Chapter 3

Asia’s First Civilizations: China and India

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

In both East and South Asia, civilization developed along with the irrigation of great river systems. The Harappan civilization of the Indus River valley developed in the middle of the third millennium B.C.E. approximately at the same time as the river civilizations of the Middle East. As Harrapan civilization crumbled, nomadic Arayan migrants moved into the Indus and Ganges valley, though it would be centuries before they built a fully developed civilization. Unlike Harappa, which failed to serve as the core of a unified, successor civilization, Shang China, which flourished from 1500 B.C.E. to 1122 B.C.E., spawned successors that endured for millennia.

II. The Indus Valley and the Birth of South Asian Civilization

A. Introduction

South Asia’s first civilization emerged in the third millennium B.C.E. It developed around two great cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Although it was a relatively centralized civilization, Harappa was not heavily militarized and thus remained vulnerable to nomadic incursions. Harappan civilization was based on the Indus River system. Seven tributaries converged to form the Indus River. In addition to the water supplied by the rivers, monsoons brought summer rains. The region was capable of supporting a vast agricultural population. By at least 3000 B.C.E. sedentary agricultural villages were situated along the river plains. Pre-Harappan culture included bronze metallurgy, art featuring a bull motif (possibly suggesting links to Middle Eastern civilization), and figurines of women.

B. The Discovery and Mystery of Harappa

Harappan civilization was discovered by British engineers constructing railways in the Indus valley during the 19th century. Subsequent excavation of sites revealed numerous cities that comprised Harappan civilization. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were the two capitals of the Indus civilization.

C. The Great Cities of the Indus Valley

Despite being separated by hundreds of miles, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were built utilizing similar grid patterns and surrounded by walls. Both internal architecture and city walls were constructed of uniform bricks. The standardization of construction suggests that Harappan civilization had a strongly autocratic government capable of insuring uniformity. Strong citadels in both major cities also suggest the existence of a powerful ruling elite. The citadels evidently
contained both centers of government and public use areas, including baths. Granaries were located close to the citadels in both cities. The areas of the city reserved for housing were crowded. Domestic architecture, like the rest of the buildings in Harappan civilization, was constructed of brick. Homes were relatively standardized, lacked ornamentation, and homes typically included a bathing area connected to a city-wide sewer system.

An advanced agricultural system, including sophisticated irrigation works to control the monsoon floods, supported the Harappan cities. Harappan urban centers had plentiful commercial contacts with the civilizations of the Middle East and East Asia. Despite exposure to other cultures, the Harappans were technologically conservative and less advanced militarily than other civilizations. The society of Harappa was stratified, with a powerful priestly class at the top of the social order. Deities and venerated animals demonstrate an obsession with fertility. Beneath the priestly rulers were the administrative and commercial classes who lived in larger houses located near the temple complexes. Artisans, laborers, and slaves made up the lower orders of society. Outside the cities, numerous farmers populated the countryside and supplied the food for the urban population.

Harappan civilization declined gradually in the middle centuries of the second millennium B.C.E. as a result of flooding, perhaps due to climatic changes that altered the rhythm and severity of the monsoon season. Over centuries, the region in which the Harappan civilization flourished became more arid. There is also evidence of rapid immigration into the region. Apparently the Harappans were too weak militarily to prevent incursion from outside peoples. As the priestly elite began to lose control, the irrigation systems failed. Pastoral Aryan immigrants then replaced the indigenous agricultural population of the countryside.

III. Aryan Incursions and Early Aryan Society in India

A. Introduction

Among the nomadic peoples who entered the Indus River valley during the decline of Harappan civilization, the Aryans gained dominance. Originally herders who spoke one of the Indo-European languages, the Aryans began migration into South Asia in the third and second millennia B.C.E. Military prowess allowed the Aryans to dominate the cultures they replaced. The Indo-European invaders, of which the Aryans were only one group, left a lasting linguistic heritage in both Europe and Asia.

B. Aryan Warrior Culture

The Aryans spread in small bands from the Indus River valley into the lands surrounding the Ganges River system. Like the Indus River valley, the region of the Ganges featured the combination of river systems and monsoon rain patterns that made agricultural communities possible. Although it took many centuries, the Aryans eventually supplemented pastoralism with cultivation. Much of what is known about earliest Aryan culture is derived from the Vedic hymns transmitted orally for centuries until finally transcribed in books called the Vedas during the sixth century B.C.E. The hymns describe a martial society that recognized as its chief deity Indra, a god devoted to war. Aryan military technology featured chariots and metal-tipped weapons that were superior to the indigenous cultures of South Asia. With the exception of military technology, the civilization of the Aryans was cruder than that of the peoples they replaced. Urbanization declined under the Aryans, as major cities were replaced by small villages without monumental architecture. According to the Vedic hymns, gambling and music were two of the most popular pastimes among the Aryans.
C. Aryan Society

When they initially entered the Indian subcontinent, the Aryans were divided into three main social groups: warriors, priests, and commoners. As a result of their conquest of indigenous peoples, a fourth group, slaves or serfs, was added. The dividing line between the three Aryan groups and the conquered peoples was rigidly maintained. Attempts to restrict all social relationships between Aryan social groups and the conquered peoples led to the development of a rigid class system of social organization. Despite social restrictions dividing the two groups, intermarriage did occur. Eventually four social groups, called varnas, developed: brahmans (priests), warriors, merchants, and peasants. Beneath these four groups were the socially outcast untouchables, most commonly descendants of non-Aryans. Descent and inheritance were patrilineal in Aryan society. Women left their households upon marriage to enter those of their husbands. Aryan epics do give examples of both polygamy and polyandry, but monogamous households were the norm. Both dowries and bride-prices were exchanged at the time of marriage, suggesting the female children were not yet regarded as economic burdens to their families. Males were favored because of the traditional Aryan emphasis on martial valor and religious ritual.

D. Aryan Religion

Initially the Aryans were polytheistic in their religious practices. Deities, both male and female, had the power to assist human supplicants and to assure fertility. Male gods were dominant, particularly those deities associated with war. Religious worship involved ritual offerings and animal sacrifices. It was the function of the Vedic priests to perform the sacrificial rituals effectively. In early Aryan religion, there was apparently little concern with the afterlife, the purpose of creation, or the nature of the soul. Neither reincarnation nor transmigration of the soul were common to Aryan religious beliefs.

E. Harappa’s Fall and Aryan Dominance

When the Aryan invasion of India first occurred around 1500 B.C.E., civilization disappeared from South Asia. Only with the development of sedentary agricultural communities and commerce did the basic elements of civilization reappear among the Aryans. Small kingdoms eventually emerged along the upper Ganges and the foothills of the Himalayas. These kingdoms became the foundation for classic Indian civilization.

IV. A Bend in the River and the Beginnings of China

A. Introduction

The first Chinese civilization developed along the Yellow River in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. The Shang greatly expanded irrigation systems begun by prior agricultural cultures and developed a system of writing that defined Chinese civilization. Agricultural societies, drawn by the fertile soil, gravitated to the Ordos bulge along the Yellow River from 8000 B.C.E. By 4000 B.C.E., sedentary agricultural societies spread along the loess zone and provided the agricultural base for Shang civilization. The Yangshao culture, dating to 2500 B.C.E., was based on hunting and fishing supplemented by agriculture. The Longshan culture, beginning about 2000 B.C.E. was more dependent on sedentary agriculture and developed large villages surrounded by walls. As sedentary agriculture expanded, irrigation systems and dikes to control flooding became increasingly significant. Early elites may have developed because of
their ability to control the floods.

B. The Warrior Kings of the Shang Era

The first Chinese dynasty, the Xia, was supposedly founded by Yu, who was responsible for creating the system of dikes along the Yellow River. Whether the Xia actually existed has not been determined, but by 1500 B.C.E. small kingdoms founded by nomadic groups began to emerge along the north China plain. Around 1500 B.C.E., one of these tribes, the Shang, established a kingdom that would provide the basis for Chinese civilization. Like the Aryans, the Shang began as warlike nomads. Unlike the Aryans, the strong kings ruled the Shang warriors. Shang rulers were viewed as direct intermediaries between the Supreme Being and mortals. Kings were regarded as all-powerful rulers who ensured fertility and were responsible for placating the natural spirits.

C. Shang Society

Shang kings lived in cities, but vassal retainers ruled most of the peasant and artisan population of Shang China. Vassals supplied soldiers and collected tribute from the peasants and laborers to support the Shang kings and their courts, in return for which the vassals received control over land and workers. The Shang nobility lived within walled towns in large compounds. Noble family organization was strictly patriarchal. Multi-generational families were widespread only among the nobility. Peasant households were most commonly nuclear. Beneath the peasantry in the Shang social system were large numbers of slaves, many of whom were artisans.

D. Shang Culture

Shang culture featured many rituals designed to placate deities and ensure fertility. Rituals often required sacrifices, including human offerings. When Shang monarchs died, they were buried with retainers and war captives to accompany them in the afterlife. Ancestral veneration grew into a cult of the royal clan. Shang society depended heavily on shamans, who provided predictions of future events based on their interpretation of cracks in heated animal bones and shells. The emphasis on divination gave rise to Chinese writing, used initially to assist in divination.

E. Writing and Chinese Identity

Chinese writing served to bond ethnically and linguistically diverse populations into a single culture. This sense of identity was felt most strongly by elites, but it eventually filtered down to the peasants and artisans.

V. The Decline of the Shang and the Era of Zhou Dominance

A. Introduction

The Zhou, probably Turkic peoples who originally recognized the lordship of the Shang, overthrew their former lords by the end of the 12th century B.C.E. Zhou government was typified by the development of the shi, a class of scholar-administrators. Early rulers of the Zhou extended their empire beyond the borders of the Shang kingdom and ruled more directly than did their predecessors. Unlike the Shang, the Zhou rulers claimed direct ownership of all vassal states. The greatest of the Zhou vassals were often drawn from the royal family. The Zhou ruled through granting fiefs to vassals in return for promises of loyal service. Services of vassalage
were more formalized under the Zhou than their predecessors. Vassals who held lands at some
distance from the royal court were virtually independent. They sent tribute, troops, and laborers
to serve the Zhou as long as the rulers remained powerful. When the Zhou dynasty began to
weaken, the system of vassalage broke down.

B. Changes in the Social Order

Two developments made it unlikely that a feudal system could be maintained permanently in
China. The political concept of the Mandate of Heaven granted Zhou and subsequent Chinese
rulers the right to rule absolutely as long as they did so effectively. The concept of the Mandate
of Heaven, however, provided that rulers who failed to govern effectively could be overthrown
and replaced with a new imperial house. Revolutionary success demonstrated that the new
dynasty enjoyed the Mandate of Heaven. The development of a corps of professional bureaucrats
created a political alternative to government through military vassals.

D. New Patterns of Life

The Zhou established two capitals at Xian and Loyang. They lived separately in one part of the
walled cities, while subject peoples lived in other precincts. Eventually, the palace at Loyang
became the center of the empire. Zhou vassals lived in walled garrison towns surrounded by the
residences of artisans, peasants, and slaves. Under the Zhou, the staple crops of Chinese
agriculture remained millet and wheat, although rice was widely cultivated. Iron implements and
expanded irrigation systems improved agricultural productivity, but much of the increase went to
the Zhou elite. Peasants were subject to demands for labor and military service as well as food
contributions. Peasant communities that were most remote from the garrison towns tended to be
left alone so long as they sent the annual tribute.

E. Migrations and the Expansion of the Chinese Core

Improvements in agricultural technique fueled population growth under the Zhou. Cultivation
was extended into new regions along the north China plain and southward along the coast.
Settlement extended into the Yellow River valley, the Shandong peninsula, and eventually to the
Yangtze River valley.

F. Cultural Change in the Early Zhou Period

Zhou culture was heavily patriarchal, a fact reflected in the increasing dominance of ancestor
veneration within religion. Ancestor worship through elaborate rites replaced sacrifice in Chinese
religion. Increased emphasis was placed on proper performance of rites, a practice which
extended from religion into other aspects of Zhou society.

G. The End of the Early or Western Zhou

In the eighth century B.C.E., the Zhou emperors lost control over much of western China. The
last of the Zhou rulers transferred their authority to the eastern capital of Loyang. The Eastern
Zhou were less powerful rulers whose actual authority scarcely extended beyond their capital.
Former vassals warred among themselves to establish rival kingdoms. The political chaos
produced a reaction among the shi, or professional bureaucrats, that produced some of China’s
most important thinkers.
VI. Global Connections: Contrasting Legacies: Harrapan and Early Chinese Civilizations

Early China, like Mesopotamia, was a source of civilizing influences for many other civilizations, particularly in terms of writing and political organization. Early China also had a critical impact in engineering and silk manufacture. Harrapa, in contrast, had little long-term influence, despite widespread extensive trade networks. Harrapa’s greater vulnerability to natural calamities, climate change, and nomadic migrants explains much of this difference.
TIMELINE

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

- Agricultural society in Indus River valley
- Composition of Vedas
- Rise of Zhou dynasty
- Rise of Shang dynasty
- Rise of Harappan civilization
- End of Western Zhou

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

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

- Monsoons
- Mohenjo-Daro
- Vedas
- Yoga
- Polyandry
- Loess
- Ordos Bend
- Vassal retainers
- Nuclear families
- Wu
- Shi
- Harappan civilization
- Horned god
- Indra
- Varnas
- Huanghe River valley
- Yangshao culture
- Xia
- Ideographic writing
- Oracles
- Feudalism
- Tian
- Harappa
- Aryans
- Dasas
- Polygamy
- Yu
- Longshan culture
- Shang
- Extended families
- Zhou
- Mandate of Heaven
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.

Indus River  
Harappa  
Huanghe River  
Ganges River  
Himalaya Mountains  
Xian and Loyang

1. To what extent did the early Asian civilizations continue to be dependent on river systems for their origins? What major river systems are involved?

2. What physical features divide the Indian and Chinese civilizations?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

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

1. In what ways was Harappan civilization like Mesopotamian civilization?
2. What is the evidence for an autocratic form of government in Harappan society?
3. What are the causes for the decline of Harappan civilization?
4. What impact did the Aryan migration have on the level of Harappan civilization?
5. How was Aryan society organized?
6. What was the nature of the formative Chinese agricultural system? What were its primary elements?
7. What was the nature of the political organization of Shang China?
8. What was the social organization of Shang China?
9. What was the relation between Shang religion and the development of writing?
10. What was the basis of the Zhou government?
11. What checks were there to the growing absolutism of the Zhou?
12. In what ways did the Zhou kingdom expand? Where did expansion occur?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

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

1. Compare and contrast Harappan and early Chinese civilizations. Consider the agricultural systems, religious practices, and political organization.
2. Contrast the long-term significance of Harrapan and early Chinese civilizations. Discuss the reasons behind their differing influences on subsequent civilizations.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. What was one of the strongest similarities among the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Harappan, and Chinese civilizations?
   a. irrigation of great river systems
   b. lack of a written language
   c. city-state political organization
   d. lack of centralized authority

2. The monsoons were
   a. annual religious rituals to ensure fertility of the soil.
   b. Harappan priests.
   c. citadels found in each of the major cities of Harappan civilization.
   d. seasonal winds that carry rain to the Indian subcontinent.

3. The standardization of construction at all sites in Harappan civilization implies
   a. the lack of wood in the Indus River valley.
   b. the existence of an autocratic authority.
   c. the low level of material technology.
   d. the absence of an organized religion.

4. Which of the following statements best describes the material culture of Harappan civilization?
   a. It was relatively unsophisticated, using only bronze.
   b. It was particularly advanced in the construction of weapons.
   c. It incorporated iron technology following contacts with Hittite culture.
   d. It was technologically superior to the cultures of Mesopotamian civilization.

5. What were the hymns originally used by the Aryans called?
   a. Book of the Dead
   b. Vindics
   c. Vasas
   d. Vedas

6. What sort of relationship did the Aryans maintain with the conquered population of India?
   a. The Aryans immediately incorporated all members of conquered groups who were willing to fight into their armies.
   b. The conquered peoples, called Dasas, were enslaved, and the Aryans prohibited all social relationships with them.
   c. Because the Aryans lacked a system of social stratification, the conquered peoples were soon incorporated into Aryan society.
   d. The conquered people were permitted to enter all ranks of Aryan society except the priesthood.
7. Which of the following was not typical of Aryan household structure?
   a. patriarchal authority
   b. patrilocal marriage customs
   c. patrilineal descent
   d. strict monogamy

8. One of the primary differences between the geography of Chinese civilization and that of Harappan civilization was that
   a. Chinese civilization did not depend on irrigation.
   b. Harappan civilization did not depend on irrigation.
   c. Chinese civilization originated in an area not affected by seasonal monsoons.
   d. Harappan civilization originated in an area not affected by seasonal monsoons.

9. Which of the following was not a feature of Shang religious practices?
   a. human sacrifice
   b. lack of emphasis on burials for the elite
   c. divination through readings of cracks in heated bones
   d. ancestor worship

10. Which of the following best summarizes the early Zhou political system?
    a. independent city-states
    b. tribal government
    c. centralized feudalism
    d. republican government