

Part 2: The Early Civilizations of the Fertile Crescent to 1200 BCE

It is also important to note that these five characteristics are not hard and fast or even intentional on part of the civilizations. Rather, the earliest civilizations in the West arose as societies in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt tried to deal with the realities of the climate and environment around them. It is to these earliest civilizations, we will turn to next.

Let's first consider what Egypt and Mesopotamia had in common. Both civilizations, as many other civilizations in the ancient world did, arose in river valleys: Mesopotamia in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys and Egypt in the Nile River Valley. These were good locations for many reasons: such river valleys offered relatively accessible water supplies, transportation, and were more easily defensible. Both Egypt and Sumer also arose in regions that were and still are relatively dry and hot. However, their climate still differed significantly. For example, ancient Mesopotamia averaged 120 F in the summer with an average of 10 inches at most of rain annual. And when it did rain, it often flooded in an unpredictable pattern. Despite the river valleys, the great plains of the region made Mesopotamia constantly vulnerable to outsider invaders. In contrast, though Egypt was and is dry and hot, the temperatures were more manageable. In Lower Egypt (Northern Egypt) in the delta region on the coast, the average temperature during the day was 88 F and in the desert regions of Upper Egypt (Southern Egypt) 104 F. However, its average rainfall was even lower than that of Mesopotamia, with as little as 3 inches of rain a year. However, the Nile River's abundance countered this. It flooded in a regular and predictable manner, though they still occasionally experienced excessive flooding or droughts. In addition, Egypt's location provided it with a natural defense against foreign invaders. It was difficult to invade Egypt from the south because of the cataracts or waterfalls on the Nile, and to the north the marshy delta made a sea invasion almost impossible. The only

viable invasion route was through the Sinai Peninsula, which was covered with a harsh desert. Mesopotamia's relatively open geography however allowed for trade with distant regions of the ancient world, including both ancient India and Egypt, and its uneven distribution of natural resource encouraged the growth of trade. For example, the South Mesopotamia was far better for crops but it had few major sources of stone and no metal ores, but developing trade networks allowed the south to make up for this deficiency.

Because of these differences in environment, as slight as the differences might seem to a modern, these civilizations would take significantly different paths. Though both civilizations (as the word indicates) had cities, Mesopotamia in many ways was a much more urbanized region, while Egypt, which had major cities, such as Thebes and Memphis, in the Lower Delta, remained a country made up of mainly small, peaceful farming villages. In Sumer, the earliest civilization of Mesopotamia farming villages began to develop around 7000 BCE and became cities between about 4300 and 3600 BCE. In Egypt, permanent settlements began around 6000 BCE in the Delta, and major cities first began to appear around 3200 BCE.

In conjunction with this, Egypt and Mesopotamia differed in the second characteristic of civilization: government. While both regions had strong governments, Egypt was unified by 3100 B.C. under the pharaoh whom the Egyptians believed was an embodiment of the god Horus. Though Egypt had a strong tradition of local control, such as the nomes who controlled groupings of villages, it remained consistently unified for much of its ancient history. By the third-century BCE, Egypt had developed lists of some thirty-line dynasties stretching back to 2686, and they divided their history or least their golden age into six different eras: the Old Kingdom between about 2686 and 2160 BCE, the First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom between 2055 and 1650 BCE, the Second Intermediate Period, the New Kingdom

between 1550 and 1075 BCE, and then the Third Intermediate Period. Just like the Nile River has a cycle of flooding that brought death and then fertility afterwards, so did the ancient Egyptians see their history as a period of life and prosperity under the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, while the intermediate periods brought strife, disaster, famine, and death to Egypt.

Egypt, however, did not remain unchanged during this long two-millennium period of history. For example, as a result of the famine and other disasters that brought down the Old Kingdom, even in the Middle Kingdom, Egyptian royal authority remained decentralized compared to the that of the Old Kingdom when the kings built the pyramids and perhaps contributed to its bankruptcy. In addition, under the New Kingdom, Egyptians, who had previously been happy to remain isolated, began to expand out of Egypt, conquering territories down the Nile and crossing the Sinai to conquer Canaan and Syria. Egyptian views of their king changed over time as well, as they began to see his relationship with their gods differently. In the Old Kingdom, he was Horus, and while that did not change in the Middle Kingdom, he was expected not simply to be a distant deity but a good shepherd under whom his subjects were equal with each other. Nonetheless, they were equally subjected to his benevolent dictatorship. The very name of pharaoh was not even used until the New Kingdom. But despite the changes that Egypt faced, politically it was far more stable and consistently unified than Mesopotamia, since Egypt had the advantage of the usually consistent flooding of the Nile and a geographical defense against invaders, though it still experienced a few invasions. Beginning in the early twentieth century BCE, a group of new peoples began to migrate into the Fertile Crescent known as the Indo-Europeans, and over the course of the next few centuries, they would disrupt the region, including Egypt. There in the middle of the seventeenth century BCE, a group known as Hyksos (Egyptian for foreigners) migrated into or invaded Egypt. These Hyksos were perhaps Indo-

Europeans themselves, peoples that they displaced, or a combination of both. Regardless, some Hyksos eventually dominated much of Egypt and introduced horse-drawn chariots, bows, lances, bronze swords, and the wheel, while adopting Egyptian culture. About a century later, a native dynasty expelled the Hyksos, and in response to the shock of Hyksos domination, New Kingdom Egypt became expansionist in order to defend its borders better.

Politically, Mesopotamia was less stable from its earliest history when the city-states of Sumer dominated it, and it experienced frequent outside invasions and the rise and fall of empires much more frequently than Egypt did. That was because it had few natural geographical boundaries to protect it. Before the Amorites dominated Mesopotamia, Sumer generally remained a collection of independent city-states under the rule of their kings, or lugal. Initially, priests in Sumerian cities ruled the city, theoretically on behalf of the city's chief god or goddess, such as Inanna, who the Sumerians believed built and owned their cities. However, by 2500 BCE, the hereditary kingship of the lugal developed, probably because they had been warlords whose skills in military leadership allowed them to rival and then supplant the supreme power of the priests. However, once in control, the kings made up genealogical lists of their predecessors into which they asserted the gods and goddesses they claimed founded the cities and they turned one of their gods, Enlil, into the king of the gods. According to myth concerning Enlil, when he had enslaved the other gods, they threw off his domination and created humans in order to do their work, and thus the humans were now the slaves, working for the gods in the cities the gods owned. The priests were far from impotent in these city-kingdoms, since their intercession with the gods and their administration of the temple complexes were still needed. Throughout ancient Sumer, each city controlled not only their city but also farmland, villages, and sometimes other cities, which they had managed to subject to themselves. The cities fought with each other for

resources, often under the guise of fighting for their city deity, and the cities were in a tangle of constantly changing alliances.

Because of this constant warfare and the geography, Sumer remained vulnerable to outside invasions. Around 2350, the Akkadians led by their semi-legendary king Sargon invaded Mesopotamia and subjugated the Sumerians in Western Civilization's first empire, conquering most of what is now Iraq and Syria. However, he did not reject Sumerian culture, but claimed that the Sumerian goddess Inanna had saved him from death as an infant, and she, the moon goddess, had chosen him to rule, and so he appointed his daughter as the high priestess of Inanna in Ur. His empire however fragmented soon after his death, and the Sumerian city-states soon reasserted themselves, allowing for renewed infighting as well as the rise of powerful city-states that dominated much of the region, including Ur under King Ur-Namma around 2112. This king presented himself as a liberator of the cities from foreign rule, but he also imposed uniformity on the cities, including standard weights and measures to encourage trade and a standard law code.

That law code perhaps influenced the law code of yet another invading people, the Amorites who first came into the region around 2300. One of the cities the Amorites established was Babylon, not far from modern-day Baghdad, and around 1800 BCE, its king Hammurabi began to expand the city's influence by playing other Amorite kingdoms against each other, until he conquered most of the Mesopotamian region. Though the Amorites had already destroyed the old city-state system, Hammurabi's law betrays the influence of Ur-Namma's law code, though Hammurabi's was far harsher. Scholars debate whether or not Hammurabi intended for judges to use his law like a modern law code. He placed his 275 laws on giant columns throughout the cities of his empire, so it wasn't exactly accessible like a book is. On top of the pillars, he placed an image of himself praying to the goddess Shamash, implying that

he received the law from the goddess. His law code was if anything a symbol of his unification of Mesopotamia, and he wanted to look good as well as in the eyes of future generations of kings and to guide them through his code. But it also sent a message to the judges that they needed to be consistent in their judgments, since it threatened them with death for accepting bribes. Though influenced by Sumerian law codes, it was harsher than most Sumerian codes, substituting death or mutilation for crimes that had been previously punished with a fine.

After Hammurabi's death, the glory of the Babylonian Empire waned, and it slowly declined until in 1600 BCE, an Indo-European group known as the Hittites sacked the once glorious city, ending the empire once and for all, but the city would rise again in another thousand years, carrying on the legacy of Sumer. In the end, though Mesopotamia remained politically unstable and vulnerable to invasion, ancient Sumer had a continued influence on cultures in the region long after it disappeared.

The two regions of Egypt and Mesopotamia also differed significantly in the way that their environment affected their religious outlook. In Sumer with its harsh and unpredictable environment, they developed a relatively bleak outlook on the universe. They believed that their gods were mercurial, cruel, and fickle as the floods that so often devastated the region were. The gods generally did not care how people behaved as long as they performed the right ceremonies to appease their wrath. The gods were not morally superior to humans, and though they punished cheating and lying, it was mainly because such crimes created disorder, not because it was sinful or immoral. What the gods and goddesses did want was for the people to feed them meat, beer, bread, and vegetables in their ziggurat temples. So many precious resources were spent doing so, allowing the power of the priests and judges to increase. However, all the benefits of such worship were transitory, because no matter how much one pleased the gods in

this life, everyone, rich and poor, good and bad, could look forward to a bleak, shadowy existence in the afterlife. Despite all of this, there also developed a tradition of benevolent and just gods and goddesses who sought to protect their cities, such as Innana in Uruk, and as we have already seen kings, such as Sargon and Hammurabi, laid claim to a divine calling to justify conquests.

The Egyptians had a somewhat different view of life and the gods. They so often connected their religion and gods with the life-giving nature of the Nile. Their gods were generous and caring although not necessarily loving and personal. What they believed ordered the universe was *Ma'at*, or the interworking of the universe's parts and the balance of elements, and the word can be translated as truth, order, or justice, but perhaps the best translation is the eternal now. Because of the blessings of the Nile, Egyptians tended to be averse to change or risk taking. Thus, they needed to maintain the worship of the gods with the correct worship in order to maintain the *ma'at*. Because life in Egypt was acceptable, life after death was much the same as the present life: with the pharaoh on top and everyone else serving the pharaoh. Though it was not bleak and miserable, neither was it eternal bliss. Rather, for the Egyptians, life, death, and rebirth were an endless cycle, as endless as the cycle of the Nile's flooding that brought life out of death. Initially, the afterlife was only for the pharaoh but over the few millennia of ancient Egyptian history, it was extended first to the upper class and eventually to the lowest of classes. Like in ancient Sumer, the Egyptian kings believed they had a divine calling; indeed, they believed they were the god Horus himself, a character in another story of death and rebirth. According to Egyptian myth, Horus had an unusual conception. For reasons that changed over the centuries, before Horus was conceived, his uncle Set killed his father Osiris and dismembered his body, sending it to the four corners of Egypt. In anguish, Osiris' wife-sister,

Isis, gathered his dismembered bodies into the first mummy and then revived the body long enough for the husband and wife to have sex and conceive Horus. Osiris then died again and became the Lord of the Dead, while his son, Horus, became the Lord of the Living. Though it might seem contradictory, Egyptians believed that every king (at least during the Old Kingdom) was Horus, and when he died he was Osiris.

However, the Egyptian king's divine power did not go unchallenged. During the New Kingdom, the powerful priests of Amen-Re became more wealthy and powerful and they began to question whether or not the pharaoh was actually a god-king; perhaps he was merely a channel for the divine. The pharaohs generally favored their divine status, but during the reign of Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV, r. 1363-1347), the pharaoh admitted he was merely a divine channel but did so by abolishing all religious cults besides that of Aten. In hopes of sustaining his own power, Akhenaten decided to revere Aten alone (initially a minor sun disk god) as the loving creator of all things and sustainer of life, and he then suppressed all other cults and had Amen-Re's name blotted out. He took the name Akhenaten, and he built the new capital of Akhetaten (horizon of Aten) where he could worship Aten in sun filled courts. What he required from all Egyptians was that they worship him as the mediator between Aten and the people, and he with his wife Nefertiti alone could worship Aten. His changes did not last, and eventually his grandson abolished the new cult and moved back to Thebes, and when a new dynasty seized control a few generations later, they suppressed Akhenaten's name as much as possible. But the god-king status of the pharaohs was fully restored.

In many ways, the social and gender structure of ancient Sumer and Egypt were very similar. Both had a large number of slaves, though in Egypt they did a lot more of the backbreaking work than those in Sumer. They also both had a very large agrarian class of

farmers, though the environment and climate of Egypt made such work a lot less laborious. At least from the Middle Kingdom onwards, technically all Egyptians were equal under the law. In addition, while both had a clear gender hierarchy, the daily life of an Egyptian woman was a lot less strenuous and though their main role was still to produce children, they could actually own their own property. As we have seen, perhaps because of the lack of unified rule and the absence of a god-king, Sumerians and Babylonians developed law codes. The law code of Hammurabi reveals a lot about Babylonian society and its strict social structure. The code adopted an eye for eye approach, that is, if a man gouged out the eye of an equal, he would have his eye gouged out. But if a man gouged out the eye of a social inferior, he would simply have to pay a fine. The law granted much protection to women, though they remained subjected to men. For example, in cases of adultery, a husband could have his wife executed, and though her male lover faced the same punishment in court, if a woman was even suspected of adultery, the law code suggested she should kill herself to avoid dishonoring her husband. The implication was that women were baby-making machines, and their worth (as set by the law) was determined by their fertility, while for men it was determined by social class.

The difference in climate between the two regions also affected their material culture, including the material on which Egyptians and Sumerians wrote. Though both cuneiform and hieroglyphics were complex languages that were the monopoly of the elite, Egyptians were able to write on papyrus, which were more easily preserved than the clay tablets used by the Sumerians; however, what the Sumerians wrote tended to be much more profound. For example, *the Epic of Gilgamesh* from ancient Sumer is an epic tale that explores the meaning of life in a very thought-provoking way even if it does not offer much comfort. In contrast, Egyptians mainly focused on praising nature, the pharaoh, and offering practical advice for the scribes.

The climate also shaped what public works they needed. In Sumer especially, there was a need for an organized government not only to build irrigation systems, canals, and dikes but also the great temples or ziggurats in which the priests attempted to appease their mercurial and vindictive gods. In Egypt, there was less need of irrigation systems and, thus, there was more available labor in between planting and harvesting. As result, in the Old Kingdom, farmers built Egypt's most recognizable structures, the Great Pyramids of Giza. However, though the pharaohs had nearly unlimited supplies of labor and built these tombs before Egypt even had the wheel, the pharaohs ultimately did so not only at the cost of many lives but at the expense of their power. Despite being such impressive monuments to their divine authority, they exceeded what Egypt could afford and helped to bankrupt the kingdom.

In conclusion, the greatness of ancient Egypt lasted for millennia, while one people after another conquered the land of ancient Sumer, Mesopotamia. But Mesopotamia would always find a way to rise again to become great once more. This region certainly has had a more profound influence on Western Civilization than Egypt because through dealing with adversity, its habitants began asking many of the difficult questions about life, why there is evil in the world, is there life after death, etc. Many of these questions, the West's great religions and philosophies have sought to answer and are still trying to answer. In many ways, the land of Mesopotamia, the land of Iraq, is much more Western than any country or land that does not actually deal with profound adversities because in this land of harshness and suffering, the great experiment of Western Civilization began nearly 10000 years ago.