lacked the resources to continue. Consequently, he agreed to become an ally of Rome. Rome also liberated all regions in Greece formerly under Macedonian control.

Philip's defeat emboldened the king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus III, to advance his army into Greece, hoping to obtain the territory Philip had vacated. Rome feared that Antiochus's occupation of Greece posed a threat to Italy, just as Philip had. In 190 BCE, Roman armies smashed the forces of Antiochus III at the Battle of Magnesia in western Asia Minor. Antiochus then agreed to withdraw from Asia Minor.

Rome discovered in the second century BCE that there was no end to the threats from hostile powers. Perseus, the son of Philip V, renounced the alliance with Rome. When he made alliances with Balkan tribes that threatened to invade Italy, Roman armies invaded Macedon and defeated his army at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BCE. Rome then dissolved the monarchy in Macedon, which soon afterward became a Roman province, and Perseus died of starvation as a prisoner in Rome. When the Achaean League in the Peloponnese in Greece challenged Roman control of Greece and Macedon, Rome declared war and sacked Corinth, the League's largest city, in 146 BCE. In that same year, Roman armies also destroyed the city of Carthage in the Third Punic War, fearing the city's revival as an economic and military power. After 146 BCE, no power remained in the Mediterranean that could challenge Rome ([Figure 6.32](#)).



**FIGURE 6.32 The Expansion of Rome.** This map shows Rome's expansion in the second century BCE as it responded to perceived threats to its power from neighboring kingdoms. (credit: modification of work "Expansion of Rome, 2nd century BC" by The Department of History, United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### A Republic of Troubles

Rome's constant wars and conquests in the third and second centuries BCE created a host of social, economic, and political problems for the republic. The Roman people grew dissatisfied with the leadership of the Senate and the aristocratic elite, and they increasingly looked to strong military leaders to address the problems.

A number of factors contributed to these problems and transformations. From the foundation of the republic, most Roman citizens had owned and operated small family farms. Indeed, to serve as Roman soldiers, men had to own property. However, the Punic Wars had strained this traditional system. Roman soldiers were often away from home for long periods of time, leaving the women and children to maintain their holdings. When they ultimately did return, many found their property in another's hands. Others decided to sell their neglected farms and move their families to the expanding city of Rome, where they joined the growing ranks of the landless working class known as the **proletariat**. By the first century BCE, the population of the city of Rome may have exceeded one million.

The growth of the proletariat disrupted the Roman political system and invited large-scale corruption. The traditional patron-client system collapsed, since landless Romans didn't need the assistance of patrons to settle property disputes. Politicians therefore had to win the support of the urban masses with free food and entertainment, such as gladiatorial combats, and promises to create jobs through public works projects. Some even organized the poor into violent gangs to frighten their political rivals. These conditions resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the government of the republic.

To meet the growing demand for grain, wine, and olive oil to feed the urban population, large landowners bought land from poor Roman farmers and leased public land from the Roman state to create large plantations. These were very profitable because landowners could cheaply purchase enslaved people, who were plentiful. For example, after the defeat of Perseus of Macedon in 168 BCE, the Romans enslaved 150,000

people from Epirus as punishment since this kingdom had been allied with Perseus in the war. Pirates from Cilicia (in southeast Turkey) and from the Greek island of Crete also kidnapped people throughout the eastern Mediterranean and sold them to Roman traders. The island of Delos in the Aegean Sea became a massive human market in the second century BCE, where reportedly ten thousand people were bought and sold every day.

Terrible working conditions resulted in massive revolts by the enslaved, beginning in the second half of the second century BCE. The most famous was led by Spartacus, an enslaved man and gladiator from Thrace (modern Bulgaria). In 76 BCE, Spartacus and other enslaved gladiators rose against their owners and were quickly joined by hundreds of thousands of others (Figure 6.33). Spartacus's forces defeated two Roman armies before being crushed in 71 BCE. The Romans crucified thousands of the rebels along Italy's major roads to send a warning to enslaved people across Italy.



**FIGURE 6.33 Spartacus.** This is a detail of a larger-than-life marble statue by the nineteenth-century French sculptor Denis Foyatier, showing Spartacus breaking his chains. Now in the Louvre, the statue originally stood in Paris's famous Jardin des Tuileries on the Avenue of Great Men. (credit: "Spartacus, Denis Foyatier, 1830" by Gautier Poupeau/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In addition to the proletariat and enslaved people, new classes of wealthy Romans were also unhappy with the leadership of the traditional elite. The most profitable enterprise for these new Roman entrepreneurs was acting as bankers and public contractors, or publicans. The republic relied on publicans to construct public works such as aqueducts and theaters, as well as to operate government-owned mines and collect taxes. Roman governors often looked the other way when publicans squeezed additional tax revenues from the populations of the provinces.

This tumultuous and complicated environment led to the rise of two of the Late Republic's most intriguing political figures, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. The Gracchi, as they are collectively known, were plebian brothers whose families had been members of the elite for generations (Scipio Africanus was their grandfather). Tiberius, the elder brother, was concerned to see the large plantations being worked by enslaved foreigners rather than Roman farmers. He feared Rome's military was in danger since Rome relied on its land-owning farmers to equip themselves and serve in the army. In 133 BCE, as a tribune, he proposed a law to distribute public land to landless Romans. This measure struck a blow at the senatorial class, many of whom had accumulated huge swaths of land formerly owned by independent farmers who had gone to war. The assembly voted to approve the proposal, but many senators were horrified not only because they stood to lose land but also because, to win the vote, Tiberius had violated the traditions of the Republic. The Republic was ruled by the upper classes, and in courting popular opinion, the brothers had challenged elite control over high political institutions. Convinced he was assuming too much popular support and violating the traditions of Rome, the Senate declared a state of emergency and a group of senators beat Tiberius to death.

Ten years later Tiberius's brother Gaius, an astute politician as well, was also elected tribune. He won over poor Roman farmers with his proposal to establish new colonies to give them land. He also provided free grain for the poor and called for new public works projects to create jobs for the working class and lucrative contracts for wealthy publicans. His measures passed the Plebeian Assembly. Gaius was also elected tribune for two years straight, in violation of Roman political tradition. The final straw for the Senate was Gaius's proposal to establish a new court system that could try senators for corruption. In 121 BCE, the senators took action to subdue Gaius. He attempted to use force himself to resist the Senate, but in the end his supporters were massacred and he died, either by his own hand or at the hands of senators who had opposed his rise to power.

### The Rise of Client Armies

After the assassination of Gaius Gracchus, Rome's political class was divided into two warring factions. The **populares** were politicians who, like Gaius, sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society, whereas the **optimates** were the champions of the old order and the traditional leadership of the elite in the Roman Senate. In 112 BCE, Rome went to war against Jugurtha, the king of Numidia (modern Algeria/Tunisia) in North Africa, after he slaughtered Romans there who had supported his brother as king. Roman armies suffered defeat after defeat, and due to the decline in numbers of Roman farmers, Rome was having difficulty filling the ranks.

Gaius Marius was a plebeian and commoner who rose up the ranks of the Roman army and emerged as the leader of the *populares*. In 107 BCE, he ran for consul by denouncing the traditional Roman elites as weak and ineffective generals and promising to quickly end the war with Jugurtha. Such rhetoric was wildly popular with the common people who supported him. Once in power, Marius reformed the entrance requirements for the army to open it to proletariats, extending them the opportunity for war gains and even land for their service. These reforms led to the emergence of professional client armies, or armies composed of men more loyal to their commander than to the state.

By 105 BCE, Jugurtha was captured and then paraded through the Roman streets in chains. That same year, Rome faced new threats from the north in the form of Germanic tribes crossing the Rhine River and seeking to invade Italy. The Romans elected Marius consul for five consecutive terms (105–101 BCE) to lead his professional army against these enemies. After his victories, however, his enemies in the Senate wanted to embarrass him politically, so they prevented his proposal to give veterans land from becoming law. Marius was intimidated by these events and retired from politics.

In 90 BCE, Rome was again in turmoil when its Italian allies revolted after years of providing troops without having any voice in governing. During this “Social” War (90–88 BCE), the Romans under the leadership of Sulla, an *optimatus*, defeated the rebels. Shortly thereafter, in 88 BCE, Rome's provinces in Greece and Asia Minor also revolted, after years of heavy taxes and corrupt governors. The rebels massacred thousands of Roman citizens and rallied around Mithridates, the Hellenistic king of Pontus in north Asia Minor. *Optimates* in the Senate appointed Sulla to lead an army against Mithridates. Like Marius, Sulla had promised his recruits land in return for their service. *Populares* in the Plebeian Assembly, however, assigned command of the army to Marius, who had come out of retirement.

Sulla, then outside Rome with his client army, convinced his soldiers to choose personal loyalty to their general and his promise of land over their allegiance to Rome, and they marched on the city. Sulla's army hunted down and murdered many *populares*, and after establishing his own faction in charge of Rome, Sulla marched against Mithridates ([Figure 6.34](#)).



**FIGURE 6.34 Rome and King Mithridates.** As Rome expanded far beyond Italy, keeping its citizens in distant provinces safe could be a challenge. That was the case when parts of Greece and Asia Minor rebelled and rallied around King Mithridates of Pontus. This 1911 map of the eastern Mediterranean in 88 BCE shows Rome and its allies (red) and King Mithridates's kingdom and his allies (gray). (credit: modification of work "Asia Minor at the time of the First Mithridatical War" by The Historical Atlas by William River Shepherd, University of Texas Libraries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 87 BCE, Marius, who had been in hiding, rallied his old veterans and marched on Rome, marking the second time in two years that Roman soldiers had chosen personal loyalty to their general over obedience to Rome's laws. Marius's men now hunted down and murdered *optimates*. After winning his seventh term as consul in 87 BCE, Marius died in office from natural causes. Having forced Mithridates out of Greece and restored Roman rule there, Sulla led his army back to Rome in 83 BCE to overthrow the *populares* who were still in charge. While in Rome, he compelled the Senate to appoint him **dictator**. The office of dictator was an ancient republican office used only during emergencies because it granted absolute authority for a limited time to handle the emergency. When Sulla assumed the office, it hadn't been used since the Second Punic War.

During Sulla's time as dictator, he ordered the execution of his political enemies and reformed the laws. In 79 BCE, he relinquished the office and retired from public life, convinced he had saved the republic and preserved the power of the traditional elite in the Senate. Instead, however, within half a century the Roman Republic was dead.

## 6.5 The Age of Augustus

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the key events of the First and Second Triumvirate
- Analyze the personal charisma and leadership styles of Julius Caesar and Augustus
- Explain the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the first emperor

The social troubles that rocked Rome following the Punic Wars led to populists like the Gracchi and military leaders like Sulla, who marched on Rome in his attempt to restore order. Such events made it clear to many that Rome's republican institutions were no longer able to adapt to the transformed landscape produced by

decades of territorial expansion. These problems also presaged the political transformations Rome was to suffer through in the following decades. Between 60 BCE and 31 BCE, a string of powerful military leaders took the stage and bent the Republic to their will. In their struggle for power, Rome descended further into civil war and disorder. By 27 BCE, only one leader remained. Under his powerful hand, the Republic became a mere façade for the emergent Roman Empire.

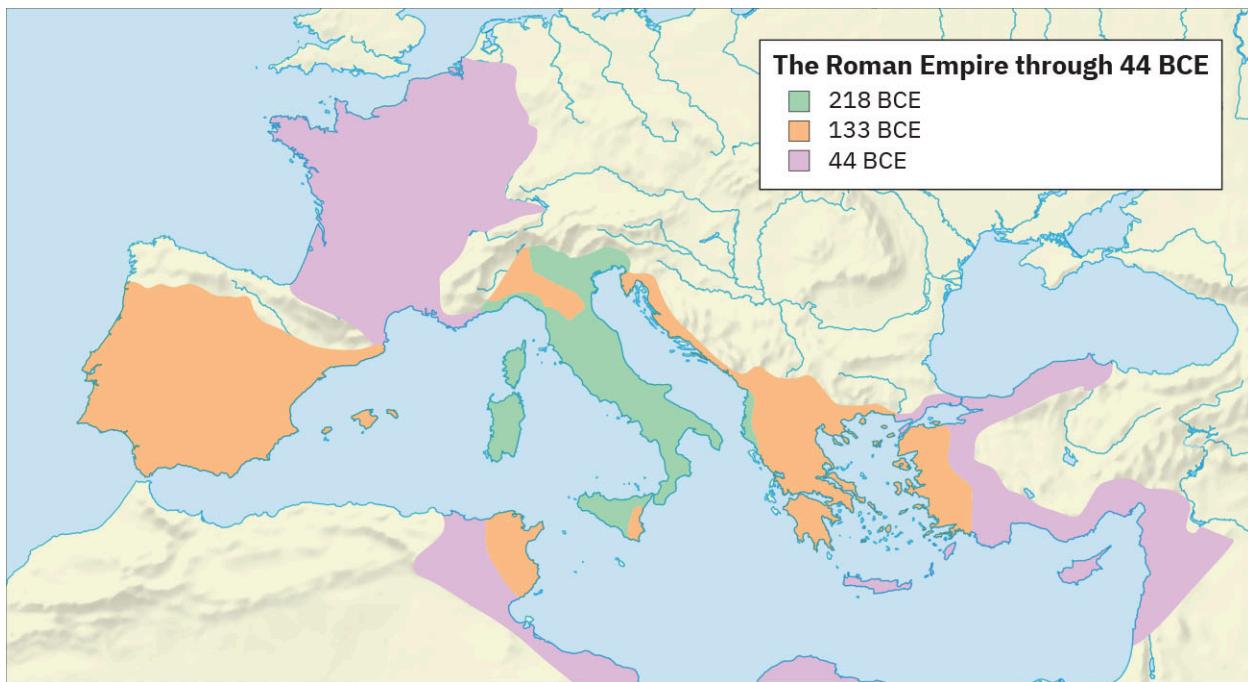
### The First Triumvirate

Sulla was unable to crush the *populares* completely since some discontented groups still opposed the Senate leadership. After his retirement, new military and political leaders sought power with the support of these groups. Three men in particular eventually assumed enormous dominance. One was Pompey Magnus, who became a popular general, and thousands of landless Romans joined his client army on the promise of land. In 67 BCE, Roman armies under Pompey's command suppressed pirates in the eastern Mediterranean who had threatened Rome's imported grain supplies. Pompey next conclusively defeated Mithridates of Pontus, who had again gone on the attack against Rome. By 63 BCE, Pompey had subdued Asia Minor, annexed Syria, destroyed the Seleucid kingdom, and occupied Jerusalem.

Another politician and military commander of this era was Crassus. He had served under Sulla, achieved popularity in Rome by fighting against Spartacus, and used the support of disaffected wealthy Romans such as publicans to amass a huge fortune. The third influential figure was Julius Caesar, whose original source of popularity was the fact that Marius was his uncle. When Sulla took control, Caesar lost much of his influence, but by 69 BCE he was making a political comeback and winning the support of *populares* in Rome.

The *optimates* in the Senate distrusted all these men and cooperated to block their influence in Roman politics. In response, in 60 BCE the three decided to join forces to advance their interests though a political alliance known to history as the First Triumvirate ("rule by three men"). Together its members had the wealth and influence to run the Roman Republic, but they were all very ambitious and each greatly distrusted the others. After serving as consul in 60 BCE, Julius Caesar took command of the Roman army in Gaul (modern France). Over the next ten years, his armies conquered all Gaul and launched attacks against German tribes across the Rhine, and on the island of Britain across the English Channel. The Roman people were awed by Caesar's military success, and Pompey and Crassus grew jealous of his popularity. In 54 BCE, Crassus invaded the Parthian Kingdom in central Asia, hoping for similar military and political triumphs. The invasion was a disaster, however, and Crassus was captured by the Parthians and executed.

The Roman Empire had now grown large, thanks to Pompey's and Caesar's conquests ([Figure 6.35](#)). After Crassus's death, Pompey decided to break with Caesar and support his old enemies the *optimates*. In 49 BCE, the *optimates* and Pompey controlled the Senate and demanded that Caesar disband his army in Gaul and return to Rome to stand trial on various charges. Instead, Caesar convinced his client army to march on Rome. In January of that year he famously led his troops across the Rubicon River, the traditional boundary between Italy and Gaul. Since Caesar knew this move would trigger war, as it was illegal to bring a private army into Rome proper, the phrase "crossing the Rubicon" continues to mean "passing the point of no return." In 48 BCE, Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus in northern Greece. Shortly after this, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered by the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy XIII, who hoped to win Caesar's favor.



**FIGURE 6.35** The Roman Empire through 44 BCE. Some of the areas marked in purple, like Gaul and Syria, were added to the Roman Empire by the victories of Julius Caesar and Pompey, respectively. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

To prosecute the war against Pompey, Caesar had himself appointed dictator in 48 BCE. Despite the tradition that dictatorship was to be temporary, Caesar's position was indefinite. In 46 BCE, he was appointed dictator for a term of ten years, and in 44 BCE his dictatorship was made permanent, or for life. These appointments and other efforts to accumulate power unnerved many Romans, who had a deep and abiding distrust of autocratic rulers that stretched all the way back to the period of Etruscan rule. Caesar had hoped to win over his former enemies by inviting them to serve again in the Senate and appointing them to positions in his government. However, these former *optimates* viewed him as a tyrant, and in 44 BCE two of them, Brutus and Cassius, led a conspiracy that resulted in his assassination.

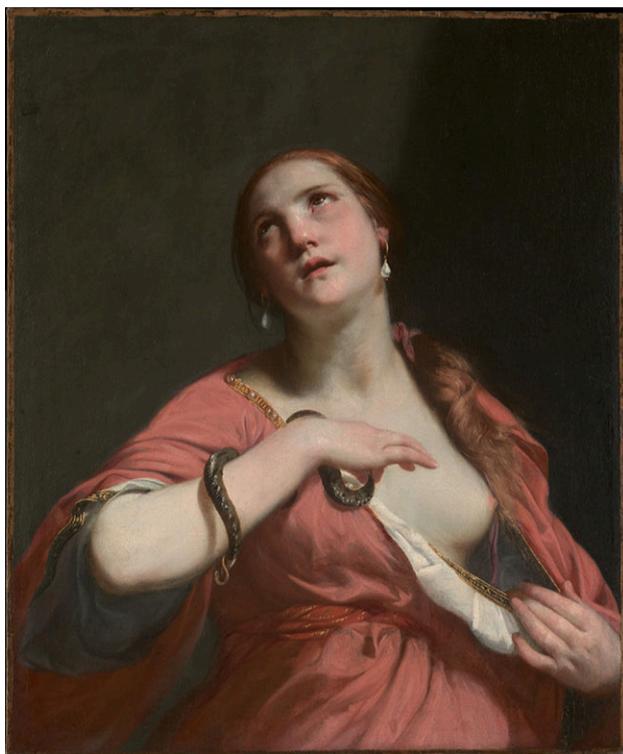
### **LINK TO LEARNING**

In Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, written in about 1599, Marc Antony gives one of the most famous speeches in English literature, based in part on the work of ancient Roman historians like Plutarch. In this [short clip of that speech from the 1970 film adaptation](https://openstax.org/l/77AntonySpeech) (<https://openstax.org/l/77AntonySpeech>) of the play, Charlton Heston plays the part of Marc Antony.

### **From Republic to Principate**

Octavian was only eighteen when Caesar was killed, but as Caesar's adopted son and heir he enjoyed the loyalty and political support of Caesar's military veterans. In 43 BCE, Octavian joined forces with two seasoned generals and politicians, Marc Antony and Lepidus, who both had been loyal supporters of Caesar. Marc Antony had been particularly close to him, as evidenced by the fact that Caesar left his legions under Antony's command in his will. Together these three shared the power of dictator in Rome in a political arrangement known as the Second Triumvirate. Unlike the First Triumvirate, which was effectively a conspiracy, the Second Triumvirate was formally recognized by the Senate. In 42 BCE, the army of the Second Triumvirate, under the command of Antony, defeated the forces of Julius Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece. The Second Triumvirate also ordered the execution of thousands of their political opponents.

After crushing the remnants of the *optimates*, the three men divided the Roman Empire between them: Octavian took Italy, Hispania, and Gaul; Lepidus Africa; and Antony Macedon, Greece, and Asia Minor. Soon they quarreled, however, and civil war erupted once again. Having greater support from Caesar's troops than his two opponents, in 36 BCE Octavian forced Lepidus into retirement. Antony countered by forming an alliance with Cleopatra VII, the Macedonian queen of Egypt, whom he married. Cleopatra was at that time co-ruler with Ptolemy XV, her son by Julius Caesar. With her financial support, Antony raised an army and fleet. In 31 BCE, in the naval Battle of Actium off the coast of northern Greece, Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. When he afterwards invaded Egypt, the pair died by suicide ([Figure 6.36](#)), and Octavian installed himself as the new Egyptian pharaoh after executing Ptolemy XV. Octavian used the wealth of his kingdom in Egypt to finance his restructuring of the Roman state.



**FIGURE 6.36 Cleopatra and the Asp.** This mid-seventeenth-century painting by the Italian artist Cuido Cagnacci was modeled on one of many ancient accounts about how Cleopatra died. In this version, she allows a poisonous Egyptian snake, an asp, to bite her. If the story is true, she may have been incorporating Egyptian symbolism in her final act, the asp being associated with the Egyptian god Re. (credit: “The Death of Cleopatra” by Purchase, Diane Burke Gift, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, by exchange, Friends of European Paintings Gifts, Gwynne Andrews Fund, Lila Acheson Wallace, Charles and Jessie Price, and Álvaro Saieh Bendek Gifts, Gift and Bequest of George Blumenthal and Fletcher Fund, by exchange, and Michel David-Weill Gift, 2016/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

One of Octavian's primary tasks after 31 BCE was to consolidate his position in order to preserve the peace and stability he had created. To avoid the fate of his adopted father, he successfully maintained a façade that the Roman Republic was alive and well, assuming titles and powers traditionally associated with it. After stacking the Senate with his supporters, in 27 BCE Octavian officially stepped down as dictator and “restored” the Republic.

The Senate immediately appointed him proconsul or governor of all Roman frontier provinces, which made him effectively the commander of the entire Roman army. The Senate also recognized him as the *Princeps Senatus*, or “leader of the Senate,” meaning the senator who enjoyed the most prestige and authority due to his service to the Republic. (The name of this political order, the **principate**, derives from this title.) Finally, the Senate voted to honor Octavian with the title of *Augustus* or “revered one,” used to describe gods and great

heroes of the past. As these honors and titles suggest, Octavian, traditionally referred to as Augustus after 27 BCE, had assumed enormous power. Despite his claim that he had restored the Republic, he had in fact inaugurated the Empire, with himself as emperor possessing almost godlike authority ([Figure 6.37](#)).



**FIGURE 6.37 A Temple in the Roman Empire.** The power of Augustus laid the foundation for the emergence of the imperial cult, in which Roman emperors were worshiped during their reigns (largely in the east) and assumed demigod status after their deaths. At temples like this one in Vienne, France, built during Augustus's lifetime, people demonstrated their loyalty to the Roman Empire through the rituals of this cult. (credit: "Temple of Augustus and Livia in Vienne" by O.Mustafin/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

After 27 BCE, Augustus held elected office as one of the two consuls, so he could sit in the Senate, oversee the law courts, and introduce legislation to the Centuriate Assembly, but the senators disliked this arrangement because it closed the opportunity for one of them to hold this prestigious office instead. In 23 BCE, therefore, the Senate gave Augustus several powers of a tribune. He could now veto any action taken by government officials, the Senate, and the assemblies, and he could introduce laws to the Plebeian Assembly. He could wield political and military power based on the traditional constitution of the Republic.

As emperor, Augustus successfully tackled problems that had plagued Rome for at least a century. He reduced the standing army from 600,000 to 200,000 and provided land for thousands of discharged veterans in recently conquered areas such as in Gaul and Hispania. He also created new taxes specifically to fund land and cash bonuses for future veterans. To encourage native peoples in the provinces to adopt Roman culture, he granted them citizenship after twenty-five years of service in the army. Indigenous cities built in the Roman style and adopting its political system were designated *municipia*, which gave all elected officials Roman citizenship. Through these “Romanization” policies, Augustus advanced Roman culture across the empire.

Augustus also finally brought order and prosperity to the city of Rome. He began a vast building program that provided jobs for poor Romans in the city and reportedly boasted that he had transformed Rome from a city of brick to a city of marble. To win over the masses, he also provided free grain (courtesy of his control of fertile Egypt) and free entertainment (gladiator combats and chariot races), making Rome famous for its bounty of “bread and circuses.” He also established a permanent police force in the city, the Praetorian Guard, which he recruited from the Roman army. He even created a fire department.

Augustus provided wealthy Romans outside the ranks of the Senate with new opportunities for advancement via key positions he reserved for them, such as prefect (commander/governor) of the Praetorian Guard and prefect of Egypt. These officials could join the Senate and become members of the senatorial elite. Augustus

thus created an effective new bureaucracy to govern the Roman Empire. Emperors who followed him continued these practices.

Augustus was keenly aware that the peace and prosperity he had created was largely built upon his image and power, and he feared what might happen when he died. As a result, the last few decades of his life were spent arranging for a political successor. This was a complicated matter since there was neither an official position of emperor nor a republican tradition of hereditary rule. Augustus had no son of his own, and his attempts to groom others to take control were repeatedly frustrated when his proposed successors died before him. Before his own death in 14 CE, Augustus arranged for his stepson Tiberius to receive from the Senate the power of a proconsul and a tribune. While not his first choice, Tiberius was an accomplished military leader with senatorial support.

Despite the smooth transition to Tiberius in 14 CE, problems with imperial inheritance remained. There were always risks that a hereditary ruler might prove incompetent. Tiberius himself became dangerously paranoid late in his reign. And he was succeeded by his grandnephew and adopted son Gaius, known as Caligula, who after a severe illness became insane. The prefect of the Praetorian Guard assassinated Caligula in 40 CE, and the guard replaced him with his uncle Claudius (40–54 CE). The Roman Senate agreed to this step only out of fear of the army. Claudius was an effective emperor, however, and under his reign the province of Britain (modern England and Wales) was added to the empire.

The government of Claudius's successor, his grandnephew Nero (54–68 CE), was excellent as long as Nero's mother Agrippina was the power behind the throne. After ordering her murder, however, Nero proved a vicious despot who used the Praetorian Guard to intimidate and execute his critics in the Senate. By the end of his reign, Roman armies in Gaul and Hispania were mutinying. The Senate declared him an enemy of state, and he died by suicide. During the year after his death, 68–69 CE, four different generals assumed power, thus earning it the name "Year of the Four Emperors."

Of the four, Vespasian (69–79 CE) survived the civil war and adopted the name Caesar and the title Augustus, even though he was not related to the family of Augustus or their descendants (the Julio-Claudian dynasty). On Nero's death, he had been in command of Roman armies suppressing the revolt of Judea (Roman armies eventually crushed this revolt and sacked Jerusalem in 70 CE). In his administration, Vespasian followed the precedents established by Augustus. For example, he ordered the construction of the Colosseum as a venue for the gladiator shows he provided as entertainment for the Roman masses, and he arranged for his two sons, Titus (79–81 CE) and Domitian (81–96 CE), to succeed him as emperor. Domitian, like Nero, was an insecure ruler and highly suspicious of the Senate; he employed the Praetorian Guard to arrest and execute his critics in that body. In 96 CE, his wife Domitia worked with members of the Senate to arrange for his assassination. Thus the flaws of the principate continued to haunt the Roman state long after its founder was gone.

## Key Terms

- dictator** a Roman Republican office with absolute authority over the state for a limited time during emergencies
- Hellenistic** a description of Greek history, language, and culture in the period 323–31 BCE
- Levant** a historical geographical term referring to an area in the eastern Mediterranean consisting roughly of modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria
- Linear A** a script developed by the Minoans but not yet deciphered by modern scholars
- Linear B** a Mycenaean script developed from Linear A that was used to write an early form of the Greek language
- mystery religions** religious cults that featured secret rituals (the so-called mysteries) and became popular in Hellenistic cities
- optimates** politicians who supported the old order and the traditional leadership of elites
- polis** a city-state in Ancient Greece
- populares** politicians who sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society
- principate** the political system established by Augustus Caesar after 27 BCE, which relied on Rome's traditional institutions and practices to legitimize a military dictatorship
- proletariat** the landless working class
- Struggle of the Orders** a political contest during the first centuries of the Republic in which Rome's commoners sought equal rights with elites
- Twelve Tables** the first set of written laws in Rome, from about 450 BCE

## Section Summary

### 6.1 Early Mediterranean Peoples

The Late Bronze Age witnessed the development of a common culture that linked the diverse states of the eastern Mediterranean from Asia to the Aegean region. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations emerged on the Aegean island of Crete and on mainland Greece. Minoan culture strongly influenced the art and culture of the Mycenaean civilization that followed it. Around 1200 BCE, these Late Bronze Age states collapsed in a wave of wars and migrations.

The Iron Age began with the development of technology to produce iron tools and weapons. During this transition, the Phoenicians built their civilization and invented the alphabet around 1100 BCE, establishing trade networks that linked the entire Mediterranean basin. The arrival of Phoenicians and especially Greeks in central Italy after 700 BCE contributed to the evolution of a new culture in Italy, the Etruscans. Their civilization made a deep impact on the later development of ancient Rome.

### 6.2 Ancient Greece

During the Archaic period that began the Greek renaissance, the city-state, or polis, developed its defining characteristic—self-government. Sparta was an oligarchy whose elite class of soldier-citizens alone participated in government, while Athens developed a democracy in which all adult male citizens participated. During this period, well-known features of Greek culture emerged such as the Greek script, the epic poems of Homer, and the Olympic Games.

The Classical period of Greece was marked by increased creativity and innovation, especially in Athens. The philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, the plays of Athenian dramatists, and the art of Greek sculptors, architects, and painters have inspired European thinkers and artists for centuries. These developments were partially a result of the success the Greek city-states achieved in their efforts to withstand two invasions by the Persian Empire. Following these wars, however, the Greek city-states turned on themselves. Sparta and its allies first fought the Athenian empire in the Peloponnesian War. Following this long and destructive conflict, Sparta and Thebes struggled for dominance in Greece, often with meddling from the Persian Empire. By 350 BCE, the many decades of fighting had left the Greek city-

states exhausted and vulnerable.

### **6.3 The Hellenistic Era**

By 338 BCE, King Philip II's empire of Macedon had become the ruling power in Greece. Philip's son Alexander the Great adopted his father's plan to unite the Greek city-states in a war of revenge against the Persian Empire. He defeated the Persians at the battles of Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (330 BCE), and after the assassination of the Persian king Darius III, he claimed the Persian throne for himself and advanced deep into central Asia and India. After his own soldiers mutinied, however, Alexander withdrew to Babylon, where he died in 323 BCE.

Alexander's generals and their children competed for control of his empire between 323 BCE and 272 BCE. The descendants of Alexander's generals, Antigonus, Seleucus, and Ptolemy, ruled over separate kingdoms in Macedon and Greece, western and central Asia, and Egypt, building new Greek cities for their Greek colonists. Alexandria in Egypt, the largest Hellenistic city, was a center of Greek science and literature, with its massive library and museum. Having lost sovereignty and self-government, many Greeks sought personal happiness through new philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism.

### **6.4 The Roman Republic**

The Romans overthrew the Etruscan dynasty at the close of the sixth century BCE and became a republic. The Struggle of the Orders ended with the plebeians winning equality with the patricians under the law, and by the third century BCE Roman citizens were electing officials and passing legislation through various assemblies under the watchful eye of the Senate. By the third century BCE, Rome had united the Italian peninsula by pledging to defend all new allies from their enemies. With these allies, Rome possessed the military resources to crush the other Mediterranean powers, Carthage and the Hellenistic monarchies of the eastern Mediterranean.

By the mid-second century BCE, Rome was the dominant power in the Mediterranean. But the wars had created a number of social problems tearing the Republic apart. These conflicts led to the rise of the Gracchi and later the partisan battle between the *populares* who opposed the governing elite and the *optimates* who supported it. By the end of the second century BCE, powerful military commanders and their client armies had assumed great authority in the republic. One of these commanders, General Sulla, twice marched on Rome to secure power for his political faction, the *optimates*. In 79 BCE, he retired, but his marches on Rome and his resurrection of the office of dictator laid the groundwork for the permanent overthrow of the Republic later.

### **6.5 The Age of Augustus**

United by their opposition to the *optimates*, in 60 BCE, Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar formed a political alliance, the First Triumvirate. After Crassus was killed in a failed conquest of the Parthians, Pompey joined his former enemies to oppose Caesar, whose success against the Gallic and Germanic tribes had made him popular. In 49 BCE, Caesar marched on Rome and initiated a civil war that ended in Pompey's defeat. Considering Caesar a tyrant, Pompey's former supporters assassinated him in 44 BCE.

Caesar's heir Octavian formed the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE with Lepidus and Marc Antony. The three defeated Caesar's assassins but afterwards quarreled. With the support of Caesar's veterans, Octavian emerged the sole inheritor of Roman power. In 27 BCE, he announced the restoration of the Republic but in form only, receiving the honorary title of Augustus. He set up a system of government, the principate, in which the traditions of republican government legitimized his position as de facto emperor. In power, Augustus provided land for veterans; secured jobs, free grain, and internal order for the urban proletariat; and offered wealthy Romans political and social advancement. However, he was not able to create an orderly system of succession, and the hereditary monarchs who succeeded him were often weak and ineffective.

## Assessments

### Review Questions

1. On what Aegean island did Minoan civilization develop?
  - a. Crete
  - b. Sardinia
  - c. Cyprus
  - d. Rhodes
2. The Etruscan culture arose in the central area of what modern country?
  - a. Greece
  - b. Anatolia
  - c. Spain
  - d. Italy
3. Who developed the first alphabet?
  - a. Egyptians
  - b. Akkadians
  - c. Greeks
  - d. Phoenicians
4. What is an example of the Greeks borrowing and adapting Phoenician cultural traits?
  - a. Greeks adopted the Phoenician *fasces* to symbolize power.
  - b. Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet.
  - c. Greeks adopted Phoenician deities to worship as gods.
  - d. Greeks adopted Phoenician warfare tactics in their athletic competitions.
5. What likely set Athens on the path toward democracy as early as the eighth century BCE?
  - a. the decline in literacy
  - b. the decline in population
  - c. its growing prosperity
  - d. a rising conflict with Phoenicia
6. What Athenian leader played an instrumental role in the founding of a democracy in Athens in the late sixth century BCE?
  - a. Socrates
  - b. Cleisthenes
  - c. Pericles
  - d. Alcibiades
7. Though unsuccessful, the Spartans inspired the Greeks with their defense against the Persian army of what mountain pass in 480 BCE?
  - a. Salamis
  - b. Mantinea
  - c. Thermopylae
  - d. Leuctra
8. What two Greek city-states led their respective alliances on either side in the Peloponnesian War?
  - a. Corinth and Thermopylae
  - b. Athens and Corcyra

- c. Thebes and Syracuse
  - d. Sparta and Athens
9. What Greek philosopher founded his own school at the Lyceum in Athens?
- a. Aristotle
  - b. Plato
  - c. Socrates
  - d. Democritus
10. At what battle did the forces of Philip of Macedon defeat the allied armies of Athens and Thebes in 338 BCE?
- a. Thermopylae
  - b. Chaeronea
  - c. Leuctra
  - d. Salamis
11. What land did Alexander the Great and the Macedonians conquer?
- a. Egypt
  - b. Italy
  - c. Sicily
  - d. Carthage
12. What Greek city was the largest in the Hellenistic period?
- a. Alexandria
  - b. Carthage
  - c. Athens
  - d. Sparta
13. Around what Persian sun god did a mystery religion form?
- a. Zeus
  - b. Isis
  - c. Baal
  - d. Mithras
14. In what branch of government was Rome's Council of Elders?
- a. Senate
  - b. praetors
  - c. censors
  - d. tribunes
15. What Roman officials could veto the actions of Roman law courts, the popular assemblies, and the Senate?
- a. consuls
  - b. praetors
  - c. censors
  - d. tribunes
16. The common people of the Roman Republic were known as:
- a. patricians
  - b. *optimates*
  - c. plebeians

- d. senators
- 17.** With what group did Rome fight a war for control of the Mediterranean?
- a. Latins
  - b. Carthaginians
  - c. Samnites
  - d. Etruscans
- 18.** What were private contractors called who constructed public works and collected taxes in Rome?
- a. publicans
  - b. equestrians
  - c. *populares*
  - d. proletariat
- 19.** Who were the members of the First Triumvirate?
- a. Lepidus, Caesar, Octavian
  - b. Caesar, Pompey, Crassus
  - c. Marc Antony, Octavian, Lepidus
  - d. Pompey, Lepidus, Marc Antony
- 20.** What event led to the establishment of the Second Triumvirate?
- a. the assassination of Caesar
  - b. the succession of Tiberius
  - c. the retirement of Lepidus
  - d. the suicide of Cleopatra
- 21.** Julius Caesar won popularity among the Roman people for his successful military campaigns in \_\_\_\_\_.  
 a. Pontus  
 b. Parthia  
 c. Carthage  
 d. Gaul
- 22.** Octavian's success in the civil war was due largely to support from \_\_\_\_\_.  
 a. Pompey's veteran soldiers  
 b. *optimates*  
 c. Julius Caesar's veteran soldiers  
 d. Julius Caesar's assassins
- 23.** Octavian's naval forces defeated those of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 a. Pharsalus  
 b. Actium  
 c. Philippi  
 d. Zama

### Check Your Understanding Questions

1. What were the three major Phoenician cities and where were they located?
2. What explains why iron replaced bronze as the metal of choice between 1200 and 900 BCE in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean?
3. What evidence suggests that Minoan civilization was conquered by the Mycenaeans?

4. What was the primary reason that Greeks established colonies overseas in the Archaic period?
5. What were Athens's and Sparta's expectations of their respective allies before and during the Peloponnesian War?
6. Under Athens's democracy in the Classical period, how were Athenian citizens (free adult males) able to participate in the government?
7. In what ways did the efforts of Philip II ultimately lead to the success of Alexander the Great?
8. What were the boundaries of Alexander the Great's empire by the time of his death in 323 BCE?
9. Why was there a period of wars following Alexander's death in 323 BCE?
10. Who were the tribunes and what were their main powers as elected officials?
11. How did the plebeians win concessions from the ruling patricians during the Struggle of the Orders?
12. During the Punic Wars and the wars fought by Rome thereafter, why did Rome's farmers come under stress?
13. What did Augustus actually accomplish with his efforts to "restore" the Republic?
14. Why did some Roman senators assassinate Julius Caesar?
15. During the wars between the members of the Second Triumvirate, what advantage did Octavian enjoy over his rivals?

### Application and Reflection Questions

1. Given that iron, when properly manufactured, was far superior in strength to bronze, why did it take a civilizational collapse for metalworkers to experiment with it? Does the absence of tin seem sufficient to explain the shift to iron? Why or why not?
2. Historians and archaeologists have long recognized connections between different Mediterranean cultures like the Greeks, Etruscans, and Phoenicians. Why do you think these different cultures borrowed from each other? What might encourage one culture to adopt elements from another?
3. People often associate advancements in technology with human progress. Why did the development of iron technology and the alphabet occur at a time of societal collapse at the end of the Late Bronze Age?
4. How does the development of the Athenian political system over the course of the Archaic period compare to that of Sparta? In which of these cities would you have preferred to live? Why?
5. Alliances led the Greeks to victory during the Persian Wars but also contributed to the Peloponnesian War between the Greek city-states. What does this suggest about the role of alliances in the Greek world? Would Greece have been better off without them? Why or why not?
6. Many influential philosophies and celebrated works of art emerged from the Greek world in the fifth century BCE, when the Greeks were busy fighting Persia and each other. What does this suggest about the connection between conflict and the arts?
7. Alexander's march into India has been celebrated as a great achievement because of its boldness and as a terrible mistake because it led his troops to mutiny, and he died not long after. What do you think of this move? How might things have played out differently if Alexander hadn't tried to extend his empire in this way?
8. In the aftermath of Alexander's conquest and death, much of the former Persian Empire remained in the hands of Greek and Macedonian rulers. Why do you think this happened? Why didn't local rulers and dynasties reestablish their rule over these lands?

9. The Romans believed they had overthrown Etruscan kings in the sixth century BCE to establish their republic. What does this feature of their own history suggest about their reaction to the stresses on the Republic in the second century BCE and to the rise of military leaders like Sulla?
10. Given the problems experienced by small farmers and the lower classes in Rome as a result of the wars of expansion, why did Rome continue the wars? Why didn't populist leaders like the Gracchi suggest an end to them?
11. How did Sulla's march on Rome in 88 BCE set the stage for the civil wars of the First and Second Triumvirates?
12. To what extent were Octavian's political and military successes due to the achievements of his adoptive father Julius Caesar? Explain your answer.
13. What was the primary cause of the fall of the Roman Republic? Could modern republics such as the United States collapse for the same reason? Why or why not?



**FIGURE 7.1 The Colosseum in Rome.** The largest standing amphitheater in the world, the Colosseum is a perpetual reminder of the power and culture of the Roman Empire at its height. (credit: modification of work "Colosseum - Rome - Italy" by Sam Valadi/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 7.1** The Daily Life of a Roman Family
- 7.2** Slavery in the Roman Empire
- 7.3** The Roman Economy: Trade, Taxes, and Conquest
- 7.4** Religion in the Roman Empire
- 7.5** The Regions of Rome

**INTRODUCTION** The ancient city of Rome gave its name to an empire that stretched from Britain to the Arabian Peninsula. While political life was centered in the city of Rome—the seat of the Senate and of the emperor—“Rome” came to represent a much broader geographic expanse. From the second century BCE to the third century CE, Rome’s magnitude was reflected in the diversity of experiences of all those who lived within the empire’s borders, not just those who lived in the shadow of the great Colosseum ([Figure 7.1](#)).

Rome was a patriarchal society that achieved success through military dominance, patriotism, and respect for authority. Romans prided themselves on the status and reputation they achieved through military or political service, as well as through their claims of noble ancestors. This arrangement largely benefited upper-class Roman men, while others struggled to navigate the system and were subject to domination by the elite. Roman women and enslaved people were held to restrictive cultural standards for their behavior, though many were able to overcome these and hold real influence in Roman society. The complexity of daily life in Rome is key to understanding the way the empire functioned and flourished at its height.



**FIGURE 7.2** Locator Map: Experiencing the Roman Empire. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

## 7.1 The Daily Life of a Roman Family

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe a typical Roman home
- Discuss gender roles in Roman families
- Analyze the influence of social class on daily life in Rome

The family was an important element of life during the Roman Empire. The male patriarch was the head of the household, which consisted of the immediate and extended family, as well as adjacent groups, including dependents and enslaved people. While men held ultimate authority in the family, women were also expected to maintain family order, with responsibilities in and often outside the household. Pride in a family's prosperity was a crucial Roman value, which motivated both the honoring of ancestors and the securing of a future for descendants. Romans looked to their ancestors for examples of correct moral behavior and worked diligently for the family's continuing stability.

### The Structure of Roman Families

Family life was oriented around the **paterfamilias**, the male head of the household. According to tradition, this patriarch had the power of life and death over all his dependents, an authority referred to as *patria potestas* (“paternal power”). Members of the extended family subject to this authority included the patriarch’s wife, their children, anyone descended through the family’s male line, and all enslaved people belonging to the household. With his authority, the patriarch was both the judge and rule maker of the family, with the power to sell his dependents into bondage or destroy their property ([Figure 7.3](#)).



**FIGURE 7.3** A Roman *Paterfamilias*. This painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Ferdinand Bol depicts the Roman general Manlius, who had his own son executed for disobedience. Though produced in a much later period, Bol's work illuminates some traditional Roman values: The patriarch's power is indicated in Manlius's outward indifference as he looks away from his son's death, and his loyalty to Rome is demonstrated by his looking toward his troops instead. (credit: “Consul Titus Manlius Torquatus Orders the Beheading of his Son” by Rijksmuseum/Wikimedia Commons, CCO 1.0)

Ultimately, however, the goal of the *paterfamilias* was to promote his family's welfare. His power worked through consensus and deliberation with the other family members. As the primary provider, he expected respect from his family but could also reward good behavior. In this way, an entire family might benefit by working together to further their social or financial prosperity.

The securing of a Roman family's reputation began with the education and training of children. In early Rome, children were educated in the home; later, grammar schools enrolled boys and girls from wealthy families until around the age of twelve. Education usually centered on reading and writing Latin and Greek as well as arithmetic. Around age fifteen, boys donned the *toga virilis* (“toga of manhood”), a plain white toga representing their enrollment as citizens and entrance into manhood. Roman citizenship was highly coveted and was bestowed either at birth to children of citizens or by special decree. Sons of prominent families could

then go on to a civil or military career. After a son inherited his father's property (as well as his debts), it became his responsibility to maintain the family's reputation and prosperity.

By contrast, girls commonly married at a young age, usually between fourteen and eighteen years old, and often to a much older man. Younger girls were viewed as more sexually pure and therefore easier to control. In the most common form of marriage, a wife brought a dowry that became her husband's property. Thus, a woman from a wealthy background with a large dowry had some sway in making marriage arrangements. She also had the protection a powerful family could offer should her husband prove to be less than ideal. Lower-class women were more reliant on their husband's status to enhance their own. In any case, marriage represented a woman's coming under the legal control of her husband's household.

The vast legal and age imbalance between husband and wife was reflected in the cultural restrictions on Roman women. Yet, though a Roman man's work was an important contributor to the family's success, women devoted much of their efforts to the same goal. Women were responsible for the management of the household, which included ensuring provisions for the family, overseeing any enslaved people and other dependents, and looking after the children. Spinning wool was viewed as the activity of an ideal Roman woman, and many wives were expected to occupy themselves with this work. Despite these expectations, there is evidence that many women, particularly non-elite women, held professions outside the home, including in medicine, trade, and agriculture.

### A Day in the Life of a Roman Family

Romans lived and worked in a variety of contexts across the empire. Most of our evidence of the practical elements of their daily lives comes from archaeological evidence uncovered at Pompeii. The remains of this once-bustling city (which was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 79 CE) show us the occupations, architecture, and lifestyles of different social classes. In addition, though most of what we know is about wealthy estates, life in the countryside outside the city constituted another important part of imperial Roman society.

Daily life was dominated by aristocratic men who enjoyed careers in politics, law, and the military. Wealthy Romans were part of two property-based classes: the senatorial and the equestrian ranks. Only those above a certain property threshold were allowed to be members of these upper classes, and they occupied privileged social positions with access to prestigious careers denied to the lower classes. An elite Roman man's day began at home in the ***domus***, a traditional single-family house that served both practical and symbolic roles (the term *domus* refers not only to the physical residence but also to the family). It was a place of display in which a family could take pride and where the father would conduct official business. Every morning, in the role of **patron**, he would receive a number of **clients** in his home who sought his aid in exchange for loyalty. The late morning was usually consumed by responsibilities outside the home, including business and political meetings. During the afternoon, wealthy Roman men spent their time socializing and pursuing leisure activities, such as attending public entertainment performances or visiting the bathhouse.

### BEYOND THE BOOK

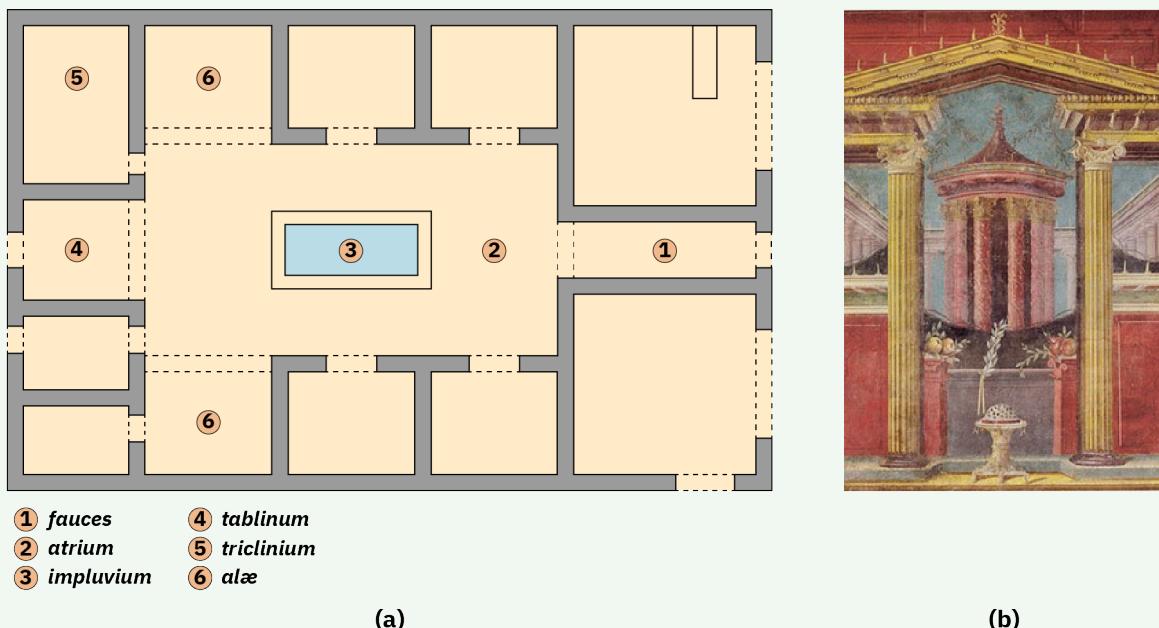
#### The Plan of a Typical Roman Household

The most common type of Roman house was the *atrium* house, which could include two or more stories. Based mostly on evidence from Pompeii, we know that each house contained several key features. The *fauces* or *vestibulum* was the entryway. The *atrium* was the open-air reception hall where the patron of the house met with his clients; this area was often decorated with a colorful mosaic on the floor. The *tablinum* was a small room separated from the atrium by a wooden screen or curtain and contained family records and portraits.

The partial roof over the atrium, or the *compluvium*, was slanted to drain rainwater into the shallow *impluvium* pool. This water was collected in an underground cistern for use by the family, or, if left in the pool, it helped to

ventilate other rooms in the house. The *triclinium* (“three couches”) was the dining room, where members of the household ate in the Roman fashion, reclining around a small table. *Alæ* were the smaller recesses in a house that stored masks or busts of a family’s ancestors.

Fountains, peristyle (columned) courtyards, gardens, and other lavish features were located across the atrium from the doorway, to make sure guests could see them upon arrival. This floor plan emphasized the power relationship between a patron and his clients, as well as the authority and prestige of the *paterfamilias* (Figure 7.4).



**FIGURE 7.4 A Typical Roman Home.** A typical Roman home was oriented around an atrium, or open-air reception hall (a). There were four styles of wall paintings or frescoes in Roman homes. The “architectural” style (b) was meant to serve as a window onto an imaginary public scene, framed by columns. This fresco is from the villa in Naples that is believed to have belonged to Publio Fannio Sinistore and was buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. (credit a: attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license; credit b: modification of work “Fresco from the villa of Publio Fannio Sinistore in Boscoreale” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1903/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What are the key features of an atrium house and what do they tell us about daily life in Rome?
- How does the architecture of a typical Roman home reflect important aspects of Roman culture and society?

### LINK TO LEARNING

Explore the [ruins of the city of Pompeii](https://openstax.org/l/77Pompeii) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Pompeii>) to learn more. Remarkably preserved after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, the city is our finest source of information about daily life in a Roman city.

The wealthiest Romans had both houses in the city and villas in the countryside. Suburban villas were located just outside a city’s walls, and villas located in the countryside typically originated as agricultural estates. Large estates, known as *latifundia*, were agricultural operations in which enslaved people worked the land for the owner’s profit. In the imperial period, these estates came to contain villa residences that functioned more as places of recreation and a means to display wealth. Many elements of luxury displayed in townhouses also appear in villas, such as gardens, fountains, and mosaics. Hadrian’s villa outside Rome is an opulent example

of luxury at the very top of the Roman social order, incorporating elements of this emperor's travels in the second century CE ([Figure 7.5](#)).



**FIGURE 7.5 How Wealthy Romans Lived.** The architecture of Hadrian's second-century villa outside Rome recalls elements of the emperor's travels, including a Greek Temple of Venus, a small lake resembling an Egyptian canal, and numerous statues. (credit: "Hadrian villa ruins" by "Entoaggie09"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Life for the lower classes was not as luxurious or as stable. Clients formed a largely educated class in Rome who supported themselves through gifts from their patrons and meager employment. Though Romans typically had a six-hour workday, the urban poor relied more on occasional work or odd jobs. In large cities, many lived in *insulae*, apartment complexes of three to four levels that occupied a rectangular city block. *Insulae* had a reputation for being overcrowded and having limited facilities, however.

### What Family Meant in Rome

The power of the *paterfamilias* was mirrored in the power of Roman politicians and magistrates. Romans' personal respect for authority, dispensing of justice, and honoring of the family influenced the way they conducted themselves publicly. The desire to further the family's prosperity also extended into other facets of daily life. The family as a unit worked to achieve status and prosperity, and everyone had a role to play.

Politics was certainly an extension of Roman family principles. Holding a coveted and powerful political position, Roman senators were referred to as "conscript fathers" (*patres conscripti*), and their authority, dispensed through legislation and legal judgments, was much like that of a father over his household. Laws about marriage and childbirth made once-private matters a concern of the Roman state. For example, the emperor Augustus made adultery a public crime, setting out to promote childbirth in Rome and protect legal marriages. Yet, like the expectations for women in Roman society, this legislation disproportionately punished women, who could be exiled for adultery as a result.

**DUELING VOICES****Augustus's Laws Governing the Family**

During his reign, which lasted from 27 BCE to 14 CE, the emperor Augustus enacted numerous moral laws to encourage proper Roman marriage and behavior, including those concerning adultery, discussed in the following accounts by the Roman historian Tacitus and by Suetonius, the biographer of the early Roman emperors. The question was, if Augustus could not ensure good behavior in his own family as *paterfamilias*, how could he expect Roman citizens to follow his strict moral guidelines? As you read, note the tone of each and what each author says about public perceptions of Augustus's treatment of the women in his family.

Fortune, staunch to the deified Augustus in his public life, was less propitious to him at home, owing to the incontinence of his daughter and granddaughter, whom he expelled from the capital while penalizing their adulterers by death or banishment. For designating as he did the besetting sin of both the sexes by the harsh appellations of sacrilege and treason, he overstepped both the mild penalties of an earlier day and those of his own laws [the laws concerning adultery passed in 18/17 BCE].

—Tacitus, *Annals*

But at the height of his happiness and his confidence in his family and its training, Fortune proved fickle. He found the two Julias, his daughter and granddaughter, guilty of every form of vice, and banished them. . . . After [his daughter] was banished, he denied her the use of wine and every form of luxury, and would not allow any man, bond or free, to come near her without his permission, and then not without being informed of his stature, complexion, and even of any marks or scars upon his body. It was not until five years later that he moved her from the island to the mainland and treated her with somewhat less rigor. But he could not by any means be prevailed on to recall her altogether, and when the Roman people several times interceded for her and urgently pressed their suit, he in open assembly called upon the gods to curse them with like daughters and like wives.

—Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*

- Why do you think Augustus went beyond the penalties of his own laws to punish adultery within his own family?
- What do his actions say about the cultural values of Roman men?

Emperors were especially interested in maintaining their family's stability, for the practical purpose of ensuring dynastic continuity but also to garner positive public opinion. Rulers took special interest in finding an heir and exercising tight control over family matters. Augustus worked diligently to name an heir to rule after him, appointing several before being succeeded by his stepson Tiberius. Having an unstable household could mean a quick end to an emperor's reign if the situation became too tumultuous. In the later Roman Empire, when there was significant turnover of rulers, emperors named an heir soon after coming to power.

Similarly, public figures who embodied Roman family values were looked on favorably. Cornelia, a noblewoman in the second century BCE, is remembered for devoting herself to motherhood above all else. She gave birth to twelve children, and after her husband died she refused to remarry and focused instead on raising her surviving children. Her sons Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus led influential political careers before they were both assassinated. Cornelia is reported to have said of her sons, in conversation with another woman displaying her jewelry, "These are my jewels." Cornelia was noted for embodying feminine virtues in her motherly devotion and for her indirect impact on Roman politics.

By contrast, public figures who disregarded Roman family values were infamous. For example, Agrippina the Younger, great-granddaughter of the emperor Augustus, was viewed as a power-hungry woman in her time.

She married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, who was twenty-five years older than she. She then convinced him to adopt her son Nero from a previous marriage, an act that eventually implicated Agrippina in Claudius's murder in 54 CE and led to Nero's reign as emperor. Instead of holding more power as empress after Nero's ascension, Agrippina saw her relationship with her son flounder. Nero plotted to have her killed, first in a sinking boat, from which she escaped, and then by an assassin. The violence and treachery of the imperial family especially tarred Agrippina as a disreputable woman.

Finally, respect for ancestral custom and precedents known as *mos maiorum* ("the way of the ancestors") and for deceased members of the family were epitomized in funeral parades. In these public rituals, the deceased was carried from home to the city center, or *forum*, where the body was laid out. A eulogy was delivered by the heir, surrounded by others wearing ancestor masks that represented deceased family members. The procession linked the living family to the past, and the route through the city gave the ritual public and communal significance (Figure 7.6).



**FIGURE 7.6 A Roman Funeral.** This relief from the first century BCE depicts a Roman funeral procession. The deceased's high status is clear from the presence of soldiers, musicians, and politicians heading toward the sanctuary on the right, where an animal sacrifice is prepared. (credit: modification of work "Etruscan-Roman cinerary urn from Volaterrae circa 100 BC" by "TimeTravelRome"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

## 7.2 Slavery in the Roman Empire

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the legal and social structures that supported slavery in the Roman Empire
- Discuss the different experiences of enslaved men, women, and children
- Explain the importance of gladiators in Roman culture

Slavery was a fundamental part of Roman daily life. Enslaved people came from many parts of the large empire and had been enslaved in many different ways. They worked in a variety of contexts and were subject to their master's whims and punishment. Many were trained as **gladiators**, professional fighters paid to battle before an audience, sometimes to the death, but others worked in the cities and countryside in a variety of roles. The

freeing of enslaved people was a common practice, and freed people were important to the continued functioning of the Roman economy and political order.

### The Structures of Roman Slavery

Enslavement was the result of a variety of circumstances in the Roman world; there was no single mechanism that sustained the system. During the Roman Republic, it appears that most enslaved people were former soldiers captured in war. Slave dealers purchased these captives from defeated armies and brought them to various slave markets throughout the empire for sale to buyers in need of slave labor. Following the civil wars during the reign of Augustus, however, prisoners of war were fewer, and the system relied more heavily on other sources.

Some historians believe natural reproduction accounted for a large number of new enslaved people; the children of enslaved women were considered the property of the household in which the mother lived. Enslavement could also be the result of kidnapping and piracy. Some enslaved people were sold into bondage through *patria potestas*. Others had been abandoned as infants by families that did not want to or could not care for a child; these children often ended up in the hands of slave traders. Finally, while involuntary debt bondage had been outlawed since the time of the early Roman Republic, people could sell themselves into slavery to pay off debts. Slave markets, often kept supplied by piracy, were an important element of the system, and the one at Delos (which was most active in the second and early first century BCE) was the largest; upwards of ten thousand enslaved people might be sold in a single day.

The freeing of enslaved people through **manumission** was an expected practice in Rome, though the rate at which it occurred is difficult to assess. It usually happened when a person was around eighteen years old, but not simply in return for good behavior. Some of the enslaved were allowed to keep part of their earnings in order to purchase their freedom. And enslaved women could also be freed after producing a certain number of children. Manumission was made official before a Roman magistrate or in a slaveholder's will. It was often accompanied by a sum of money so that the newly freed could more assuredly begin their lives as freed persons. The debt of obligation was clear, however, since a freed person became the client of their former master.

Freed people formed a substantial class in Rome, but with a fair number of restrictions on their conduct. They were often beholden to their former master's influence and prevented from holding most important political or religious positions. Many did go on to become independently wealthy professionals in trade, agriculture, and education, and some were even slaveholders themselves. A few occupied prominent positions in powerful households. They were denied the full rights of Roman citizenship, however, though their children were considered full citizens.

Enslaved people were subject to brutal treatment, and a series of revolts illustrates their efforts to seek freedom. In the late second century BCE, rebellions in Sicily inspired uprisings elsewhere in the Mediterranean, notably in the Greek mines. A few decades later, Spartacus instigated the most famous slave revolt. Originally from Thrace or Greece, Spartacus was enslaved after being captured in battle and was trained as a gladiator in Capua in central Italy. In 73 BCE, he planned to escape, along with a substantial number of other enslaved people. Though their original plan may have been only to get away, they took up weapons and fought for their freedom. Spartacus eventually raised an army of more than seventy thousand and defeated a number of armies sent by the Roman Senate. Finally, the Roman general Crassus defeated Spartacus in battle, putting an end to the revolt in 71 BCE ([Figure 7.7](#)). However, Spartacus's rebellion was the tipping point. Following these violent conflicts, there seems to have been some effort by Rome to avoid future revolts, as seen in the laws of Augustus that controlled the practice of manumission.



**FIGURE 7.7** Spartacus's Revolt. Spartacus's revolt began in 73 BCE, in Capua in central Italy. As more enslaved people were recruited to the cause, Rome sent armies to subdue them. The rebels were besieged on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius but were able to outwit their opponents, defeat the initial Roman forces sent against them, and eventually expand their raiding territory farther south. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

### Life under Slavery

Enslaved people led lives that varied across the empire, depending on their age and gender and whether they lived in rural or urban areas. They worked as unskilled laborers, artisans, and assistants to merchants and shopkeepers. Many were trained as teachers, doctors, musicians, and actors. Others helped build public works such as bridges and roads and even served as imperial administrators. In the city, and in the household especially, they had more advantages and avoided the brutal physical labor demanded in mines, quarries, and *latifundia* across the empire. There, more than one hundred enslaved persons might labor, their harsh life evidenced by their poor clothing, cruel treatment, and inability to raise funds to buy their freedom.

Still, enslaved people in any context were a moment away from punishment by slaveholders, who were perpetually concerned with avoiding conspiracy and rebellion. A culture of uncertainty, coercion, and submission was the result of the constant threat of potential violence. Enslaved people could be whipped, beaten, or tortured and were often sexually abused. In Petronius's *Satyricon*, a novel written in the first century CE, the freed Trimalchio discusses the services he offered while enslaved: "Still, I was my master's favorite for fourteen years. No disgrace in obeying your master's orders. Well, I used to amuse my mistress too. You know what I mean; I say no more, I am not a conceited man." Enslaved people who ran away and were caught could be branded or forced to wear a collar with their owner's name on it.

Though the enslaved were denied the official rights of marriage, they could form families and have children, which often occurred in urban settings. The slaveholder could always manipulate the relationships between enslaved people for personal ends. Enslaved children were put to work, perhaps with simple duties in the house, and over time enslaved people might be promoted to different roles within a household.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Slavery in the Ancient Novel

Roman novels, which would have been read primarily by the upper classes, give us a glimpse of the lives of

enslaved people during the empire. *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, written in the mid-second century CE, follows the adventures of a wanderer named Lucius after he is magically transformed into a donkey; the first passage here is Lucius's observation of enslaved people. In the second passage, an excerpt from Petronius's *Satyricon*, the formerly enslaved Trimalchio mistreats his own enslaved people during a lavish dinner party.

The pale welts from chains crossed every patch of their skin like brush-strokes. Their flogged-up backs under sparse patchwork were no better covered than stretches of ground that shade falls on. Some of them had thrown on an exiguous vestiture, which extended only to the loins, yet all were calm so that their scraps of tatters kept no secrets. Their foreheads were inscribed with brands, their hair half-shaved, their ankles braceletdd with fetters, their pallor hideous, their eyelids gnawed by gloomy smoke of the murky fumes, which left them less able to access light at all. Like boxers who fight bathed in fine dust, these men were filthy white with floury ash.

—Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*

As he was speaking, a boy dropped a cup. Trimalchio looked at him and said, “Quick, off with your own head, since you are so stupid.” The boy’s lip fell and he began to petition. “Why do you ask me?” said Trimalchio, “as if I should be hard on you! I advise you to prevail upon yourself not to be stupid.” In the end we induced him to let the boy off. As soon as he was forgiven the boy ran round the table.

—Petronius, *Satyricon*

- What do you learn from these fictional accounts about the treatment of enslaved people and Roman attitudes toward them?
- What do these passages reveal about the conduct of slaveholders?

## Gladiators

Gladiatorial combat was an important element of Roman culture and a prominent part of public entertainments. Matches originated in central Italy in the third century BCE and were originally part of funeral games, spectacles that honored the deceased. The first games in the city of Rome occurred in 264 BCE, with three pairs of gladiators fighting. In the centuries that followed, the number of games increased until, under the emperors, they included hundreds of gladiators.

Gladiators came from a variety of backgrounds, and though some were volunteers, enslaved people forced into the role formed a substantial number. A team of gladiators was called a *familia* and was trained in a gladiatorial school by a *lanista*, the manager of the group. The *lanista* and other trainers assessed new recruits and picked the weapons they would use in combat. Daily training was strenuous, but gladiators were expected to fight only a handful of times over a year.

Matches usually consisted of differently armed gladiators fighting one another. In one common type of match, gladiators armed with swords fought a *retiarius*, who was armed with a net and a trident (Figure 7.8). Gladiators did not usually fight to the death, but the crowd played a major role in the fights, often encouraging gladiators to kill their wounded opponents. The emperor, if in attendance, could also influence the outcome by giving a “thumb up” or “thumb down,” meaning allow the opponent to live or die, respectively. The most talented and successful gladiators could acquire a devoted following of fans as well as earn money for fighting.



**FIGURE 7.8** Gladiators in the Arena. This third-century CE mosaic tells the story of a gladiatorial match in ancient Rome. The fight begins in the bottom panel with the *retiarius* Kaliendio throwing his net over Astyanax and thrusting his trident at him, but in the upper panel Kaliendio has been wounded, his trident has missed, and he is surrendering by raising his knife. The caption “Astyanax vicit” at the top indicates that Astyanax has won, while “Kaliendio Ø” tells us that Kaliendio was killed. The two toga-clad figures are *lanistae* (plural of *lanista*). (credit: “Astyanax vs Kalendio mosaic” by James Grout/Encyclopaedia Romana/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### LINK TO LEARNING

Explore a newly discovered [gladiatorial training camp](https://openstax.org/l/77Gladiator) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Gladiator>) in Austria.

There is also evidence that both senators and women participated in gladiatorial combat, possibly to ceremonially reenact scenes from myth. A law enacted by the emperor Tiberius in 19 CE declared that no senator or person of equestrian rank could take part in the fighting, suggesting that their participation had been an ongoing issue. That women took part is clear in a stone relief from the first or second century CE, showing two female gladiators fighting (Figure 7.9).



**FIGURE 7.9 Female Gladiators.** The two women gladiators facing off in this stone relief from the first or second century CE are identified below as “Amazon” on the left and “Achillea” (a version of the name Achilles) on the right. Stage names like these were often adopted for the reenactment of mythological scenes in the arena. (credit: “Two female gladiators, named as Amazonia and Achillea” by “Xastic”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The **Colosseum** was a massive structure in the middle of the city of Rome that was the site of many public entertainments, including gladiatorial matches. Built between 69 and 79 CE, it was named the Flavian Amphitheater, after the ruling dynasty at that time. It was also known as the Colosseum because a colossal statue of the emperor Nero stood nearby. (Well over one hundred feet tall, the statue was later rededicated to the Roman sun god Sol.) The amphitheater was officially dedicated in 80 CE by the emperor Titus in a ceremony that included one hundred days of games. Its design featured a rising arrangement of columns in different styles and a complicated network of barrel vaults. Up to fifty thousand spectators could be seated within the structure, and spectacles included gladiator matches, mock naval battles, and animal hunts. The impressive displays of showmanship were intended to be entertainment, but they also served an important political function. As part of a policy mockingly called “bread and circuses,” these epic games (and the distribution of free wheat) were meant to distract the people from potential weaknesses in Roman governance. The idea was that those whose immediate needs were being met with food and entertainment were less likely to notice social inequality, become discontented, or foment rebellion. The games were also a way to bolster popular enthusiasm for the sitting emperor, who usually attended regularly.

### **LINK TO LEARNING**

Explore a [virtual reality reconstruction of the Colosseum](https://openstax.org/l/77Colosseum) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Colosseum>), the site of public spectacles in Rome, including gladiatorial matches. This video gives a sense of the Colosseum’s scale and what Romans may have seen when they entered the structure as gladiators or as spectators.

## 7.3 The Roman Economy: Trade, Taxes, and Conquest

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify key trade routes in the Roman Empire
- Explain how the Roman Empire used taxes to raise revenue and influence behavior
- Analyze the importance of conquest in the Roman economy

The Roman economy was a massive and intricate system. Goods produced in and exported from the region found their way around the Mediterranean, while luxury goods brought from distant locales were cherished in the empire. The sea and land routes that connected urban hubs were crucial to this exchange. The collection of taxes funded public works and government programs for the people, keeping the economic system functioning. The Roman army was an extension of the economic system; financing the military was an expensive endeavor, but the Romans saw it as a critical tool in dominating the Mediterranean.

### Trade

Sea routes facilitated the movement of goods around the empire. Though the Romans built up a strong network of roads, shipping by sea was considerably less expensive. Thus, access to a seaport was crucial to trade. In Italy, there were several fine seaports, with the city of Rome's port at Ostia being a notable example. Italy itself was the producer of goods that made their way around the Mediterranean. Most manufacturing occurred on a small scale, with shops and workshops often located next to homes. Higher-value goods did find their way to distant regions, and Italy dominated the western trade routes (Figure 7.10).



**FIGURE 7.10** Trade Routes of the Roman Empire. As this map demonstrates, the Romans were able to harness an extensive system of roads and waterways to import and export both practical and luxury goods. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Italy was known for its ceramic, marble, and metal industries. Bronze goods such as cooking equipment and ceramic tableware known as red pottery were especially popular items. Red Samian pottery made its way to places around the Mediterranean and beyond, including Britain and India. Iron goods produced in Italy were exported to Germany and to the Danube region, while bronze goods, most notably from Capua, circulated in the northern reaches of the empire before workshops also developed there. These industries likewise relied on imports, including copper from mines in Spain and tin from Britain for making bronze.

Other Roman industries balanced their production with imported goods from foreign markets. Textiles such as

wool and cloth were produced in Italy, while luxury items like linen came from Egypt. Several trading routes existed in addition to the famous Silk Roads. The monsoon-driven Indian Ocean network linked Asia and the Mediterranean and provided the Romans with silk from China and India and furs from the Baltic region. The eastern empire was known for its luxury goods, including purple dye, papyrus, and glass from Egypt and Syria. For a time, central Italy did manufacture and export glass products northward, until manufacturing in Gaul (present-day France) and Germany took over the majority of its production in the second century CE. Building supplies such as tiles, marble, and bricks were produced in Italy.

Agricultural goods were an important aspect of the Roman economy and trade networks. Grain-producing Egypt functioned as the empire's breadbasket, and Italian farmers were therefore able to focus on other, higher-priced agricultural products including wine and olive oil. Wine was exported to markets all over the Mediterranean, including Greece and Gaul. Both wine and olive oil, as well as other goods, were usually shipped in amphorae. These large storage vases had two handles and a pointed end, which made them ideal for storing during shipment. They may have been tied together or placed on a rack when shipped by sea ([Figure 7.11](#)).



**FIGURE 7.11 A Roman Amphora.** Amphorae (the plural of *amphora*) were large vessels essential for shipping liquid goods in the Mediterranean world. Their slender shape and pointed base made for easy storage whether they were placed upright in a ship's hold or set in the soft ground. (credit: "Roman Amphora" by Mrs. Elvi Adamcak/Smithsonian, National Museum of Natural History, CC0)

The government's official distribution of grain to the populace was called the ***annona*** and was especially important to Romans. It had begun in the second century BCE but took on new importance by the reign of Augustus. The emperor appointed the *praefectus annonae*, the prefect who oversaw the distribution process, governed the ports to which grain was shipped, and addressed any fraud in the market. The prefect and his staff also secured the grain supply from Egypt and other regions by signing contracts with various suppliers.

The Roman government was also generally concerned with controlling overseas trade. An elite class of shipowners known as the *navicularii* were compelled by the government to join groups known as *collegia* (corporations) so they could be easily supervised. For signing contracts to supply grain, these shipowners received benefits including exemption from other public service. By the third and fourth centuries CE, control of the *navicularii* had intensified, and signing contracts to supply the *annona* was compulsory.

The *annona* kept the populace fed but was also a political tool; the emperor hoped his generosity would endear him to the people. The distribution of grain was thus heavily tied to the personality of the emperor. For instance, like many emperors, Hadrian, who ruled from 138 to 161 CE, associated himself with the *annona* to create a positive image before the public ([Figure 7.12](#)).



**FIGURE 7.12** The *Annona* as Political Tool. On this coin issued by Hadrian, the emperor's likeness is on one side (left); the other side portrays Annona, the representation of the grain supply, holding a cornucopia in one hand and grain ears in the other. In the background is the prow of a ship, likely a reference to the grain supply entering the city of Rome. (credit: “Vespasian Dupondius” by Guy de la Bedoyere/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

### Taxes

Collecting taxes was a chief concern of the Roman government because tax revenues were a necessity for conducting business and funding public programs. Taxes fell into several categories, including those calculated with census lists in the provinces, import and customs taxes, and taxes levied on particular groups and communities.

Upper-class investment in the provinces drove the economy and facilitated the collection of taxes. An important role in this system was played by the *publicani*, who operated as tax collectors in the provinces. These contractors first bid for the right to collect taxes by making a direct payment to the Roman government, which functioned as a *de facto* loan. To recover their investment, the *publicani* then collected taxes from provincial residents, keeping any money in excess of their original bid in addition to a percentage paid by the Roman government.

The *publicani* ran an effective system of tax collection, but it was imprecise and they were often accused of fraud. During the reign of Augustus, the *publicani* system was essentially abolished. In the revised system, provincials had to pay roughly 1 percent tax on their wealth, which included their assets in the form of land, as well as a flat poll tax. This new tax structure was assessed through census lists and administered by procurators, imperial officials who made collections and oversaw the payment of public officials in the province.

Other taxes included those on inheritances and legacies. To raise funds for paying veteran soldiers, in 6 CE, Augustus codified a new 5 percent tax on money inherited through a will. The rule excluded inheritances from close relatives, however, and was directly aimed at traditional patron-client relationships. With this tax, Augustus disrupted elite patron-client networks that had relied on the formation of social bonds outside the immediate family. As a result, the elite were compelled to coalesce around the figure of the emperor as the ultimate patron.

Despite these attempts at collecting taxes, by the third century CE the empire had entered a period of financial crisis. Constant wars meant a never-ending need to sustain large armies. As less new land was acquired, troop payments came more often from the central treasury than from newly conquered territory. The financial pressure proved critical. The emperor Diocletian implemented a series of measures to address the problems. For example, in 301, to combat inflation, Diocletian issued the Edict on Maximum Prices, which set a price ceiling for certain goods and services. Diocletian's reforms also increased the money collected by the government with two new taxes, on agricultural land and on individuals. The inclusion of property in Italy in the land tax for the first time, as well as Diocletian's standardization of a five-year census, dramatically

increased revenue for the empire. Replacing some of Rome's revenue shortfall through these taxes helped stabilize the economy in the short term.

### Conquest

Periods of conquest contributed to the Roman economy in a number of ways. The Romans sought to control natural resources and attain wealth from the regions they conquered. By harnessing the revenues of conquest, they could support their goals of keeping the populace fed and the troops paid.

In early Rome, the army was a volunteer force mustered during times of conflict. By the time of the empire, however, it had become a standing professionalized force. The Roman **legion** was the cornerstone of the army. Though its organization changed over time, this military unit consisted of about five thousand soldiers and was commanded by a legate. A legion also included craftspeople and those assisting in building projects. Following the reforms of Augustus, twenty-eight legions were stationed throughout the provinces of the empire and on the frontier. They were numbered but also had nicknames based on their place of origin or service. Since legions could move around the empire, the First German legion might be found in Spain, for example. Soldiers served a sixteen-year term, though this was later raised to twenty, and they were paid a set amount at the end of their service. Soldiers and military staff received a large portion of the wealth secured during wartime, and some were also occasionally promised land taken in the various conflicts that Rome engaged in.

Many military engagements were clearly intended to secure resources and capital. For instance, the empire's grain supply was vastly expanded by its conquest of Egypt in the first century BCE, as well as of Sicily and Sardinia early in Rome's history. In addition, people captured in conquest were often sold in the Roman slave markets. Since the work of enslaved and freed people was the backbone of Roman industry, enslaved people too contributed to the functioning of the economy.

But there were trade-offs in this arrangement. The increasing size of the Roman military and the empire's expanding frontier made conflict more costly. While earlier in its history, Rome's soldiers might expect to campaign only part of the year, by the imperial period, conflict had become a regular situation on the frontier. Campaigns could last for months on end, and in some situations wars may have seemed endless. The distance from the city of Rome also contributed to the cost of running the military; far-flung military campaigns were expensive. The machinery of running and paying the army necessitated further conquest, a situation that ultimately strained the Roman military.

In addition, there were clearly societal disadvantages to continuous conflict. Though Romans took pride in their military superiority, the loss of life and property must have been a burden for many. Conflict abroad disrupted regional markets that Italy depended on. For example, an interruption in the grain supply in 190 CE resulted in famine and riots in the city of Rome. Elites were largely able to benefit from the economic arrangement of conquest, but those in the lower classes no doubt shouldered the burden of its negative consequences.

## 7.4 Religion in the Roman Empire

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the major cults and religions found in the Roman Empire
- Discuss how Romans accepted and adapted religions from other areas of the Empire
- Explain the rise of Christianity in Rome

Religious belief and practice were enmeshed in Roman daily life. The presence of the divine suffused the physical world, and Romans sacrificed to their many gods as a way to gain their favor. Roman religion was multifaceted and based initially on the Greek pantheon, adapted for Rome's culture and language. While Romans took pride in the traditional elements of their religious system, they were also able to incorporate new features in it to accommodate cultural or political change. Some new gods were added, and it was common for

certain sectors of Roman society such as soldiers to have favorite gods or patron deities. The flexibility of Roman religion set the stage for new religious groups to emerge, including Christians in the first century CE.

### The Emperor and the Virgins

Roman *religio* (from which the English word “religion” derives) signified an obligation to the gods. According to this principle, Romans were expected to pay attention to divine and religious matters, including the most important aspect of religious practice, sacrifice. By offering animals to the gods, Romans hoped to receive good fortune or gain insight into a question or problem. While their religion certainly had private elements, its public rituals often intertwined faith with politics. That connection was also, and especially, visible in the worship of the emperor.

The **imperial cult** was a group of rites and practices that praised a deceased emperor’s divine status. Emperors were often deified (made gods) after they died, by order of their successors and with approval by the Senate. This formal process of deification was known as *apotheosis* and was extended to emperors who were remembered favorably ([Figure 7.13](#)). The process of deification had become so routine among later emperors that when the emperor Vespasian was dying, he is reported to have said, “Alas! I think I am becoming a god!”



**FIGURE 7.13** The Apotheosis of Emperor Antoninus Pius and Empress Faustina. This detail of a carved marble column from the second century CE shows the *apotheosis*, or elevation to divine status, of the emperor Antoninus Pius and his wife Faustina. A winged *genius* (an attendant spirit) in the lower right carries the two to heaven. (credit: “Column Base of Antoninus Pius (II)” by Institute for the Study of the Ancient World/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In this period, priesthoods were created specifically for the worship of a defied emperor. A number of priesthoods already existed that were attached to specific gods and that organized the religious affairs of the city, such as the festival calendar. Priesthoods for the imperial cult were added to this group of religious offices that men could join to further their public careers.

The worship of living emperors was much more muddled because Romans were wary of changing the custom