Mesopotamian Geography

An arc of land curves from the Persian Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean coast. The land within this crescent-shaped area is so well suited to farming that it is known as the Fertile Crescent. Because this land had rich soil and abundant crops, it was able to sustain an early civilization.

The ancient Greeks spoke of the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as Mesopotamia, the land "between the rivers."

Six thousand years ago, the waters of these two rivers provided the lifeblood that allowed the formation of farming settlements. These grew into villages and then cities. This pattern would also occur along other river systems in northern Africa, India, and China, as the world's first civilizations developed.

Mesopotamia was a region with little rain, but its soil had been enriched over the years by layers of silt-material deposited by the two rivers. In late spring, the Tigris and Euphrates often overflowed their banks and deposited their fertile silt. This flooding, however, depended on the melting of snows in the upland mountains where the rivers began. Unlike the Nile flood, the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates cannot be easily predicted. The size of the flood also varies. Not surprisingly, the early people of the valley viewed nature and the gods as harsh and unpredictable.

Around 3500 BCE, the people called the Sumerians arrived on the scene. Good soil was the advantage that attracted these settlers to the flat, swampy land of Sumer. There were, however, three disadvantages to their new environment. First, the flooding of the rivers was unpredictable. Little or no rain fell, and the land became almost a desert. Second, with no natural barriers for protection, the Sumerians were almost defenseless. Third, the natural resources of Sumer were extremely limited.

Over a long period of time, the people of Sumer created solutions to deal with these problems. To provide water, they dug irrigation ditches that carried river water to their fields and allowed them to produce a surplus of crops. For defense, they built city walls with mud bricks. Finally, Sumerians traded for the products they lacked.

Egyptian Geography

Today desert covers large areas of Egypt. Even so, for the last 5,000 years one physical feature has dominated the region: the Nile River. Without this important river, the land could not have supported the civilization that appeared in Egypt. "Egypt," said the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, "is wholly the gift of the Nile."

The Nile is a unique river, beginning in the heart of Africa and coursing northward for more than 4,000 miles. It is the longest river in the world. Before it empties into the Mediterranean, the Nile splits into two major branches. This split forms a triangular territory, the delta. The Nile Delta is called Lower Egypt; the land to the south, is called Upper Egypt. Egypt's important cities developed at the tip of the delta.

To the ancient Egyptians, the most important feature of the river was its yearly flooding- the "miracle" of the Nile. The river left a deposit of mud that created an area of rich soil several miles wide on both sides of the river. The Egyptians called this fertile land, which was dark in color, the "Black Land." Beyond these narrow strips of fertile fields lay the deserts, the "Red Land."

As in Mesopotamia, yearly flooding brought the water and rich soil that allowed settlements to grow. This cycle repeated itself year after year- flood, plant, harvest; flood, plant, harvest. The abundance brought by the Nile was so great that the Egyptians worshiped it as a god who gave life and seldom turned against them. Egyptian farmers were much more fortunate than the villagers of Mesopotamia. Compared to the unpredictable Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Nile was as regular as clockwork. The surpluses of food that the Egyptian farmers grew in the fertile Nile Valley made Egypt prosperous.

In ancient times, the Nile was the fastest way to travel through the land, making both transportation and communication easier. Boats on the Nile can either travel upstream with the wind or row downstream with the current. The river served as a trade route. Egyptian merchants traveled up and down the Nile in sailboats and barges, exchanging the products of Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean world.
These activities required organization, cooperation, and leadership. It took many people working together, for example, for the Sumerians to construct their large irrigation systems. Leaders were needed to plan the projects and supervise the digging. These projects also created a need for laws to settle disputes over how land and water would be distributed. These leaders and laws were the beginning of organized government.

As with the Nile Valley, the Fertile Crescent was surrounded by dry lands and mountains. They were not as barren as those around Egypt, however. Thus unlike Egypt, this area was not geographically isolated. Tribes of wandering herders lived off the grasses. They often invaded the valley, conquered it, and established empires. Over time, these invaders grew weak and new waves of invaders conquered them.

This pattern makes the history of the Fertile Crescent a story of repeated migration and conquest. As a result, the region became a crossroads where people and ideas met and mingled. Each new group that arrived made its own contributions to the turbulent history of the region.

Unlike Mesopotamia, which was subject to constant invasion, Egypt was blessed by natural barriers that gave it protection from invasion and a sense of security. These barriers included the deserts to the west and east; the Red Sea to the east; the cataracts (rapids) on the southern part of the Nile, which made defense relatively easy; and the Mediterranean Sea to the north. For much of its early history, Egypt was spared the constant warfare that plagued the Fertile Crescent.

The regularity of the Nile floods and the relative isolation of the Egyptians created a feeling of security and changelessness. To the ancient Egyptians, when the Nile flooded each year, "the fields laugh and people's faces light up." Unlike people in Mesopotamia, Egyptians faced life with a spirit of confidence in the stability of things. Although dynasties rose and fell, ancient Egyptian civilization was marked by a remarkable degree of stability and continuity over thousands of years.
Mesopotamian History

**Sumer.** By 3000 BCE, the Sumerians had established a number of independent cities in southern Mesopotamia. As the cities expanded, they came to have control over the surrounding countryside. They formed city-states, the basic units of Sumerian civilization. A *city-state* included a town or city and the surrounding land controlled by it. Sumerian cities were surrounded by walls.

As the number of Sumerian city-states grew and the city-states expanded, new conflicts arose. From 3000 to 2000 BCE, the city-states of Sumer were almost constantly at war with one another for control of land and water.

Weakened by war these city-states could no longer ward off attacks from the peoples of the surrounding deserts and hills. Although the Sumerians never recovered from the attacks on their cities, their civilization did not die. Succeeding sets of rulers adapted the basic ideas of Sumerian culture to meet their own needs.

**Akkad.** To the north of the Sumerian city-states were the Akkadians. About 2300 BCE, Sargon, the ruler of neighboring Akkad, invaded and conquered the city-states of Sumer and set up the first empire in world history. An *empire* is a large political unit or state, usually under a single leader, that controls many peoples, nations or territories. Empires are often easy to create but difficult to maintain. Soon after his death, other invaders swept into the wide valley between the rivers, tumbling his empire into ruin. The rise and fall of empires is an important part of history.

Sargon’s dynasty lasted only about 200 years, after which it declined due to internal fighting, invasions, and a severe famine. The fall of the Akkadian Empire around 2100 BCE brought a return to the system of warring city-states.

**Babylonia.** Eventually, however, new conquerors followed in the footsteps of Sargon and imposed unity over the Fertile Crescent. In about 2000 BCE, nomadic warriors known as Amorites invaded Mesopotamia. Within a short time, the Amorites overwhelmed the Sumerians and established their capital at Babylon, on the Euphrates River. In about 1792 BCE a strong ruler named Hammurabi came to power in Babylon. He conquered most of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley.

Egyptian History

Modern historians have divided Egyptian history into three major periods, known as the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2050-1800 BCE), and the New Kingdom (1550-1100 BCE). These were periods of long-term stability marked by strong leadership, freedom from invasion, the building of temples and pyramids, and considerable intellectual and cultural activity. Between the periods of stability were ages of political chaos and invasion, known as the Intermediate periods.

The history of Egypt begins around 3100 BCE, when Menes the king united Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt into a single kingdom. Menes established the first Egyptian dynasty. A *dynasty* is a family of rulers whose right to rule is passed on within the family.

From the time of Menes until almost 300 BCE, some 30 dynasties ruled Egypt. Although power passed from one dynasty to another, the land generally remained united.

**Old Kingdom.** Little is known of Egypt’s first two dynasties, but the Third Dynasty begins the period historians call the Old Kingdom. The Old Kingdom set the pattern for Egypt’s civilization. It was an age of prosperity and splendor. Like the kings of the Sumerian city-states, the kings or monarchs of the Old Kingdom were powerful rulers over a unified state. It was during this period that the Great Sphinx and the pyramids were built.

Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs grew weaker and the nobles grew stronger. For more than 100 years after the end of the Old Kingdom, civil wars divided Egypt as rivals battled for control of the land. Historians call this period of internal strife the First Intermediate Period.

**Middle Kingdom.** Finally, a new royal dynasty gained control of all Egypt and began the Middle Kingdom. Egyptians later portrayed the Middle Kingdom as a golden age—an age of stability & prosperity.

As evidence of its newfound strength, Egypt began a period of expansion. Egyptian armies occupied part of Nubia, the gold-rich land to the south. Traders also had greater contacts with the peoples of the Middle East and the Mediterranean island of Crete.
More than just a great military leader, Hammurabi was also an outstanding political leader and lawmaker. Hammurabi’s most enduring legacy is the code of laws he put together. This collection of about 282 laws contained some ideas that are still found in law codes today.

The Babylonian Empire reached its peak during the reign of Hammurabi, from 1792 to 1750 BCE. After his death, however, a series of weak kings was unable to keep Hammurabi’s empire united. Two centuries after Hammurabi, the Babylonian Empire fell to nomadic warriors.

Over the years, new groups dominated the Fertile Crescent. Invasion and conquest were prominent features in the history of the ancient Middle East. Yet many ideas of the early Sumerians would be adopted by the later peoples, including the Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Hebrews. The newcomers adapted cuneiform to their own languages and helped spread Sumerian learning across the Middle East. Building on Sumerian knowledge of the constellations and planets, later Mesopotamian astronomers developed ways to predict eclipses of the sun and moon. By means of the various peoples who conquered the Middle East, Sumerian knowledge passed on to the Greeks and Romans. They, in turn, had a powerful impact on the development of the western world.

One feature of the Middle Kingdom was a new concern of the pharaohs for the people. In the Old Kingdom, the pharaoh had been seen as a god-king far removed from his people. Now he was portrayed as the shepherd of his people and expected to build public works and provide for the public welfare.

During the Middle Kingdom, however, nobles and priests again began to weaken the power of the pharaoh. At this time a people called the Hyksos arrived in Egypt from Asia, introducing new weapons such as the chariot and the compound bow. In about 1650 BCE much of Egypt fell under their rule, ushering in a Second Intermediate Period.

For almost a hundred years, the Hyksos ruled much of Egypt. Eventually, a new dynasty of pharaohs used the new weapons to drive out the Hyksos and reunite Egypt.

**New Kingdom.** The New Kingdom launched the Egyptians along a new militaristic path. The New Kingdom pharaohs built an empire, a form of government in which an individual or a single people rules over many other peoples and their territories.

Massive wealth boosted the power of the New Kingdom pharaohs. For a time, the pharaohs once again had absolute power. They kept strict control over the government and created a strong army. The Egyptian rulers showed their wealth by building new temples.

The New Kingdom was not without troubles, however. The pharaoh Amenhotep IV believed in only one god—a belief called monotheism. He tried to introduce the worship of Aton, god of the sun disk, as the sole god. Akhenaton (Amenhotep IV) was not able to change his people’s religious beliefs.

The upheavals associated with Amenhotep’s religious revolution led to a loss of Egypt's empire. Under Rameses II, who reigned from 1279 to 1213 BCE, the Egyptians went back on the offensive. They regained control of Palestine but were unable to reestablish the borders of their earlier empire.

New invasions in the thirteenth century BCE by the "Sea Peoples," drove the Egyptians back within their old frontiers and ended the Egyptian empire.

**Decline & Fall.** Eventually foreign empires such as the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans attacked and conquered Egypt.
Mesopotamian Government

The Sumerians stand out in history as one of the first groups of people to form a civilization. By 3000 BCE, the Sumerians had built a number of cities. Although these cities shared the same culture, they developed their own governments, each with its own rulers. Each city and the surrounding land it controlled formed a city-state. A city-state functioned much as an independent country does today.

Just as control of the Nile was vital to Egypt, control of the Tigris and Euphrates was key to developments in Mesopotamia. The rivers frequently rose in terrifying floods that washed away topsoil and destroyed mud-brick villages. To survive and protect their farmland, villages along the riverbanks had to work together. Even during the dry season, the rivers had to be controlled to channel water to the fields. Temple priests or royal officials provided the leadership that was necessary to ensure cooperation. They organized villagers to build dikes to hold back flood waters and irrigation ditches to carry water to their fields.

Historians believe that in the early stages of the city-states, priests and priestesses played an important role in ruling. The farmers believed that the success of their crops depended upon the blessings of the gods, and the priests acted as go-betweens with the gods. The center of all Sumerian cities was the temple often built atop a massive stepped tower called a ziggurat. There the priests appealed to the gods for the well-being of the city-state. From the ziggurat the priests managed the irrigation system. They also demanded a portion of every farmer's crop as taxes.

The Sumerians believed that gods and goddesses owned the cities. The people devoted much of their wealth to building temples, as well as elaborate houses for the priests and priestesses who served the gods. The temples and, related buildings served as the center of the city physically, economically, and even politically. Priests and priestesses, who supervised the temples and their property, had a great deal of power. Initially, making the state a theocracy - a government by divine authority. Eventually, however, ruling power passed into the hands of worldly figures, or kings.

Egyptian Government

According to legend, the king of Lower Egypt wore a red crown, and the king of Upper Egypt wore a tall white crown shaped like a bowling pin. About 3100 BCE, a king of Upper Egypt named Menes united all of Egypt. As a symbol of his united kingdom, Menes created a double crown from the red and white crowns. From then on, the Egyptian ruler would be called "King of Upper and Lower Egypt." The double crown indicated the unity of all Egypt.

The role of the king was one striking difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, kings were considered to be representatives of the gods. To the Egyptians, kings were gods, almost as splendid and powerful as the gods of the heavens. The Egyptian god-kings came to be called pharaohs. The word pharaoh originally meant "great house" or "palace".

Egyptians believed the pharaoh was a god. Kingship was a divine institution and formed part of a universal cosmic order: "What is the king of Upper and Lower Egypt? He is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men, alone by himself, without an equal." In obeying their pharaoh, subjects believed that they were helping to maintain a stable world order. A breakdown in royal power could only mean that people were offending the gods and weakening that order.

The pharaoh stood at the center of Egypt's religion as well as its government and army. This type of government in which the ruler is a divine figure is called a theocracy. Egyptians believed that the pharaoh bore full responsibility for the kingdom's well-being. It was the pharaoh who caused the sun to rise, the Nile to flood, and the crops to grow. It was the pharaoh's duty to promote truth and justice. Pharaohs held absolute, or unlimited, power. This meant the type of government was also a monarchy - rule by one. They not only led the government, but also served as judges, high priests, and generals of the armies. The pharaoh owned all the land in the kingdom.

Nevertheless, they had help in ruling. At first, members of the pharaoh's family aided him in running the country. During the Old Kingdom, however, a bureaucracy - an administrative organization with officials and regular procedures - developed.
In time of war, however, the priests did not lead the city. Instead, the men of the city chose a tough fighter who could command the city's soldiers. At first, a commander’s power ended as soon as the war was over. As wars between cities became more and more frequent as city-states competed for water and land, Gradually, Sumerian priests and people gave commanders permanent control of standing armies.

In time, some military leaders became full-time rulers—monarchs or kings. This type of government is called a **monarchy**, meaning rule by one. These rulers usually passed their power on to their sons, who eventually passed it on to their own heirs. Such a series of rulers from a single family is called a **dynasty**. Between 3000 and 2500 B.C., many Sumerian city-states came under the rule of dynasties.

Sumerians viewed kingship as divine in origin. Kings, they believed, derived their power from the gods and were the agents of the gods. Regardless of their origins, kings had power. They led armies, supervised the building of public works, and organized workers for the irrigation projects on which Mesopotamian farming depended. The army, the government, and the priests and priestesses all aided the kings in their rule. As befitted their power, Sumerian kings, their wives, and their children lived in large palaces.

In each city-state, the ruler was responsible for maintaining the city walls and the irrigation systems. He led its armies in war and enforced the laws. As government grew more complex, he employed scribes to carry out functions such as collecting taxes and keeping records. The ruler was seen as the chief servant of the gods and led ceremonies designed to please them.

Especially important was the office of vizier, the "steward of the whole land." Under the vizier, various departments looked after such matters as tax collection, farming, and the all-important irrigation system. Thousands of scribes carried out the vizier's instructions. In time, Egypt was divided into 42 provinces, which were run by governors appointed by the pharaoh. Each governor was responsible to the pharaoh and vizier.
About 1790 BCE, Hammurabi, king of Babylon, brought much of Mesopotamia under his control. He took steps to unite the Babylonian empire. His most ambitious and lasting contribution was his publication of a remarkable set of laws known as the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi’s Code was the first important attempt by a ruler to codify, or arrange and set down in writing, all of the laws that would govern a state.

Hammurabi recognized that a single, uniform code would help to unify the diverse groups within his empire. He therefore collected existing rules, judgments, and laws into the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi wanted everyone in his empire to know the legal principles his government would follow. He had artisans carve nearly 300 laws on a stone pillar for all to see.

The Code of Hammurabi concerned all aspects of life in Babylon. Some laws dealt with commerce and industry, while others regulated wages, hours, working conditions, and property rights. The code lists 282 specific laws dealing with everything that affected the community, including family relations, business conduct, and crime. The laws tell us a great deal about the Mesopotamians’ beliefs and what they valued. Since many were merchants and traders, for example, many of the laws related to property issues.

The Code of Hammurabi was based on a system of strict justice. Punishment was harsh, based as it was on the idea of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” By setting out specific punishments for specific offenses, Hammurabi’s Code limited personal vengeance and encouraged social order.

However, penalties varied according to the social class of the victim. A crime against a member of the upper class (a noble) by a member of the lower class (a commoner) was punished more severely than the same offense against a member of the lower class.

Despite its severity, Hammurabi’s Code carried forward an important idea in Mesopotamian civilization. It reinforced the principle that government had a responsibility for what occurred in society. Hammurabi’s code took seriously the duties of public officials.
Mesopotamian Society

Economy. Although the economy of the Sumerian city-states was based chiefly on farming, trade and industry became important as well. Most Sumerians farmed. These farmers grew enough food to allow many people to work as artisans (craftsmen) and traders (merchants).

Trade brought riches to Sumerian cities. Traders sailed along the rivers or risked the dangers of desert travel to carry goods to distant regions. Traders traveled by land to the eastern Mediterranean in the west and by sea to India in the east. The invention of the wheel, around 3000 B.C., led to wheeled carts, which made the transport of goods easier. Archaeologists have found goods from as far away as Egypt and India in the rubble of Sumerian cities.

Social Classes. Each Sumerian city-state had a distinct social hierarchy- a system of ranks or classes. Sumerian city-states contained three major social groups or classes: the upper or highest class included the ruling family, leading government officials, and high priests. A small middle class was made up of lesser priests and scribes. The middle class also included merchants and artisans.

The vast majority of ordinary Sumerian people worked with their hands in fields and workshops. Some had their own land, but most worked land belonging to the king or temples. Commoners worked for palace and temple estates and as farmers, merchants, fishers, and craftspeople. Probably 90% or more of the people were peasant farmers.

At the very lowest level of Sumerian society were the slaves. Most slaves were foreigners who had been captured in war. Others were Sumerians who had been sold into slavery as children to pay the debts of their poor parents. Slaves belonged to palace officials, who used them mostly in building projects. Temple officials most often used female slaves to weave cloth and grind grain. Rich landowners also used slaves to farm their lands. By working obediently day and night, Sumerian slaves could hope to earn freedom.

Family. Fathers ruled their children as well as their wives. Obedience was expected: "If a son has struck his father, he shall cut off his hand." If a son committed a serious enough offense, his father could disinherit him. Parents arranged marriages for their children.

Egyptian Society

Social Classes. Like other early civilizations, Egypt had its own class system. Over a period of thousands of years, Egyptian society maintained a simple structure. It was organized like a pyramid, with the god-king at the top. The pharaoh and his family were surrounded by an upper class of wealthy landowners, government officials, priests, and army commanders. The priests and priestesses, served the gods and goddesses, and the nobles fought the pharaoh's wars. The members of this ruling class ran the government and managed their own landed estates, which provided much of their wealth.

Below the upper class was a tiny middle class of merchants, scribes, and artisans. They provided for the needs of the rich and powerful. Merchants carried on an active trade up and down the Nile, as well as in town and village markets. Some merchants also engaged in international trade. Egyptian artisans made an incredible variety of well-built, beautiful goods.

By far, the largest number of people in Egypt simply worked the land. In theory, the pharaoh owned all the land but granted portions of it to the subjects. Large sections of land were held by nobles and by the priests who supervised the numerous temples. Most of the lower classes were peasants who farmed the land of these estates. Men and women spent their days working the soil and repairing the dikes. They paid taxes in the form of crops to the pharaoh, nobles, and priests; lived in small villages or towns; and provided military service and labor to build palaces, temples, and tombs.

In the later periods of Egyptian history, slavery became a widespread source of labor. Slaves, usually captives from foreign wars, served in the homes of the rich or toiled endlessly in the gold mines of Upper Egypt.

Most Egyptians could never hope for wealth or power. Egyptian social classes were rigidly divided. However, Egyptians were not locked into their social classes. Lower-and middle-class Egyptians could gain higher status through marriage or success in their jobs, but they almost never entered the ranks of the upper class. Even some slaves could hope to earn their freedom as a reward for their loyal service.

During the New Kingdom, society grew more fluid as trade and warfare increased.
Women. The role of women in Sumerian society changed over time. In the earliest Sumerian myths, a mother-goddess reflected the honored role of mothers in farming communities. As large city-states emerged with warrior-leaders at their heads, male gods replaced the mother-goddess.

On the whole, Sumerian women could pursue most of the occupations of city life, from merchant to farmer to artisan. They could hold property in their own name. Women could also join the lower ranks of the priesthood. However, Sumer's written records mention few female scribes.

Over time, as men gained more power and wealth, women became more dependent on men. Yet women continued to have legal rights. Well-to-do women engaged in trade and owned property. Babylonian women had some legal and economic rights, including property rights. Women could be merchants, traders, or even scribes.

On the other hand, Hammurabi’s code makes it clear that women had far fewer privileges and rights in marriage than did men. A woman's place was definitely in the home. If she failed to fulfill her duties, her husband had legal grounds for divorce. In addition, if a wife was not able to bear children or tried to leave home to engage in business, her husband could divorce her.

Society in ancient Mesopotamia was patriarchal— that is, Mesopotamian society was dominated by men.

In general, Babylonian civil law gave a husband both legal authority over his wife and a legal duty to support her. The code also gave a father nearly unlimited authority over his children. The Babylonians believed that an orderly household was necessary for a stable empire.

Trade offered new opportunities to the growing merchant class. Foreign conquests brought riches to Egypt, which in turn meant more business for artisans- skilled craftsmen. To win the highest positions, people had to be able to read and write. Once a person had these skills, many careers were open in the army, the royal treasury, the priesthood, and the king’s court.

Family. Ancient Egyptians had a very positive attitude toward life. They married young (girls at 12 and boys at 14) and established homes and families. Monogamy (marriage to one person) was the general rule, although a husband was allowed to keep additional wives if his first wife was childless.

Parents arranged marriages for their children. Their chief concerns were family and property. The chief purpose of marriage was to produce children, especially sons. Daughters were not ignored, however, and numerous tomb paintings show the close and affectionate relationship parents had with both sons and daughters. Egyptian marriages could and did end in divorce. It included compensation for the wife.

Women. The husband was master in the house, therefore the society was patriarchal. But wives were respected. Wives were in charge of the household and the education of the children.

Egyptian women generally enjoyed a higher status and greater independence than women elsewhere in the ancient world. Under Egyptian law, women enjoyed many legal rights. They could inherit property, enter business deals, buy and sell goods, go to court, and obtain a divorce. Women's property and inheritance stayed in their hands, even in marriage. She could leave that property to her daughter. In many ways, Egyptian women had more freedom and power than women of other cultures.

Although there were often clear distinctions between the occupations of women and men, women's work was not confined to the home. They manufactured perfume and textiles, managed farming estates, and served as doctors. Despite their many rights and opportunities, few women learned to read and write. Even if they did, they were excluded from becoming scribes or holding other government jobs.
Mesopotamian Religion

The Gods. The physical environment strongly affected the way Mesopotamians viewed the world. Ferocious floods, heavy downpours, scorching winds, and oppressive humidity were all part of the Mesopotamian climate. These conditions, as well as famines, convinced Mesopotamians that this world was controlled by supernatural forces, which often were not kind or reliable. In the presence of nature, Mesopotamians could easily feel helpless.

To the Mesopotamians, powerful spiritual beings—gods and goddesses—infused all aspects of the universe. The Mesopotamians identified almost three thousand gods and goddesses. Mesopotamian religion was polytheistic because of this belief in many gods. These gods were thought to control every aspect of life, especially the forces of nature. Sumerians described their gods as doing many of the same things humans do—falling in love, having children, quarreling, and so on. Yet the Sumerians also believed that their gods were both immortal and all-powerful. Although the gods favored truth and justice, they were also responsible for violence and suffering.

The Sumerian gods were identified with forces of nature and heavenly bodies, such as the sun and the moon. Important gods included An (lord of heaven), Enlil (god of air and storms), and Enki (god of water and wisdom). Sumerian gods and goddesses also guarded individual cities. The city of Nippur, for example, was overseen by the god Enlil, while his son Nanna, god of the moon, guarded the city of Ur. Lowest of all the gods were demons, who caused disease, misfortune, and every kind of human trouble.

Human beings were supposed to obey and serve the gods. According to Sumerian beliefs, human beings were created to do the manual labor the gods were unwilling to do for themselves. By their very nature, humans were inferior to the gods and could never be sure what the gods might do to help or hurt them. At any moment, the mighty anger of the gods might strike, sending a fire, a flood, or an enemy to destroy a city.

To Sumerians, their highest duty was to keep these divine beings happy and thereby ensure the safety of their city-state.

Egyptian Religion

The Gods. Religion, too, provided a sense of security and timelessness for the Egyptians. For them, religious ideas were an inseparable part of the entire world order. Like the Mesopotamians, the early Egyptians were polytheistic, believing in many gods. In all, Egyptians worshiped more than 2,000 gods and goddesses. They had a remarkable number of gods associated with heavenly bodies and natural forces. Two groups, sun gods and land gods, came to have special importance.

Many villages had their own local god or gods. These gods often had an animal symbol that people considered sacred. Sacred animals included the cat, the bull, the crocodile, and the scarab beetle. In time, some of these gods came to be worshiped by people throughout Egypt. They built huge temples to honor the major deities. The sun, the source of life, was of course worthy of worship.

The sun god took on different forms and names, depending on his specific role. He was worshiped as Atum or Amon in human form and also as Re, who had a human body but the head of a falcon. The Egyptian ruler took the title Son of Re, because he was seen as an earthly form of Re.

River and land gods included Osiris and Isis. Osiris ruled Egypt until he was killed by his jealous brother, Set. Set cut Osiris into pieces which he tossed all over Egypt. Osiris was saved by his faithful wife, Isis. She reassembled her husband's body and brought him back to life. Because Osiris could no longer rule over the living, he became god of the dead and judge of the souls seeking admission to the afterlife.

Osiris took on an important role for the Egyptians as a symbol of resurrection. By identifying with Osiris, people could hope to gain new life, just as Osiris had done.

To Egyptians, Osiris was especially important. Not only did he rule over the underworld, but he was also god of the Nile. In that role, he controlled the annual flood that made the land fertile. Isis had special appeal for women, who believed that she had first taught women to grind corn, spin flax, weave cloth, and care for children. Like Osiris, Isis promised the faithful that they would have life after death.
Each city built a **ziggurat**, a pyramid-temple that soared toward the heavens. At its top stood a shrine to the chief god or goddess of that city. To win the favor of the gods, the people prayed and offered sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine. They also celebrated holy days with ceremonies and processions.

The Babylonians adopted many Sumerian religious beliefs. The Babylonians made sacrifices to their gods for favors like good harvests or success in business. Like the Sumerians, they believed in a shadowy life after death. Their religious practices were directed toward a successful life on Earth. Babylonians also believed that their priests could foretell the future. Therefore, Babylonian priests held great power and wealth.

**The Afterlife.** Sumerians worked hard to earn the gods' protection in this life. Yet they expected little help from the gods after death. The Sumerians believed that the souls of the dead went to the "land of no return," a dismal, gloomy place between the earth's crust and the ancient sea. No joy awaited souls there.

Like the Egyptians, the Sumerians believed in an afterlife. The Sumerians too buried food and tools with their dead. However, they saw the underworld as a grim place from which there was no release. They did not believe in rewards and punishments after death. This view of the afterlife contrasts with the Egyptian vision of the Happy Field of Food. Differences in geography may explain this contrast. The floods of the Tigris and Euphrates were less regular and more destructive than those of the Nile. As a result, Sumerians may have developed a pessimistic view of the world.

Some of the richest accounts of Mesopotamian myths and legends appear in a long poem called the **Epic of Gilgamesh**. It is one of the earliest works of literature in the world. Through the heroic adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary king, the narrative offers a glimpse into the beliefs and concerns of the ancient Sumerians. The epic tells of Gilgamesh's unsuccessful quest for immortality, a theme that recurs in ancient literature.

**A God.** About 1380 BCE, a young pharaoh challenged the powerful priests of Amon-Re. He devoted his life to the worship of Aton, a minor god whose symbol was the sun's disk. The pharaoh took the name Akhenaton, meaning "he who serves Aton." Akhenaton tried to sweep away all the other gods.

Akhenaton's radical ideas had little success. Priests of the other gods resisted the revolutionary changes. The common people, too, were afraid to abandon their old gods in favor of Aton. After Akhenaton's death, the priests of the old gods reasserted their power.

**The Afterlife.** In contrast to the Mesopotamians, with their bleak view of death, Egyptians believed in an afterlife, a life that continued after death. Belief in the afterlife affected all Egyptians, from noble to the peasant.

To survive the dangerous journey through the underworld, Egyptians relied on the **Book of the Dead**. It contained spells, charms, and formulas for the dead to use in the afterlife. The **Book of the Dead** was written on scrolls and placed in tombs. Today, these scrolls have given modern scholars a wealth of information about Egyptian beliefs and practices.

The Egyptians believed that each soul had to pass a test in order to win eternal life. According to Egyptian belief, the dead soul would be ferried across a lake of fire to the hall of Osiris. There, Osiris would weigh the dead person's heart against the feather of truth. Those he judged to be sinners would be fed to the crocodile-shaped Eater of the Dead. Worthy souls would enter the Happy Field of Food, where they would live forever in bliss.

Egyptians believed that the afterlife would be much like life on Earth. As a result, they buried the dead with everything they would need for eternity. To give a soul use of its body in the afterlife, Egyptians perfected skills in **mummification**, the preservation of the dead. This costly process took months to complete. At first, mummification was a privilege reserved for rulers and nobles. Eventually, ordinary Egyptians also were mummified.

Rulers built great tombs, such as the pyramids, and other Egyptians built smaller tombs. The mummy was placed in a coffin inside a tomb. Then they filled the tomb with items the dead person could use in the afterlife, such as clothing, food, cosmetics, and jewelry.
Mesopotamian Culture

Writing. The Sumerians created many inventions that still affect our lives today. Probably their greatest invention was their writing. Writing was important because it allowed a society to keep records and to pass along knowledge from person to person and generation to generation.

Sumerians wrote by pressing marks into clay tablets, which were then baked or dried in the sun. Once dried, these tablets lasted a very long time. Writers used a wedge-shaped tool called a stylus. As a result, most signs were wedge shapes. Today we call Sumerian writing **cuneiform** ("wedge-shaped"). Sumerians had about 600 cuneiform signs.

Cuneiform writing grew out of a system that priests used to record goods brought to temple storehouses. As their writing evolved, the Sumerians were able to use it to record not only grain harvests but also myths, prayers, laws, treaties, and business contracts. Mesopotamian peoples used writing primarily for record keeping.

Several hundred thousand tablets have been found. They have been a valuable source of information for modern scholars. Tablets contain some of the oldest written records of scientific investigations in the areas of astronomy, chemical substances, and symptoms of disease.

Education. The Sumerians considered education very important. However, only upper-class boys—no girls—attended school. Becoming a scribe was the key to a successful career. Men who began their careers as scribes became the leaders of their cities, temples, and armies. Scribes came to hold the most important positions in Sumerian society. Young boys seeking to become scribes began school when they were small children and trained until they were young men.

Scribal students spent most of their school days following the same routine. They were taught by copying and recopying standard works on clay tablets and reciting from them. Although boring, this was probably the scribe's only way of learning how to form the cuneiform writing signs neatly and correctly.

Egyptian Culture

Writing. Like other early civilizations, the Egyptians developed a form of picture writing. The development of writing was one of the keys to the growth of Egyptian civilization. Hieroglyphics were used to keep important records.

Writing in Egypt emerged around 3000 BCE. The Greeks later called this earliest Egyptian writing **hieroglyphics**, meaning "priest-carvings" or "sacred writings." As with Sumerian cuneiform writing, in the earliest form of hieroglyphics a picture stood for an idea. In time, the system changed so that pictures stood for sounds as well as ideas. Hieroglyphics could be used almost like letters of the alphabet. The hieroglyphic system of writing was complex. It used more than 600 signs, pictures, or symbols to represent words and sounds. Learning and practicing it took much time and skill. Hieroglyphic script was used for writing on temple walls and in tombs.

A highly simplified version of hieroglyphics, known as hieratic or demotic script, came into being. Hieratic script was used for business transactions, record keeping, and the needs of daily life.

Egyptian hieroglyphs were first written on stone and clay, as in Mesopotamia. Inscriptions on temples and other monuments preserved records of Egyptian culture that have endured for thousands of years. Hieratic script was written on papyrus, a paper made from the papyrus reed that grew along the Nile. Most of the ancient Egyptian literature that has come down to us was written on rolls of papyrus.

Education. Education focused mainly on an elite group of people called scribes, or clerks. Scribes learned to read and write so that they could work for the government. At the age of 10, boys of the upper classes went to schools run by scribes. Training to be a scribe took many years. Students learned to read and write by copying texts. Discipline was strict—"A boy's ears are on his back. He listens only when he is beaten." Religious instruction formed an important part of Egyptian education. Schools were usually attached to temples.

Learned scribes played a central role in Egyptian society. Temple scribes kept records of ceremonies, taxes, and gifts. Other scribes served nobles or the pharaoh.
Literature. Writing also made it possible for people to communicate ideas in new ways. This is especially evident in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh is a Mesopotamian epic poem that records the exploits of a legendary king named Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is wise, strong, and perfect in body. He is part man and part god. Gilgamesh befriends a hairy beast named Enkidu. Together, they set off to do great deeds. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh feels the pain of death and begins a search for the secret of immortality. His efforts fail, and Gilgamesh remains mortal. This epic makes clear that "everlasting life" is only for the gods.

Technology. The Sumerians invented several tools and devices that made daily life easier and more productive. They developed the wagon wheel, for example, to help transport people and goods from place to place. The potter's wheel to shape containers, the sundial to keep time, and the arch used in construction are other examples of Sumerian technology. The Sumerians were the first to make bronze out of copper and tin, creating finely crafted metalwork.

Math & Science. Many other new ideas arose from the Sumerians' practical needs. In order to erect city walls and buildings, plan irrigation systems, and survey flooded fields, they needed arithmetic and geometry. In mathematics, they used a system of numbers based on 60. For example, Sumerians divided a circle into 360 degrees (six 60s). Each degree was divided into 60 minutes, and each minute into 60 seconds. Today, when you look at a compass or a watch, you are using a system that the Sumerians developed.

Priests studied the skies, recording the movement of heavenly bodies. This knowledge enabled them to make accurate calendars, which are so essential to a farming society. Like other early civilizations, the Sumerians created a lunar calendar. To keep it accurate, they added a month every few years.

Architecture. The Sumerians lacked building materials, such as timber or stone, so they built with earth and water. Mud bricks, easily shaped by hand, were left to bake in the hot sun until they were hard enough to use for building. People in Mesopotamia were remarkably creative with mud bricks.

Math. Egyptians also made advances in mathematics. In order to assess and collect taxes, the Egyptians developed a system of written numbers for counting, adding, and subtracting. The Egyptians used a number system based on ten. This system is similar to the decimal system used today. The Egyptians used fractions and whole numbers.

Mathematics helped them in building their massive monuments. Huge building projects such as pyramids and irrigation systems required considerable skills in design and engineering. Nile floods forced Egyptians to redraw the boundaries of fields each year. Farmers used an early form of geometry to survey and reset property boundaries after the annual floods.

Science. To help them keep track of the time between floods and plan their planting season, the Egyptians developed a calendar. Early in their history they invented a calendar based on the movements of the moon. Sometime later, the Egyptians realized that a bright star, Sirius, appeared above the horizon right before the Nile floods. The time between one rising of this star and the next is 365 days. The Egyptians based their calendar on this cycle. This calendar had 12 months of 30 days each. The remaining five days were used for holidays and feasting. This calendar was so accurate that it fell short of the true solar year by only six hours. With a few changes, this ancient Egyptian calendar became the basis for our modern calendar.

Medicine. The Egyptians made important discoveries in medicine. They knew a good deal about the human body. They used their knowledge to treat illnesses and to preserve bodies after death. Although Egyptian treatments included "magic spells," they also often involved herbs and medicines. They also became skilled at observing symptoms, diagnosing illnesses, and finding cures. Doctors performed complex surgical operations. The Egyptians approached their study of medicine in a remarkably scientific way.

Art. The Egyptians left a rich legacy of art and literature. Statues, paintings, poems, and tales have given us a wealth of information about ancient Egyptian attitudes and values. Buildings were decorated with paintings of everyday life.
The Sumerians may also have invented several important architectural designs. Their architectural innovations—such as arches, columns, ramps, and the pyramid-shaped design of the ziggurat—permanently influenced Mesopotamian civilization. The arch, a curved structure over an opening, is one of the strongest forms in building. By combining several arches, the Sumerians built rounded roofs in the shape of domes or vaults. The most striking Sumerian buildings were the temples, known as ziggurats. Like other Sumerian buildings, ziggurats were made of baked brick placed in layers. The ziggurats looked something like a wedding cake. Each could be up to 150 feet high. The top served as a shrine to a Sumerian god.

Artists and sculptors were expected to follow particular formulas in style. This gave Egyptian art a distinctive look for thousands of years. For example, the human body was often portrayed as a combination of profile, semi-profile, and frontal view to accurately represent each part. The pharaohs and gods were always much larger than any other human figures. Statues often depicted people in stiff, standard poses. Some human figures have animal heads that represent special qualities.

**Architecture.** When people today think of Egypt, they picture the huge stone figure of the Great Sphinx and the pyramids. About 80 pyramids still stand, most of which are clustered in groups along the west bank of the Nile.

The Egyptians built the **pyramids** as tombs for the pharaohs—tombs for eternity. Because Egyptians believed in an afterlife, they preserved the bodies of their dead rulers and provided them with everything they would need in their new lives.

The best-known pyramids, including the Great Pyramid, tower above the sands at Giza. Its building was an enormous construction project. The Greek historian Herodotus reported the traditional story that it took 100,000 Egyptians 20 years to build the Great Pyramid. Historians believe the engineers built ramps and levers, which were used by thousands of workers to move the heavy stones.

Pyramids were built as part of a larger complex of buildings dedicated to the dead—in effect, a city of the dead. The area included a large pyramid for the pharaoh's burial; smaller pyramids for his family; and several mastabas, rectangular structures with flat roofs used as tombs for the pharaoh's officials.

Guarding the Great Pyramid at Giza is a huge statue carved from rock, known as the Great Sphinx. This colossal statue has the body of a lion and a human head.

The pyramid was not only the pharaoh's tomb but also an important symbol of royal power. It could be seen for miles and served to remind people of the glory, might, and wealth of the ruler who was a living god on Earth.

They also show that Old Kingdom dynasties had developed the economic strength to support massive public works projects, as well as the leadership and government organization to carry them out.