**ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS**

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**The term civilization basically means the level of development at which people live together peacefully in communities. Ancient civilization refers specifically to the first settled and stable communities that became the basis for later states, nations, and empires.**

**The study of ancient civilization is concerned with the earliest segments of the much broader subject called ancient history. The span of ancient history began with the invention of writing in about 3100 BC and lasted for more than 35 centuries. Mankind existed long before the written word, but writing made the keeping of a historical record possible.**

**The first ancient societies arose in Mesopotamia and Egypt in the Middle East, in the Indus Valley region of modern Pakistan, in the Huang He (Yellow River) valley of China, on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea, and in Central America. All of these civilizations had certain features in common. They built cities, invented forms of writing, learned to make pottery and use metals, domesticated animals, and created fairly complex social structures with class systems.**

**Apart from written records and carved inscriptions, the knowledge about ancient peoples is derived from the work of archaeologists. Most of the significant archaeological findings have been made in the past 200 years. The Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia was discovered in the 1890s, and some of the most important archaeological digs in China were made after the late 1970s.**

**Agriculture--The Basis of Civilization**

**The single, decisive factor that made it possible for mankind to settle in permanent communities was agriculture. After farming was developed in the Middle East in about 6500 BC, people living in tribes or family units did not have to be on the move continually searching for food or herding their animals. Once people could control the production of food and be assured of a reliable annual supply of it, their lives changed completely.**

**People began to found permanent communities in fertile river valleys. Settlers learned to use the water supply to irrigate the land. Being settled in one place made it possible to domesticate animals in order to provide other sources of food and clothing.**

**Farming was a revolutionary discovery. It not only made settlements possible--and ultimately the building of cities--but it also made available a reliable food supply. With more food available, more people could be fed. Populations therefore increased. The growing number of people available for more kinds of work led to the development of more complex social structures. With a food surplus, a community could support a variety of workers who were not farmers.**

**Farming the world over has always relied upon a dependable water supply. For the earliest societies this meant rivers and streams or regular rainfall. The first great civilizations grew up along rivers. Later communities were able to develop by taking advantage of the rainy seasons.**

**All of the ancient civilizations probably developed in much the same way, in spite of regional and climatic differences. As villages grew, the accumulation of more numerous and substantial goods became possible. Heavier pottery replaced animal-skin gourds as containers for food and liquids. Cloth could be woven from wool and flax. Permanent structures made of wood, brick, and stone could be erected.**

**The science of mathematics was an early outgrowth of agriculture. People studied the movements of the moon, sun, and planets to calculate seasons. In so doing they created the first calendars. With a calendar it was possible to calculate the arrival of each growing season. Measurement of land areas was necessary if property was to be divided accurately. Measurements of amounts--for example, of seeds or grains--was also a factor in farming and housekeeping. Later came measures of value as commodity and money exchange became common.**

**The use of various ways of measuring led naturally to record keeping, and for this some form of writing was necessary. The earliest civilizations all seem to have used picture-writing--pictures representing both sounds and objects to the reader. The best known of the ancient writing systems is probably Egyptian hieroglyphics, a term meaning "sacred carvings," since many of the earliest writings were inscribed on stone.**

**All of the major ancient civilizations--in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China-- emerged in the 4th millennium BC. Historians still debate over which one emerged first. It may well have been the Middle East, in an area called the Fertile Crescent. This region stretches from the Nile River in Egypt northward along the coast of former Palestine, then eastward into Asia to include Mesopotamia. In this area people settled along the riverbanks and practiced field agriculture. This kind of farming depended on the reproduction of seed, normally from grain crops.**

**Mesopotamia**

**Mesopotamia (from a Greek term meaning "between rivers") lies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, a region that is part of modern Iraq. By about 5000 BC, small tribes of farmers had made their way to the river valleys. On the floodplains they raised wheat, barley, and peas. They cut through the riverbanks so that water for their crops could flow to lower lying soil.**

**These early irrigation systems were more fully developed by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, who drained marshes and dug canals, dikes, and ditches. The need for cooperation on these large irrigation projects led to the growth of government and law. The Sumerians are thus credited with forming the earliest of the ancient civilizations.**

**The land of the Sumerians was called Sumer (Shinar in the Bible). Their origins are shrouded in the past. They were not Semites, like most of the peoples of the region; they spoke a language unrelated to other known tongues. They may have come to southern Mesopotamia from Persia before 4000 BC.**

**Sumerian towns and cities included Eridu, Nippur, Lagash, Kish, and Ur. The cities differed from primitive farming settlements. They were not composed of family-owned farms, but were ringed by large tracts of land. These tracts were thought to be "owned" by a local god. A priest organized work groups of farmers to tend the land and provide barley, beans, wheat, olives, grapes, and flax for the community.**

**These early cities, which existed by 3500 BC, were called temple towns because they were built around the temple of the local god. The temples were eventually built up on towers called ziggurats (holy mountains), which had ramps or staircases winding up around the exterior. Public buildings and marketplaces were built around these shrines.**

**The temple towns grew into city-states, which are considered the basis of the first true civilizations. At a time when only the most rudimentary forms of transportation and communication were available, the city-state was the most governable type of human settlement. City-states were ruled by leaders, called *ensi*s, who were probably authorized to control the local irrigation systems. The food surplus provided by the farmers supported these leaders, as well as priests, artists, craftsmen, and others.**

**The Sumerians contributed to the development of metalworking, wheeled carts, and potter's wheels. They may have invented the first form of writing. They engraved pictures on clay tablets in a form of writing known as cuneiform (wedge-shaped). The tablets were used to keep the accounts of the temple food storehouses. By about 2500 BCthese picture-signs were being refined into an alphabet.**

**The Sumerians developed the first calendar, which they adjusted to the phases of the moon. The lunar calendar was adopted by the Semites, Egyptians, and Greeks. An increase in trade between Sumerian cities and between Sumeria and other, more distant regions led to the growth of a merchant class.**

**The Sumerians organized a complex mythology based on the relationships among the various local gods of the temple towns. In Sumerian religion, the most important gods were seen as human forms of natural forces--sky, sun, earth, water, and storm. These gods, each originally associated with a particular city, were worshiped not only in the great temples but also in small shrines in family homes.**

**Warfare between cities eventually led to the rise of kings, called lugals, whose authority replaced that of city-state rulers. Sumeria became a more unified state, with a common culture and a centralized government. This led to the establishment of a bureaucracy and an army. By 2375 BC, most of Sumer was united under one king, Lugalzaggisi of Umma.**

**Babylon**

**The Sumerians were conquered by their Semitic neighbors. But their civilization was carried on by their successors--the Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.**

**The Babylonians made distinct contributions to the growth of civilization. They added to the knowledge of astronomy, advanced the knowledge of mathematics, and built the first great capital city, Babylon. The Babylonian King Hammurabi set forth the Code of Hammurabi in about 1800 BC. (This was the most complete compilation of Babylonian law and one of the first great law codes in the world (*see* Hammurabi; Law).**

**Egypt**

**Egyptian farmers had settled in the long and narrow valley of the Nile River by 5000 BC. Within 2,000 years they had invented writing, built massive irrigation works, and established a culture that bequeathed the pyramids and other magnificent monuments to posterity. The primitive farming settlements of Egypt were concerned with the raising of vegetables, grains, and animals. These settlements slowly gave way to larger groupings of people. Probably the need to control the Nile floodwaters through dams and canals eventually led to the rise of government in the region.**

**By the end of the prehistoric period before 3100 BC, Egypt was divided into two kingdoms. Lower Egypt had its capital at Buto, while Upper Egypt was centered at Hierakonpolis. In this period travelers brought in ideas from Sumeria, including the concepts of writing and the pottery wheel.**

**Egyptian civilization began with the unification in 3100 BCof the upper and lower regions by King Menes. He established a new capital at Memphis. In this era the Egyptians developed the first 365-day calendar, discovered the plow, made use of copper, developed hieroglyphic writing, and began to build with stone. Trade and exploration flourished.**

**The Egyptians were ruled by kings known as pharaohs who claimed to be descended from the god Horus. These kings, supported by a priestly class, lived in splendor; and they saw to it that after their deaths they would be buried in splendor. The tombs built for them were designed as storehouses to hold all the things that the kings would need in the afterlife.**

**The earliest royal tombs foreshadowed the later great monuments, the pyramids. By about 2700 BCthe first pyramid was built, in Saqqara. The three great pyramids still standing near Cairo were built between 2650 and 2500 BC.**

**Early Egyptian history is divided into three major eras: the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BC), the Middle Kingdom (2050-1800 BC), and the New Kingdom (1570-1090 BC). By the dawn of the Old Kingdom, the characteristics of Egyptian civilization had already been firmly established. The periods not accounted for by the dates are believed to be times of decline known as the Intermediate Periods.**

**India**

**The valley of the Indus River is considered to be the birthplace of Indian civilization. Located on the Indian subcontinent in modern Pakistan, the Indus civilization was not discovered by archaeologists until 1924. The ancient history of this region is obscured by legend. It appears, however, that by 4000 BCprimitive farmers were raising vegetables, grains, and animals along the riverbank. By 2700 BCtwo major cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and numerous smaller towns had emerged.**

**There is some evidence that Mesopotamian traders reached the early Indian people by sailing from Sumeria to the Indus Valley. While the Indians shared some developments--such as complex irrigation and drainage systems and the art of writing--with the people of Sumeria, they also developed a unique cultural style of their own.**

**What little is known of the Indus civilization suggests that it had large cities that were well laid-out and well fortified. There were public buildings, palaces, baths, and large granaries to hold agricultural produce. The many artifacts and artworks found by archaeologists indicate that the residents of the Indus had reached a fairly high level of culture before their civilization was destroyed.**

**According to the Rig Veda, the ancient Hindu scriptures written after about 1500 BC, Aryan invaders conquered the earliest Indian civilization. The Aryans, who were a nomadic people from the Eurasian steppes, imposed on Indian society a caste system, which persists to the present day in Hindu law. The caste system, which divides all people into social classes with differing rights and obligations, was a formal expression of the interdependent labor division seen in all civilizations. By the 6th century BCat least 16 Aryan states had been established on the Indian subcontinent and Brahmanism was flourishing.**

**Crete**

**By about 2500 BCa civilization had emerged on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea. Excavations in 1900 at the site of Knossos revealed the existence of a culture named by archaeologists as Minoan after a mythical king, Minos. Minoans probably settled in Crete before 3000 BC.**

**There is evidence of outside influence in Crete; apparently Egyptian traders reached the Aegean Sea soon after the Minoans did. Nevertheless, Minoan civilization developed its own unique features, and by about 2000 BC, great cities with elaborate and luxurious palaces were built, and sea trade was flourishing.**

**The Minoans had a picture-writing system, as had other ancient peoples. The Minoan religion seems to have centered on a mother goddess and on the figures of the bull and the snake. The Minoans are known for their beautiful and colorful wall paintings and their fine pottery. In about 1400 BCMinoan civilization began to decline. The end was hastened by invasions from mainland Greece.**

**China**

**The Chinese had settled in the Huang He, or Yellow River, valley of northern China by 3000 BC. By then they had pottery, wheels, farms, and silk, but they had not yet discovered writing or the uses of metals.**

**The Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 BC) is the first documented era of ancient China. The highly developed hierarchy consisted of a king, nobles, commoners, and slaves. The capital city was Anyang, in north Henan Province. Some scholars have suggested that travelers from Mesopotamia and from Southeast Asia brought agricultural methods to China, which stimulated the growth of ancient Chinese civilization. The Shang peoples were known for their use of jade, bronze, horse-drawn chariots, ancestor worship, and highly organized armies.**

**Like other ancient peoples, the Chinese developed unique attributes. Their form of writing, developed by 2000 BC, was a complex system of picture writing using forms called ideograms, pictograms, and phonograms. Such early forms of Chinese became known through the discovery by archaeologists of oracle bones, which were bones with writings inscribed on them. They were used for fortune-telling and record keeping in ancient China.**

**The Chou Dynasty (1122-221 BC) saw the full flowering of ancient civilization in China. During this period the empire was unified, a middle class arose, and iron was introduced. The sage Confucius (551-479 BC) developed the code of ethics that dominated Chinese thought and culture for the next 25 centuries.**

**Meso-America**

**Meso-America is the term used to describe the ancient settlements of Mexico and Central America. Civilization arose in the Americas much later than in the Middle East. Whether Native Americans reinvented the tools of civilization, such as farming and writing, or whether they were brought from older societies is a topic of debate among scholars.**

**The earliest elaborate civilization known in the Americas is that of the Olmec of central Mexico. The Olmec lived in the lowlands of present Veracruz and Tabasco states from about 1200 BC. They left artifacts ranging from tiny jade carvings to huge monuments such as the volcanic rock statues at San Lorenzo. These monuments suggest the existence of an organized and diverse society with leaders who could command the work of artisans and laborers. Other early civilizations in the Americas include the Chavin of Peru, the Chono of Chile, the Tehuelche of Argentina, the Tupians of Brazil, the Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula, and the Inca of Peru.**

**Only four ancient civilizations--Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China--provided the basis for continuous cultural developments in the same location. After the Minoan society on Crete was destroyed, its cultural traditions and legends passed into the life of mainland Greece. As for Meso-America, its cultures were submerged by the Spanish conquerors of the 16th century.**