

## Chapter 2: The Earliest Human Societies

### *Chapter Introduction*

#### **Cuneiform Writing**

Cuneiform – Mesopotamian wedge-shaped writing begun by the Sumerians

Example in intro.pdf

- An astrological tablet from Uruk in Sumer
  - Serves as a *reminder of the linkage that existed between religious ritual and timekeeping in ancient agrarian societies*

Population increase created by the Neolithic Revolution led to the creation of

1. Farming villages
2. Eventually cities of governmental power, religious ritual, manufacturing, trade, and cultural sophistication

Sumeria – Earliest known civilization, based on city states. Located in southern Iraq along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

### ***2-1 Neolithic Southwest Asia***

~15,000 B.C.E. the world's climate began warming after centuries of Ice Age conditions

1. Vast inland lakes
2. Streams
3. Forests

Natufians – Earliest settlers of the Levantine Corridor

- Founded the first known settled communities

~11,000 B.C.E. Younger Dryas Event

Glacial melt water had accumulated in a colossal, freshwater lake in northern Canada suddenly burst into the Atlantic Gulf Stream

1. Triggered a 1,000-year regression in Europe and southwestern Asia to the cooler and drier conditions of the late Ice Age.
2. Abundant sources of water and plant foods available to humans and animals disappeared

3. Forced Natufians to congregate in small, semi-permanent villages near surviving streams and rivers.
4. Natufians switched from hunter and gathering and instead planted domestic cereals such as emmer wheat, einkorn, and barley.

Levantine Corridor – Region that included most of the present-day Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq.

- Archaeologists have discovered the earliest evidence of agriculture here
- Location endowed with high water tables
- Indicates switch to agriculture and livestock breeding

1. Allowed people to grow their populations and congregate in towns and cities

Early Cities

- Jericho
- CatalHuyuk

Mesopotamia – “land between the rivers” meaning the fertile lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

- This is where earliest known civilizations appeared in the fourth millennium B.C.E.

## ***2-2 Sumerian Civilization***

Euphrates and Tigris rivers run parallel to each other for about 400 miles before joining together to flow into the head of the Persian Gulf

Between 7500 – 6000 B.C.E. large scale irrigation was introduced into this region

1. Enabled them to engage in regional manufacturing and trade
2. Paved the way for emerging ruling elites

## **The Ancient Near East**

Mesopotamian city-states were concentrated in the rich agricultural plain created by silt from the parallel rivers as they flowed toward the head of the Persian Gulf

Fertile Crescent – The wide belt of land reaching from Mesopotamia to Egypt along the Mediterranean coast

City-States – States or societies that are dominated by a single city

Populations ranged between 8,000 – 10,000 people

1. Eridu

2. Lagesh
3. Ur
4. Uruk

Here they developed ideas and techniques that would provide the foundation of a distinct and highly influential civilization

Sumerians were the first people to do a number of highly significant things

1. Created first large cities, distinct from towns and small cities such as Jericho
2. Developed first sophisticated system of writing, called cuneiform
3. Built the first monumental buildings
4. Probably invented the wheel as a load-bearing transportation device
5. Among the first to make use of horse-drawn chariots in warfare
6. First to design and build an irrigation system powered by use of gravity
7. First to use plow and other bronze utensils and weaponry
8. Mesopotamians and Sumerians were among the first to develop short and long distance trade

### **Sumerians left extensive records and physical evidence**

~ 2300 B.C.E. is when the land between the rivers was brought under one effective rule

Sargon the Great – Semitic invader who conquered the entire plain

Sargon established his capital in the new town of Akkad

1. Akkadian empire lasted less than a century
2. Great influence because Sumerian culture was spread far and wide through the Fertile Crescent

### **Framing History (The Epic of Gilgamesh)**

Epic of Gilgamesh – Collection of stories

- Earliest approach to analyzing the relations of gods and humans
- Portrays a society in search of a religious basis for human action
  1. Stories of the flood which occur in many ancient cultural traditions
    - Disastrous flood that engulfed the entire earth and nearly annihilated humanity

Main focus of the story is to stress the inevitability of death and the defeat of the hero as he attempts to achieve immortality

Mesopotamian counterpart of the biblical Noah is Utnapishtim

Gilgamesh is a grim tale that speaks of death and the afterlife in pessimistic and fearful tones

Epic ends with the failure of Gilgamesh's quest for the secret of immortal life

- Futility of trying to be immortal or seeking "the secret to immortality"

## ***2-2a Earning a Living***

Most Mesopotamians earned their **livelihood from land**

1. Directly as farmers and herders
2. Indirectly as carters, wine pressers, millers, or other agrarian occupations

Commerce was primarily with trade in metals and foodstuffs

Scribes, bookkeepers, and priests, are the few jobs that required formal training or degree

Trades such as leatherwork and jewelry making also existed

Slaves made up a sizable portion of the working population

## ***2-2b Religion and the Afterlife***

Knowledge of Sumerian religion is unsure

They believed in a host of nature gods

Polytheism – religion having many gods

Many female and male gods each with specific meanings in natural and human affairs

1. Inanna (Ishtar) - goddess of love and fertility
2. Enki – water god

These gods were like superhumans, with all the faults and weaknesses of men and women

Each city-state had its local gods and spirits of the land and sky who were crucial to the prosperity of the citizens

Ziggurats – Stepped and elevated temple structures that the ancient Mesopotamian civilization erected in honor of its gods

- Here hundreds of priests ritually prayed and made offerings to the gods on behalf of the city-state's welfare

Babylon – City where the famous Ziggurat of the Tower of Babel is located

Two features of Mesopotamia's natural environment that stood out the most

1. Aridity of the climate
2. Unpredictability of the rivers' annual floods, which people relied on

## ***2-2c Mathematics and Chronology***

Mesopotamian sense of time was shaped by the cyclic nature of seasonal change.

Their calendar was subdivided into lunar months, corresponding to the period between one full moon and the next

Sumerian math has held up well and has been influential in all later Western science, including that of the Greeks

Sumerian math is based on units of 60 and its divisors

- This is the reason why we still measure time in intervals of 60 seconds and 60 minutes
- 360-degree circle, also originated with the Sumerians

## ***2-2d The Evolution of Writing***

Lasting accomplishment of Sumerians is the invention of a system of writing, which evolved from their need to have good records

1. Keeping their calendar and predicting seasonal changes
2. Commercial and religious taxation
3. Marital and inheritance contracts
4. Other activities with a mutually agreed upon version of past events

Moved beyond pictorial writing or symbols derived from pictures, into further phase of conveying meaning through abstract marks

Pictography – writing of a simplified picture

- Cannot convey abstractions such as verb tenses and other language techniques

Sumerians got around this and expanded their writing by including special signs for abstractions

3,000 – 2,001 B.C.E

Scribes began using written signs to indicate sounds of the spoken language and is the beginning of a phonetic written language

- Signs have a direct connection with the oral language

Format of written language was a script written in wedge shaped characters, the cuneiform.

- Faded out about 1,000 B.C.E

## ***2-2e Law***

Earliest complete code of laws originated in post Sumerian Mesopotamia in the 1,700s B.C.E, during the reign of the emperor Hammurabi

Based on two distinctive principles

1. Punishment depended on social rank of violator
2. Offenders were subjected to same damages or injury they caused to others
- Commoner would get more severe punishment than a noble or official

Hammurabi's Law Code – History's first known law code written by King Hammurabi in the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.

- People were not equal before the law
- Dealt with social and family problems

Mesopotamian law

1. Government should act as an impartial referee among its subject-citizens

## ***2-2f Government and Social Structure***

Two types of government

1. Theocracy – Rule by gods or their priests of the early city-states of the Sumerians and Sargon the Great of Akkad
  - A king, assisted by noble and officials and priests ruled the city

Village – social equality was rarely challenged

City – distinctions were expected and to be displayed by many ways

Mesopotamia had three classes of people

1. Small groups of priests, and noble landlords
2. Freeman who did most work and trading along the outlying farmlands – had some rights
3. Slaves who had no political rights – not based on race but bad luck or bad timing

## ***2-2g Women's Rights, Sex, and Marriage***

Early stage women shared more less equally in social prestige and power

Trend towards patriarchy

Patriarchy – society in which males have social and political dominance

Sex was sacred and seen as good thing

Sexual pleasure outside of marriage depended on status of individual

Adultery is bad for family because it undermined the family's continuity

- Punishment could be death
- Only applied to women as a man could do as he pleased

### ***2-3 An Expansion of Scale and Trade***

Scholars agree Sumerians were not Semitic

Semitic – Describes a person belonging to the most widespread western Asian groups and embraces Hebrew and Arabic

By 3,000 B.C.E. Sumerians extended their domain upriver as far as the future city Babylon

### ***2-4 Successors to Sumeria***

Conquest of Sumeria by Sargon of Akkad

Most important successors

1. Amorites or Old Babylonians
2. Hittites
3. Assyrians
4. Hebrews
5. Persian Empire