Chapter 2

*The Rise of Civilization in the Middle East and Africa*

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The first full civilizations that arose in the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile valleys were both dependent on the river systems around which they were organized, but Mesopotamian civilization differed from Egyptian in significant ways. By 1000 B.C.E., both of these formative civilizations had begun to decline, but they produced smaller civilizations dependent on their initial contributions.

II. Setting the Scene: The Middle East by 4000 B.C.E.

A. Introduction

Civilizations emerged as a result of complex transformations associated with the consolidation of agricultural economies and the technological advances of the fourth millennium.

B. Agriculture and the Rise of Civilization

Agriculture did not always lead to civilization, but it could spur the development of government, particularly to define property rights and organize irrigation. New inventions, that enabled large agricultural surpluses, available in the Middle East by 4000 B.C.E., more directly promoted civilization.

C. Innovation, Specialization, and Productivity

Among the most important technological advances were the potter’s wheel, wheeled vehicles, improved shipbuilding, and the introduction of bronze tools. Each of these inventions gave rise to greater economic specialization, improved productivity, and greater surpluses.

III. Civilization in Mesopotamia

A. Introduction

Mesopotamian civilization emerged about 3500 B.C.E. It developed features characteristic of many civilizations, including writing, large cities, social stratification, and economic specialization. Invasions and the subsequent collapse of empires interrupted the course of Mesopotamian civilization.

B. The Sumerians

Civilization emerged in the Middle East in the region called the Fertile Crescent. Although the
area is served by rivers, the climate is arid. As population increased, the need for irrigation prompted technological advances and economic specialization. The Sumerians, who migrated into Mesopotamia around 4000 B.C.E., developed important religious centers. Sumerian political organization was based on city-states that controlled the surrounding agricultural fields. The city-states were ruled by kings who set boundaries, regulated religion, provided justice, and led the armies. The elite of kings, priests, and nobles controlled much of the land, which was worked by slaves. Sumerian civilization established the basic traditions for all Mesopotamian civilizations. Although larger political empires occasionally coalesced, the city-state remained the elemental principle of political organization in Sumeria. The economy continued to rely on slave labor. Technological advances facilitated agricultural development and trade. Economic expansion produced large cities including one with a population of more than 70,000. The Sumerians developed a writing system, cuneiform, around 3500 B.C.E. to make possible records of trade and property. Writing also had a religious function of granting scribes power over the natural world. Around 2000 B.C.E., the Sumerians recorded the oldest literary epic, the story of Gilgamesh. Sumerian sculpture and painting were used to decorate religious precincts. The Sumerians were particularly advanced mathematicians who used their calculations to help understand the movement of the sun and stars. Sumerian religion was essentially gloomy. Anthropomorphic gods were associated with forces of nature over which humans had little or no control. The Sumerian concept of an afterlife was filled with pain and suffering. Priests attempted to placate the gods through sacrifice and ritual. Monumental temple structures, ziggurats, formed the basis for monumental architecture. Other civilizations adapted aspects of Sumerian science, literature, art, and religion to suit their own purposes.

C. What Civilization Meant in Sumeria

As in other cases, Sumerian civilization was predicated on the existence of agricultural surpluses that supported economic specialization, social stratification, and trade. Sumerian civilization developed, in addition, a clearly defined state and significant urbanization that depended on a regional system of collection and redistribution. Sumerian civilization also created a writing system that permitted more elaborate records and facilitated taxation and trade. Writing also contributed to a more diversified intellectual life. Urban life was critical to Sumeria, because cities facilitated government, trade, production, social stratification, and economic specialization. Cities in Sumeria extended their influence over much of the agricultural countryside. The emergence of civilization in Sumeria, as elsewhere, involved both gains and losses. Civilizations create greater social inequities based on both perceived social status and gender. Civilizations, because of their greater resources, often become more aggressive and violent. Despite their intellectual prowess, advanced technologies, and more stable political structures, civilizations spread slowly in relatively isolated regions.

D. Later Mesopotamian Civilization: A Series of Conquests

Mesopotamian civilization was politically fragile. It was common for one group to form a state temporarily, only to be swept away by subsequent invaders. Around 2400 B.C.E., Sargon I of Akkad conquered the Sumerian city-states and inaugurated the first Mesopotamian empire. Military organization funded by state taxation expanded under Sargon and his successors. The Akkadian empire lasted for about two centuries before disintegrating in the face of other invasions. The Sumerian city-states briefly reasserted their independence. Around 1800 B.C.E., the Babylonian Empire united all of Mesopotamia. The most important of the Babylonian rulers, Hammurabi, created a formal bureaucracy and issued a law code based on previous Sumerian codifications. Babylonian culture advanced the Sumerian work in astronomy and mathematics. The Babylonian Empire was able to establish a unified trade and cultural zone that incorporated
much of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. About 1600 B.C.E., Hittite invaders from Asia Minor crushed the Babylonians and established their own empire. The Hittites, in turn, were displaced by a series of smaller kingdoms that disputed the control of Mesopotamia between 1200 B.C.E. and 900 B.C.E. During this period smaller regional cultures, such as the Hebrew and Phoenician, flourished. After 900 B.C.E., a new series of empires, the Assyrian and Persian, controlled the region.

IV. Ancient Egypt

A. Introduction

Egyptian civilization developed along the Nile River after 3000 B.C.E. Isolated by the surrounding deserts, Egyptian civilization was more stable than Mesopotamian.

B. On Being A Good King

Egypt developed a strong kingship early. These kings, eventually known as pharaohs, were officially considered to be manifestations of gods and in art were shown as mighty, powerful figures. But popular culture sometimes mocked them, and priests sometimes controlled them, so the full extent of their power is unclear.

C. Basic Patterns of Egyptian Society

Unlike Mesopotamian civilization, which spread from the river valleys throughout much of the Middle East, Egyptian civilization was clearly focused on the Nile River valley. Sometime before 3200 B.C.E., growing trade with other regions accelerated development in agricultural communities along the Nile. Egypt moved directly to unified political structures without the intermediary stage of city-states. The Nile ecological system was a strong factor in promoting unity. By 3100 B.C.E., Narmer, king of southern Egypt, conquered the northern rulers to create a unified government. Despite some disruptions, the Egyptian state lasted for nearly 3,000 years. Egyptian chronology is typically divided among the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms. The Egyptian political system was dominated by a semidivine pharaoh who was believed to control the rituals critical to the annual flooding of the Nile on which the Egyptian economy depended. The pharaohs commanded a bureaucracy trained in writing and law and appointed governors to supervise irrigation and public works in critical regions. The majority of Egyptians were farmers whose labor could be commandeered in support of public works and monuments. Because of the central position of the pharaohs in Egyptian society, it is not surprising that the most famous of these public works, the pyramids, were constructed to house the rulers and their households after their deaths. Elaborate death rituals associated with the pyramids and mummification may suggest the Egyptians' fundamental belief in social and political organization continued even after death.

D. Egyptian Ideas and Art

The Egyptians developed a distinctive form of writing, called hieroglyphics, much different from the Mesopotamian cuneiform. Egyptians wrote on papyrus, cheaper to produce than other materials. The Egyptians did not develop an epic literary tradition. Like Mesopotamian civilization, the Egyptians understood mathematics and astronomy, but they were not as advanced as the Mesopotamians in these sciences. Egyptian scientists were more progressive in use of medical techniques. It was not science, but religion, that dominated the Egyptian world view. Egyptian religion was polytheistic and focused on the afterlife, where the deceased were believed
to enjoy a happy existence. Egyptian art concentrated on depictions of the deities, although human subjects were not uncharacteristic. Given the stable political system, it is not strange that Egyptian culture remained relatively static. Foreign invasions brought the Old Kingdom to a close around 2200 B.C.E., but unity was restored under the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom. Another round of invasions ended the Middle Kingdom dynasties and resulted in the eventual establishment of the New Kingdom. The dynasties of the New Kingdom were the most expansionist in Egyptian civilization. Trade and commerce were established with other civilizations in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. It was during the New Kingdom that the pharaoh Akhenaton attempted to found a new religion, but failed. After 1150 B.C.E., internal disputes and foreign invasions brought on the decline of the New Kingdom.

E. Continuity and Change

Stability was a hallmark of Egyptian culture. There were few change in styles and beliefs. The changes that did occur resulted mainly from outside invasion. After about 1150 B.C.E., there was a fairly steady decline.

V. Egypt and Mesopotamia Compared

Egypt and Mesopotamia differed in many ways. Political authority in Egypt was more centralized, while in Mesopotamia imperial government overlay a substructure of regional city-states. Mesopotamian culture featured less monumental architecture than Egypt but did develop an epic literary tradition that Egypt lacked. In part, these differences can be explained by Egypt’s greater access to building materials and the ability of the pharaohs to commandeer huge numbers of laborers. Egyptian religion focused on the afterlife and provided a rationale for the development of monumental structures lacking in Mesopotamia. Given its more challenging environment, Mesopotamian society made more technological advances than did that of Egypt. Mesopotamian merchants established a wider commercial orbit and were a more significant component within their society than were their counterparts in Egypt. Women may have enjoyed a somewhat higher social status in Egypt than in Mesopotamia. There were some similarities between Egypt and Mesopotamian civilizations. The livelihood of both was dependent on their management and control of river systems. Both featured social stratification with a priestly and landowning elite class overlaying a social substratum of peasants and slaves. Both civilizations made advances in the sciences, particularly mathematics and astronomy. Conservatism in both civilizations may have resulted in greater longevity than later civilizations. Egypt and Mesopotamia were the starting points for many derivative civilizations that followed them.

VI. Civilization Centers in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean

A. Introduction

Separate but derivative civilization centers sprung up on the borders of Egypt and Mesopotamia around 1000 B.C.E.

B. Kush and Axum: Civilization Spreads in Africa

The first known African state outside of Egypt was Kush, which emerged as an independent political unit after 1000 B.C.E. Around 730 B.C.E., Kush was sufficiently strong enough to conquer Egyptian civilization, but the Assyrian invasion of the Nile valley broke Kush’s hold on its northern neighbor. Subsequently, Kush expanded southward and eventually established a permanent capital at Meroe. The development of iron technology within Kushite culture became
a source of both economic and military strength. Kush was urbanized and developed a system of writing. Political organization, based on a semidivine ruler, was similar to Egypt. At its height from 250 B.C.E. to 50 C.E., Kush served as a conduit for African goods to the Middle East and Mediterranean. Kush fell around 300 C.E. to Axum, an African kingdom to the south. It is uncertain how much influence Kushite culture had in the rest of Africa.

C. Cultures in the Mediterranean Region

The most important of the Middle Eastern cultures that emerged on the fringes of Mesopotamia was that of the Hebrews. They probably migrated from Mesopotamia around 1600 B.C.E. and settled in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean. Some of the Hebrews may have migrated to Egypt, where they were subjugated until Moses led them to Palestine. A separate political identity began to emerge around 1100 B.C.E. For most of their history, the Hebrew states were divided and small. Political independence of the Hebrew states ended after 722 B.C.E. What distinguished Hebrew culture was the development of a strict monotheism out of what was probably originally a hierarchy of divinities. According to Mosaic tradition, Jews were commanded to worship only one god and to recognize their special position as a chosen people. In addition to monotheism, Judaism emphasized two important concepts: the idea of an overall divine plan and a divinely organized morality. By the second century B.C.E., these concepts were written out in the Torah and other writings that came to comprise the Old Testament of the Bible. The lack of emphasis on evangelism within Judaism kept the Jewish people a minority in the Middle East, but the concept of monotheism and the linkage of god to ethical behavior were important components later adopted from Judaism by both Christianity and Islam.

Minoan society emerged on the island of Crete around 1600 B.C.E. Minoan civilization traded extensively with both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Cultural influences from the two older civilizations were critical on Crete. The Minoan trade network extended to the Greek mainland, where another early civilization was created, including the kingdom of Mycenae. Indo-European invasions culminating around 1000 B.C.E. disrupted civilizations on the Greek mainland and on Crete. Cultural levels fell in both areas.

Phoenician civilization developed around 2000 B.C.E. Like the Minoans, the Phoenicians controlled an extensive trade network. Most Phoenician cultural achievements were directly related to commerce. The Phoenicians established colonies throughout the Mediterranean. After the decline of Minoan and Greek civilizations, there were few trade rivals. The Phoenician alphabet was the ancestor for both the later Greek and Latin alphabets.

VII. The Issue of Heritage

Waves of invasions by Indo-Europeans marked a break with the more ancient civilizations. Hunters and herders from central Asia, the Indo-Europeans introduced the use of iron and more powerful weaponry. The disruption of the ancient civilizations brought new ideas: elective kingship and new political constitutions. There were also continuities, including key technologies, basic science and math, as well as religious, architectural, and musical ideas that survived. It has also been argued that cultures under Mesopotamian influence in the West and Middle East came to view humanity as separate from nature, in contrast to Indian and East Asian cultures.

VIII. Global Connections: The Early Civilizations and the World

Egypt and Mesopotamia pursued different strategies towards the outside world. Mesopotamia
sought expansion through conquest and trade. Egypt, though not isolated, was more self-contained, its people seeing Egypt as its own separate world.

**TIMELINE**

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

- rise of Babylonian Empire
- emergence of Kush
- rise of Minoan civilization
- Assyrian conquest of Middle East completed
- Narmer's unification of Egypt
- rise of New Kingdom Egypt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>3100 B.C.E.</td>
<td>rise of Babylonian Empire</td>
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<td>1800 B.C.E.</td>
<td>emergence of Kush</td>
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<td>1600 B.C.E.</td>
<td>rise of Minoan civilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>1570 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Assyrian conquest of Middle East completed</td>
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<td>1000 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Narmer's unification of Egypt</td>
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<td>665 B.C.E.</td>
<td>rise of New Kingdom Egypt</td>
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**TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS**

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mesopotamia</td>
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<td>potter's wheel</td>
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<td>city-state</td>
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<td>ziggurats</td>
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<td>animism</td>
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<td>Babylonian Empire</td>
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<td>Hammurabi</td>
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<td>Akhenaton</td>
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<td>Torah</td>
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<td>monotheism</td>
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<td>Phoenicians</td>
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<td>Sumerians</td>
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<td>Epic of Gilgamesh</td>
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<td>Sargon I of Akkad</td>
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<td>mummification</td>
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<td>Hittites</td>
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MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Tigris and Euphrates Rivers  
Nile River
Sumer  
Babylon
Memphis  
Thebes

1. How critical were river systems to the early civilizations of the Middle East? Were there any exceptions? How do you explain them?

2. Where did the outside invaders (Hittites, Hyksos) of the early civilizations originate? What does this suggest about the relationship between mountains, steppes, and river plains?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What is the connection between irrigation systems and civilization?
2. Why did civilization begin in Mesopotamia?
3. How was early Mesopotamia organized politically?
4. What defined civilization in Sumerian culture?
5. Why were cities important in Mesopotamian civilization?
6. Why was writing important to civilization? Was it indispensable?
7. What are some of the social losses associated with civilizations?
8. What was the form of political organization of ancient Egypt?
9. What centers of civilization other than Egypt and Mesopotamia developed in the Middle East?
10. What kind of long-term impact did Egypt and Mesopotamia have on later civilizations?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. What sort of innovations and technological advances accounted for the transition from sedentary agricultural societies such as Jericho and Çatal Hüyük to the larger population concentrations typical of civilizations?
2. Compare and contrast the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following was not a social change induced by the transition to sedentary agriculture?
   a. the creation of private property
   b. new kinds of laws and enforcement mechanisms
   c. more extensive forms of government
   d. matriarchal society

2. The Sumerian form of writing, cuneiform, was
   a. done on papyrus.
   b. more pictographic than the hieroglyphic alphabet.
   c. done using a brush.
   d. done on clay tablets with a stylus.

3. Tightly controlled city-states were typical of the political organization of what region?
   a. Egypt
   b. Mesopotamia
   c. Kush
   d. Minoan civilization

4. Sumerian religion
   a. was monotheistic.
   b. emphasized a joyous afterlife.
   c. passed on certain basic elements to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
   d. rejected animism in favor of abstract and distant deities.

5. Mesopotamian civilization
   a. developed complex political forms without writing.
   b. developed complex economies without sedentary agriculture.
   c. built large city-states without monumental architecture.
   d. placed greater emphasis on monumental architecture than did Egypt.

6. In 1800 B.C.E., the Babylonians achieved the first
   a. monumental architecture in Mesopotamia.
   b. use of wheeled vehicles in Mesopotamia.
   c. study of astronomy in Mesopotamia.
   d. political unification of all of Mesopotamia.
7. In terms of the early stages of civilization, what was one of the major differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia?

   a. Egypt passed directly from precivilization to regional governments without passing through a city-state phase.
   b. Egyptian civilization did not depend on irrigation from a major river system.
   c. Egyptian civilization never developed a political system with kings.
   d. Egyptian civilization was generally less politically unified than was Mesopotamian civilization.

8. Which of the following statements is most accurate concerning the Egyptian system of writing?

   a. It was primarily pictographic.
   b. The Egyptians failed to develop a system of writing.
   c. It was accomplished with a stylus on clay tablets.
   d. It was referred to as Linear A.

9. Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations placed cultural emphasis on

   a. the significance of the afterlife.
   b. the development of an epic literary tradition.
   c. social equality.
   d. astronomy and related sciences.

10. Which of the following was not a heritage of the ancient Middle Eastern civilizations?

    a. writing
    b. calendars
    c. religions that emphasized tranquility and harmony with nature
    d. patriarchy