

HUM C100: INTRODUCTION TO THE HUMANITIES



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Licensing

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1: Welcome to the Humanities

This semester we explore the humanities, those areas of study that take as their subject human interests and activities.

Historical traditions of the West will serve as touchstones for a more global and self-reflective exploration of human accomplishment and artistic traditions.

Much of what we do in the Humanities is archival, discovering, learning about, and preserving documents, artifacts, artworks, and ephemera from across cultures and time. To keep that archive alive and growing, we need to transmit the knowledge.

Often, to learn about humankind, we must also interpret and narrate. That is, we tell stories, which we call histories because they are based on evidence and inference, about the development of societies and cultures. And it is important that we develop [critical perspectives](#) through which we evaluate materials, so that we are able to more accurately reassess transmitted histories and conclusions as well as to interrogate our own biases when interpreting findings.

Based on inferences about how cultures and societies currently function, on historical evidence from paper trails and artifacts, on associations between trade routes or other means of contact, and other forms of inquiry and research, researchers in the humanities are able to piece together how historical humans lived, loved, died, and created.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

1.1: Course Description and SLOs

1.1.1: Course Description

1.1.2: Student Learning Outcomes

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1.1.1: Course Description

A survey of Western Civilization from its roots in prehistory to its current influence throughout the world, this course considers the religious, intellectual, socio-political, philosophical, and cultural values that have influenced the arts of the West.

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1.1.2: Student Learning Outcomes

1. Identify and reflect on how humanistic achievements and the human imagination are reflections of and influenced by culturally grounded practices, values, and beliefs.
 2. Reflect on and communicate about the ways the humanities connect to the student's own lived experience and the world as they know it.
-

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SECTION OVERVIEW

1.2: Guiding Questions

1.2.1: What are the humanities?

1.2.2: Why study the humanities?

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1.2.1: What are the humanities?

This semester we explore the humanities, those areas of study that take as their subject human interests and activities.

Much of what we do in the humanities is archival: discovering, learning about, and preserving documents, artifacts, artworks, and ephemera from across cultures and time. To keep that archive alive and growing, we need to transmit the knowledge.

Often, to learn about humankind, we must also interpret and narrate. That is, we tell stories, which we call histories because they are based on evidence and inference, about the development of societies and cultures. And it is important that we develop critical perspectives through which we evaluate materials so that we are able to more accurately reassess transmitted histories and conclusions as well as to interrogate our own biases when interpreting findings. We'll identify and explore these perspectives later in the semester.

Based on inferences about how cultures and societies currently function, on historical evidence from artifacts and paper trails, on associations between trade routes or other means of contact, and other forms of inquiry and research, researchers in the humanities are able to piece together how historical humans lived, loved, died, and created.

But what can studying the past do for our understanding of contemporary cultures or for planning for the futures of those cultures? How can our understanding of the humanities help us understand our own lived experiences as we look forward to our own futures?

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1.2.2: Why study the humanities?

At the center of the semester's content and exercises, resides these questions:

- how can the study of the humanities impact our daily lives?
- what can the humanities bring to fields like science and technology?
- how do humanistic achievements and the human imagination reflect and shape cultures?

Watch author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's oft-quoted talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." As you watch, consider how our preconceived notions of cultures, histories, and societies contribute to single stories? What's the danger inherent in a single story? How might we push back at such a story? What single stories have you encountered? Be sure to take notes, quoting from Adichie and writing your responses to these and other questions that occur to you. You'll share them in your introductory post.



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Ancient Worlds

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2.2: Early Civilizations

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2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia

2.4: Ancient Egypt

2.5: North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections

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2.10: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

2.11: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas

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2.1: Introduction

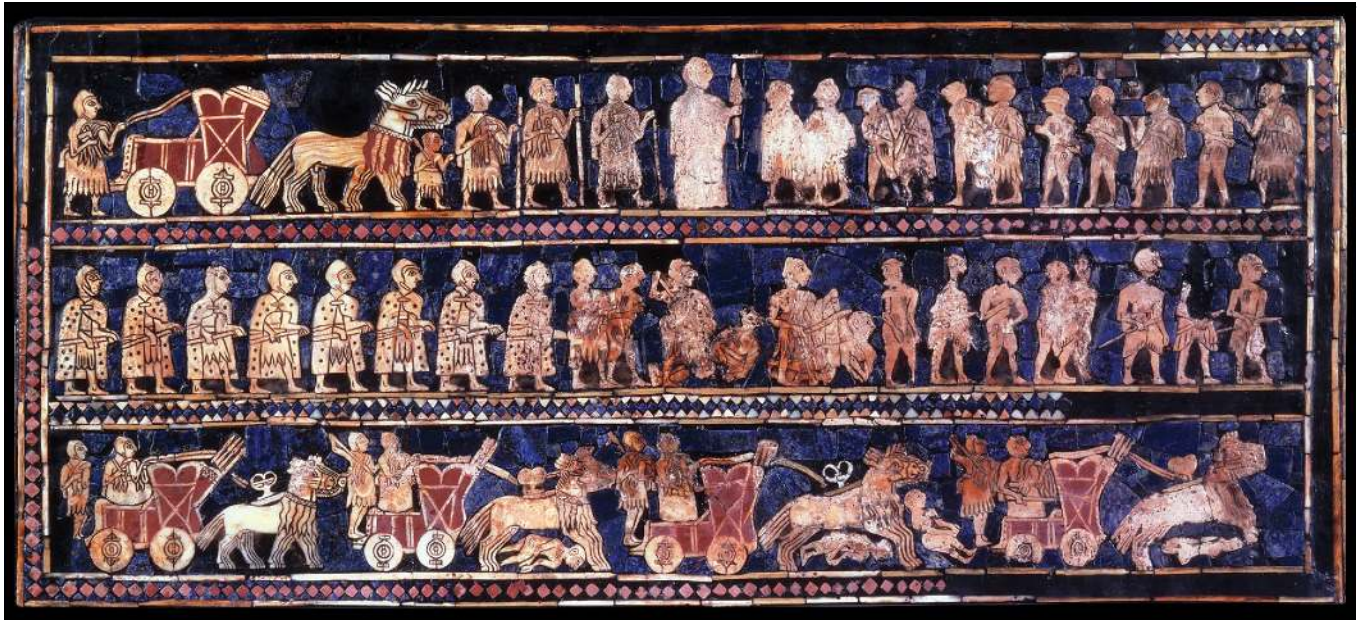


Figure 3.1 The Art of Ur. This intricately ornamented box of mosaic-covered wood was found in a royal tomb in the ancient city of Ur. It dates from about 2550 BCE and exhibits several markers of this era's civilizations, such as a hierarchical society (as the scenes illustrate) and the presence of wealth, leisure, and specialized skills needed to make such an elaborate decorative object. (credit: modification of work "Standard of Ur" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

- 3.1 Early Civilizations
- 3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia
- 3.3 Ancient Egypt
- 3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

The land of Sumer, in today's southern Iraq, was home to some of the largest early cities in human history. In one of these ancient settlements, Ur, a beautiful wooden box was laid in a royal tomb in about 2550 BCE (Figure 3.1). It measures roughly nine by twenty inches (a little bigger than a laptop) and is inlaid with elaborate mosaic figures and borders composed of bits of red limestone, lapis lazuli, and marine shell. This kind of specialized craftsmanship was a hallmark of societies that no longer depended on hunting and gathering for food but rather produced crops capable of sustaining large populations. In turn, they gained enough time and prosperity for some members to focus on artisanal crafts.

The box indicates at least three important things about the civilization that produced it. First, a highly skilled artisan constructed the box and created the mosaics, indicating the presence of specialization of labor. Second, the mosaics show someone who is presumably the king at the center of the top row, directing the soldiers below. These power dynamics suggest new social hierarchies. Finally, the soldiers all appear smaller in the scene than the king, symbolically reflecting their subordinate position and telling us that social stratification had come into existence. All these developments took place gradually over time, bringing slow but enduring change to the lives of the people in Ur and those who lived nearby. Similar changes occurred in the world's other ancient cities.

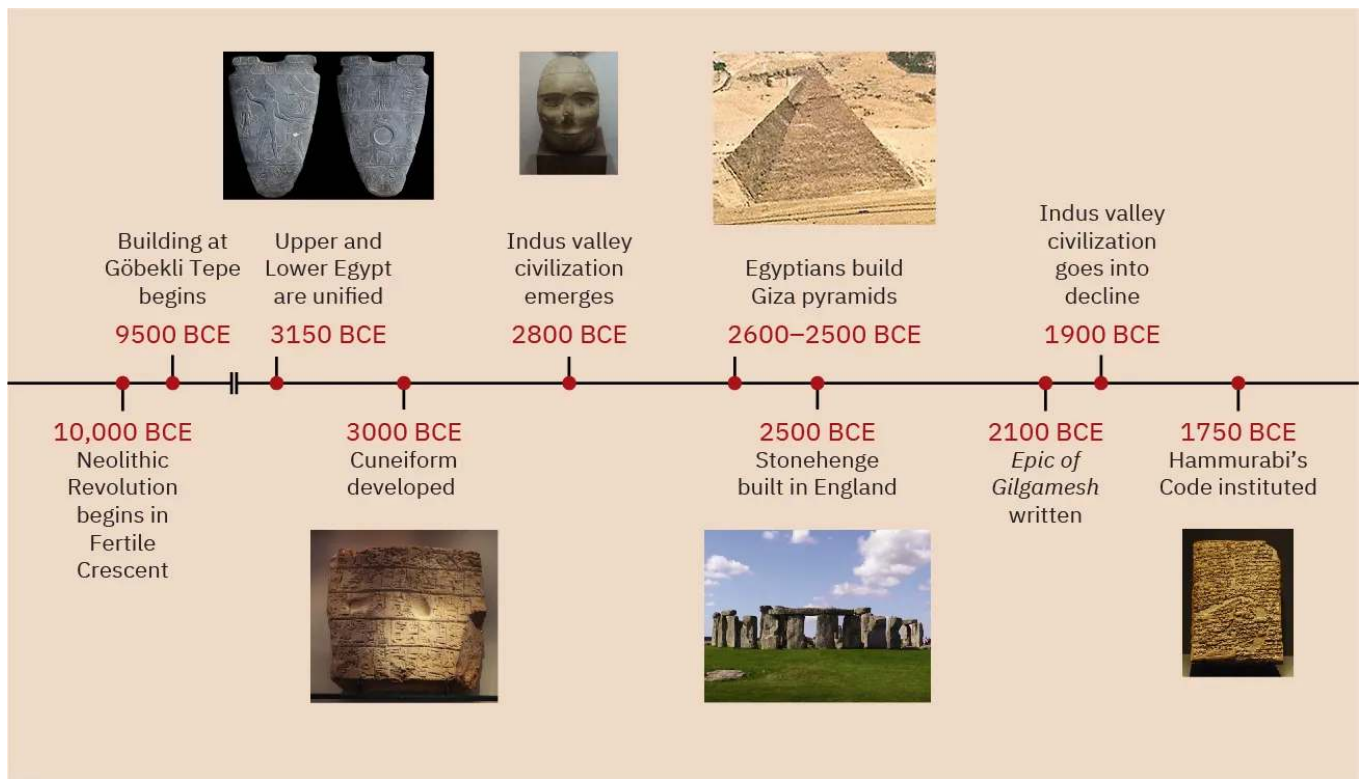


Figure 3.2 Timeline: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit "3000 BCE, cuneiform": modification of work "Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Dynastic Rule": "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Indus Valley": modification of work "Harappan (Indus Valley) Pottery" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "2500 BCE, Giza": "All Gizah Pyramids" by Ricardo Liberato/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit "2500 BCE, Stonehenge": "Stonehenge" by "thegarethwiscombe"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit "1750 BCE": "Prologue of the code of Hammurabi" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



Figure 3.3 Locator Map: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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2.2: Early Civilizations

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the attributes of early civilizations
- Analyze the way human relationships changed with the development of urban areas

Early civilizations, most of which arose along large rivers, were marked by an agriculturally sustained population that remained settled in one area and could number in the tens of thousands. The stability of the population allowed for the development of a discernible culture, which consists of all the different ways a distinct group of people interact with one another and their environment and pass these ways down from generation to generation over time. This is not to say that earlier groups of people lacked social identities. But there were important differences between them and the early civilizations that followed.

The development of early civilizations occurred between 10,000 and 8,000 BCE in just a few specific areas of the world that historians have labeled the “cradles of civilization.” In these locations—today’s Mexico, Peru, China, India/Pakistan, Iraq, and Egypt—the introduction of farming allowed larger populations to settle in one place, and the ability to produce and distribute surpluses of food enabled some people to specialize in such tasks as manufacturing handicrafts, tending to the spiritual world, and governing. The peoples of these cultures experienced radical changes in their lifestyles as well as in the ways their communities interacted with each other and their environments.

Attributes of Early Civilizations

Even after the Neolithic Revolution, many people continued to lead a nomadic or seminomadic existence, hunting and gathering or herding domesticated animals. People produced or gathered only enough materials to meet the immediate food, shelter, and clothing needs of their family unit. Even in societies that adopted farming as a way of life, people grew only enough for their own survival. Moreover, the family unit was self-sufficient and relied on its own resources and abilities to meet its needs. No great differences in wealth existed between families, and each person provided necessary support for the group. Group leaders relied primarily on consensus for decision-making. Order and peace were maintained by negotiations between community elders such as warriors and religious leaders. Stability also became dependent on peaceful relationships with neighboring societies, often built on trade.

Early civilizations, by contrast, arose where large numbers of people lived in a relatively small, concentrated area and worked to produce a surplus of food and other materials, which they distributed through a system of exchange. For farming communities, this food surplus meant family size grew to six or seven children and caused the global human population to skyrocket. Population growth rooted in agricultural production led to larger cities, in which the food produced by farmers in outlying rural areas was distributed among the population of the urban center, where food was not produced. This system of specialization was a key feature of early civilizations and what distinguished them from previous societies. Individuals performed specific tasks such as farming, writing, or performing religious rituals. People came to rely on the exchange of goods and services to obtain necessary supplies. For example, artisans specializing in craft production relied on farmers to cultivate the food they needed to thrive. In turn, farmers depended upon artisans to produce tools and clothing for them. A weaver acquired wool from a shepherd and produced cloth that might then be given to a physician in exchange for medicine or a priest as payment for conducting a religious ritual.

The system of exchange, however, created hierarchies within society. Those who could accumulate more goods became wealthy, and they passed that wealth from one generation to the next. This wealth led, in turn, to the accumulation of political and religious power, while those who continued to labor in production remained lower on the social scale. This social stratification, another characteristic of early civilizations, means that families and individuals could vary greatly in their wealth and status. Those who share the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata, and these strata or classes are ordered from highest to lowest based on their social standing.

The nature of government also changed as populations grew. In smaller groups, decisions about war and migration were made in concert because no individual or family was likely to survive without the others. Also, in small communities, order and peace were often enforced at the family level. If someone acted badly, the customs of the society were brought to bear on them to correct the offending behavior. For example, the San of South Africa held a ritual dance to contact their elders for advice on how to correct a difficult situation. The act of coming together was often enough for the community to heal. In larger civilizations, officials such as priests and kings possessed the authority to command the obedience of subjects, who relied on the powerful to protect them. In

return for physical protection and the promise of prosperity, farmers and artisans provided food and goods and, eventually, paid taxes. This exchange served to reinforce both the developing social hierarchy and the specialization of labor.

As civilizations developed around the world in this way, they shared the features noted. Their existence did not mean the end of older ways of living, however. Nomadic and seminomadic peoples not only remained an integral part of the ancient world, they also provided crucial resources and a vehicle for the exchange of knowledge and culture. They were particularly important as a means of connecting one large city to another.

The First Urban Societies

Around 10,000 BCE, wheat was first domesticated in what is today northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and western Iran, and also in Syria and Israel. This region is commonly called the Fertile Crescent (because of its shape). It includes Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), southern Anatolia (modern Turkey), and the Levant (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine) and has yielded the earliest evidence of agriculture (Figure 3.4). This same region saw the rise of the first urban areas in the Neolithic Age, often called Neolithic cities. Examples include Jericho (8300–6500 BCE) along the Jordan River in what is today the Palestinian Territories, and Çatalhöyük (7200–6000 BCE) in southeastern Turkey. Archaeologists have established that these early urban areas had populations as high as six thousand.



Figure 3.4 The Fertile Crescent. This broad swath of land (shown in green) in what is now Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Turkey was home to the world's first cities, including Çatalhöyük and Jericho. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Link to Learning

Hunter-gatherer cultures also built large structures, such as the monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey and at Poverty Point in Louisiana in the United States. Listen to this [TEDx Talk lecture by the archaeologist who excavated at Göbekli Tepe](#) to find out more about the site. You can learn more about the Poverty Point culture by exploring the [Poverty Point website](#). Look especially at “History and Artifacts.”

Neolithic settlements depended upon the transition to agricultural production to sustain their populations. Such developments were also accompanied by increasing complexity in other areas of life, such as religion. An agricultural surplus enabled religious specialists to devote time to performing bull sacrifices at Çatalhöyük, for example, and freed artisans to hone their skills to create the frescoes that decorated the interior space where these sacrifices occurred. Some form of government must have organized the labor and materials necessary to construct the walls and tower at Jericho, which may have served as an observatory to mark the passage of the solar year. In both Jericho and Çatalhöyük, a shared belief system, or unity behind a leader, must have inspired the inhabitants to labor in the fields and distribute their agricultural surplus. At Jericho, the community may have been united by its veneration of ancestors, whose skulls were decorated and revered as idols. The people of Çatalhöyük may have offered their bull sacrifices to a mother-deity, possibly represented by small figurines of a woman that archaeologists have discovered there.

Beyond the Book

Interpreting Evidence from Neolithic Cities

Prehistoric peoples left no writings behind, and historians and archaeologists can only attempt to understand their beliefs and attitudes by studying the artifacts they produced. This is challenging because ancient societies had very different religious and social systems from our own. But even the most convincing interpretations may not persuade everyone. We may simply never know what certain artifacts meant to the people who created them.

Consider the famous tower of Jericho, built around 8000 BCE (Figure 3.5). Careful excavation has revealed that the tower likely took more than thirty years to build and had stairs for climbing to the top through the center. Some believe it was made for defensive purposes; others think it was a religious monument or even an observatory. Regardless of its use, it seems likely the city had some type of governing system that served to organize the labor. But that assumption too could be in error.



Figure 3.5 The Tower of Jericho. Built around 8000 BCE, this twenty-eight-foot-tall tower at the Neolithic city of Jericho is one of the earliest stone monuments in the world, but its precise purpose remains unclear. (credit: "Tower of Jericho" by Reinhard Dietrich/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As another example, consider a decorated skull found in Neolithic Jericho (Figure 3.6). An ancient artisan made it by plastering over a human skull and placing pieces of shell in the eye sockets. Historians and archaeologists have speculated that the people of Jericho venerated such skulls, which may have been seen as relics of ancestors and objects of worship. But perhaps the skull meant something else entirely.



Figure 3.6 Skull from Jericho. More than nine thousand years ago, an artisan at Jericho covered this human skull with plaster and placed shells in the eye sockets, possibly to celebrate a distant ancestor. (credit: "A plastered skull from the ancient city of Jericho in Palestine 7000 BCE" by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Evidence from the Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük demonstrates that its people venerated bulls. Archaeologists have discovered numerous bucranium (bull heads and horns) at the site (Figure 3.7). But what did these bull symbols mean? Popular interpretation suggests they symbolize the son and lover of an important mother-deity. Other explanations call them female symbols of life and rebirth. Still others propose different interpretations.



Figure 3.7 Bull Decorations at Çatalhöyük. This reconstruction of a room at Çatalhöyük depicts several bucranium decorating the walls. Interpretations of their meaning vary. (credit: "A reconstructed sanctuary of Catal Hüyük" by Stipich Béla/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

- What do scholars' interpretations suggest about the way these artifacts are studied?
- Do their interpretations sound convincing to you? What others can you think of, given what you have read and seen?

The Neolithic cities of Jericho and Çatalhöyük were some of the earliest to emerge. But they are not the only such sites. As early as 7000 BCE, a Neolithic settlement appeared in modern Pakistan, at a site today known as Mehrgarh, whose inhabitants engaged in long-distance trade, grew barley, and raised goats and sheep. Comparable Neolithic settlements in China emerged around 8000 BCE along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, where people cultivated millet and rice. A few thousand years later in the Americas, Neolithic settlements sprang up in both Mesoamerica and the Andes Mountains region.

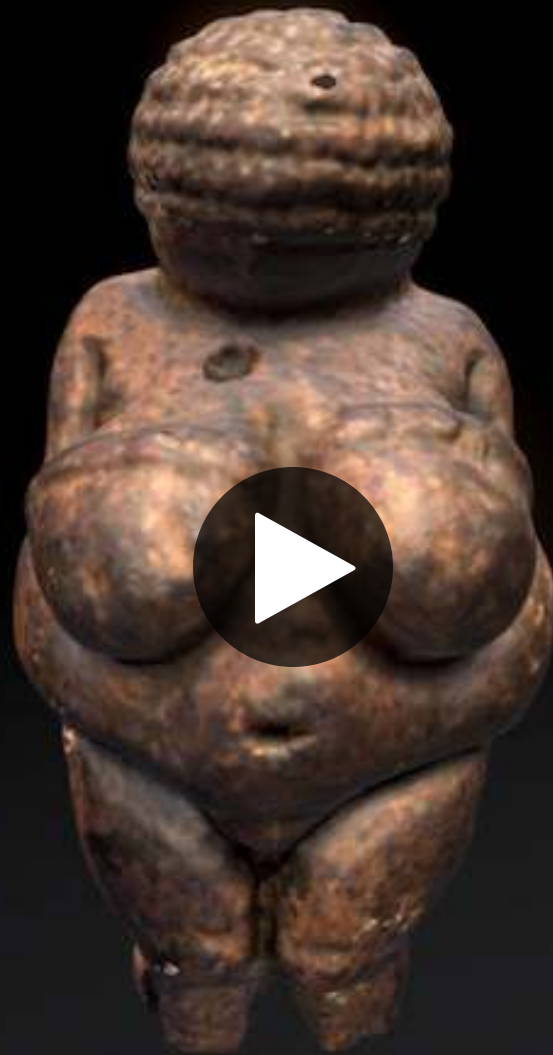
Not all the Neolithic settlements endured. Çatalhöyük, for example, was ultimately abandoned around 6000 BCE and never reoccupied. Jericho, on the other hand, was abandoned and resettled a few times and is still a functioning city today. What is important about these Neolithic settlements is what they can tell us about the long transition between the emergence of agriculture and the eventual rise of early civilizations thousands of years later in places like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley.

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2.2.1: Venus of Willendorf



Venus of Willendorf
by BrightonMuseums



Venus of Willendorf by BrightonMuseums on Sketchfab

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2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of civilization in Ancient Mesopotamia
- Discuss the political history of Mesopotamia from the early Sumerian city-states to the rise of Old Babylon
- Describe the economy, society, and religion of Ancient Mesopotamia

In the fourth millennium BCE, the world's first great cities arose in southern Mesopotamia, or the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, then called Sumer. The ancient Sumerians were an inventive people responsible for a host of technological advances, most notably a sophisticated writing system. Even after the Sumerian language ceased to be spoken early in the second millennium BCE, Sumerian literary works survived throughout the whole of Mesopotamia and were often collected by later cities and stored in the first libraries.

The Rise and Eclipse of Sumer

The term *Mesopotamia*, or “the land between the rivers” in Greek, likely originated with the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and has become the common name for the place between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq. The rivers flow north to south, from the Taurus Mountains of eastern Turkey to the Persian Gulf, depositing fertile soil along their banks. Melting snow and rain from the mountains carry this topsoil to the river valleys below. In antiquity, the river flow was erratic, and flooding was frequent but unpredictable. The need to control it and manage the life-giving water led to the building of cooperative irrigation projects.

Agricultural practices reached Mesopotamia by around 8000 BCE, if not earlier. However, for about two millennia afterward, populations remained quite small, typically living in small villages of between one hundred and two hundred people. Beginning around 5500 BCE, some had begun to establish settlements in southern Mesopotamia, a wetter and more forbidding environment. It was here that the Sumerian civilization emerged (Figure 3.8). By around 4500 BCE, some of the once-small farming villages had become growing urban centers, some with thousands of residents. During the course of the fourth millennium BCE (3000s BCE), urbanization exploded in the region. By the end of the millennium, there were at least 124 villages with about one hundred residents each, twenty towns with as many as two thousand residents, another twenty small urban centers of about five thousand residents, and one large city, Uruk, with a population that may have been as high as fifty thousand. This growth helped make Sumer the earliest civilization to develop in Mesopotamia.



Figure 3.8 Early Sumer. By the end of the fourth millennium BCE, urban areas of varying sizes dotted the landscape in Sumer. Uruk was the largest. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The fourth millennium BCE in Sumer was also a period of technological innovation. One important invention made after 4000 BCE was the process for manufacturing bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, which marked the beginning of the Bronze Age in Mesopotamia. In this period, bronze replaced stone as the premier material for tools and weapons and remained so for nearly three thousand years. The ancient Sumerians also developed the plow, the wheel, and irrigation techniques that used small channels and canals with dikes for diverting river water into fields. All these developments allowed for population growth and the continued rise of cities by expanding agricultural production and the distribution of agricultural goods. In the area of science, the Sumerians developed a sophisticated mathematical system based on the numbers sixty, ten, and one.

One of the greatest inventions of this period was writing. The Sumerians developed cuneiform, a script characterized by wedge-shaped symbols that evolved into a phonetic script, that is, one based on sounds, in which each symbol stood for a syllable (Figure 3.9). They wrote their laws, religious tracts, and property transactions on clay tablets, which became very durable once baked, just like the clay bricks the Sumerians used to construct their buildings. The clay tablets held records of commercial exchanges, including contracts and receipts as well as taxes and payrolls. Cuneiform also allowed rulers to record their laws and priests to preserve their rituals and sacred stories. In these ways, it helped facilitate both economic growth and the formation of states.



Figure 3.9 Sumerian Cuneiform. Cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneus* (meaning “wedge”), was created by pressing a stylus of reed into wet clay to create a meaningful arrangement of wedge shapes. This clay cone from circa 1934–1924 BCE includes a dedication to the ruler of the city of Isin in southern Mesopotamia. (credit: “Votive cone with cuneiform inscription of Lipit-Eshtar” by Anonymous Gift, 1971/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Dueling Voices

The Invention of Writing in Sumer

Writing developed independently in several parts of the world, but the earliest known evidence of its birth has been found in Sumer, where cuneiform script emerged as a genuine writing system by around 3000 BCE, if not earlier. But questions remain about how and why ancient peoples began reproducing their spoken language in symbolic form.

Archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat argued in the 1990s that small clay representations of numbers and objects, often called “tokens,” date from thousands of years before the development of cuneiform writing and were its precursor. These tokens, she believed, were part of an accounting system, and each type represented a different good: livestock, grains, and oils. Some were found within hollow baseball-sized clay balls now called “bullae,” which were marked with pictures of the tokens inside. Schmandt-Besserat believed the pictures portray the type of transaction in which the goods represented by the tokens were exchanged, and thus they were a crucial step toward writing. Over time, she suggested, the marked bullae gave way to flat clay tablets recording the transactions, and the first truly written records emerged (Figure 3.10).



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.10 Sumerian Clay Tablet. One theory holds that the antecedents of Sumerian clay tablets inscribed with writing like this one (a) were small clay tokens (b) and the pictures of them on the clay “bullae” vessels that held them. (credit a: modification of work “Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet” by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work “Clay accounting tokens Susa Louvre” by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Schmandt-Besserat’s linear interpretation is still one of the best-known explanations for the emergence of writing. But it is hardly the only one. One scholar who offers a different idea is the French Assyriologist Jean-Jacques Glassner. Glassner believes that rather than being an extension of accounting techniques, early writing was a purposeful attempt to render the Sumerian language in script. He equates the development of writing, which gives meaning to a symbol, to the process by which Mesopotamian priests interpreted omens for divining the future. Writing allowed people to place language, a creation of the gods, under human control. Glassner’s argument is complex and relies on ancient works of literature and various theoretical approaches, including that of postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Many disagree with Glassner’s conclusions, and modern scholars concede that tokens likely played an important role, but probably not in the linear way Schmandt-Besserat proposed. Uncertainty about the origin of writing in Sumer still abounds, and the scholarly debate continues.

- Why do you think Schmandt-Besserat’s argument was once so appealing?
- If you lived in a society with no writing, what might prompt you to develop a way to represent your language in symbolic form?

Cuneiform was a very complex writing system, and literacy remained the monopoly of an elite group of highly trained writing specialists, the scribes. But the script was also highly flexible and could be used to symbolize a great number of sounds, allowing subsequent Mesopotamian cultures such as the Akkadians, Babylonians, and many more to adapt it to their own languages. Since historians deciphered cuneiform in the nineteenth century, they have read the thousands of clay tablets that survived over the centuries and learned much about the history, society, economy, and beliefs of the ancient Sumerians and other peoples of Mesopotamia.

The Sumerians were polytheists, people who revered many gods. Each Sumerian city had its own patron god, however, one with whom the city felt a special connection and whom it honored above the others. For example, the patron god of Uruk was Inanna, the goddess of fertility; the city of Nippur revered the weather god Enlil; and Ur claimed the moon god Sin. Each city possessed an immense temple complex for its special deity, which included a site where the deity was worshipped and religious rituals were performed. This site, the ziggurat, was a stepped tower built of mud-brick with a flat top (Figure 3.11). At its summit stood a roofed structure that housed the sacred idol or image of the temple's deity. The temple complex also included the homes of the priests, workshops for artisans who made goods for the temple, and storage facilities to meet the needs of the temple workers.



Figure 3.11 The Ziggurat of Ur. The partially reconstructed remains of the once-great ziggurat of Ur (near the modern city of Nasiriyah in Iraq) demonstrate the size of these huge temples and the enormous human resources spent on their construction. When it was completed in the twenty-first century BCE, this structure had additional tiers upon the large base shown and was about one hundred feet high. (credit: "Ziggurat of Ur" by "Tla2006"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Sumerians were clearly eager to please their gods by placing them at the center of their society. These gods could be fickle, faithless, and easily stirred to anger. If displeased with the people, they might bring famine or conquest. Making sure the gods were praised and honored was thus a way of ensuring prosperity. Praising them, however, implied different things for different social tiers in Sumer. For common people, it meant living a virtuous life and giving to the poor. For priests and priestesses, it consisted of performing the various rituals at the temple complexes. And for rulers honoring the gods, it meant ensuring that the temples were properly funded, maintained, and regularly beautified and enlarged if possible.

By the Early Dynastic Period (c. 2650 BCE–2400 BCE), powerful dynasties of kings called *lugals* had established themselves as rulers of the cities. In each city, the *lugals* rose to power primarily as warlords, since the Sumerian cities often waged war against each other for control of farmland and access to water as well as other natural resources. *Lugals* legitimized their authority through the control of the religious institutions of the city. For example, at Ur, the daughter of the reigning *lugal* always served as the high priestess of the moon god Sin, the chief deity at Ur.

The *lugals* at Ur during this period, the so-called First Dynasty of Ur, were especially wealthy, as reflected in the magnificent beehive-shaped tombs in which they were buried. In these tombs, precious goods such as jewelry and musical instruments were stored, along with the bodies of servants who were killed and placed in the tomb to accompany the rulers to the Land of the Dead. One of the more spectacular tombs belonged to a woman of Ur called Pu-Abi, who was buried wearing an elaborate headdress and might have been a queen (Figure 3.12). The most famous *lugal* in all Sumer in this early period was Gilgamesh of Uruk, whose legendary exploits were recounted later in fantastical form in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.



Figure 3.12 Sumerian Gold Headdress. The striking beauty and quality of this gold and lapis lazuli headdress from circa 2600 BCE have convinced some that the woman wearing it in the Ur tomb where it was found might have been a queen. Others believe she was simply an attendant, though an elaborately dressed one. (credit: modification of work "Headdress" by Dodge Fund, 1933/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the world's earliest examples of epic literature. To understand this ancient tale, first written down in the form we know today around 2100 BCE, read the [overview of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*](#) provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has a notable collection of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts.

The Rise of the World's First Empire

Around 2300 BCE, the era of the independent Sumerian city-state, a political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls, came to an end. Sumer and indeed all of Mesopotamia was conquered by Sargon of Akkad, who created the first-known empire, in this case, a number of regional powers under the control of one person. The word "Akkad" in his name was a reference to the Akkadians, a group that settled in central Mesopotamia, north of Sumer, around the ancient city of Kish. Over time, the Akkadians adopted Sumerian culture and adapted cuneiform to their own language, a language of the Semitic family that includes the Arabic and Hebrew spoken today. They also identified their own gods with the gods of the Sumerians and adopted Sumerian myths. For example, the Akkadians identified the fertility goddess Inanna with their own goddess Ishtar.

Sargon conquered not only Sumer but also what is today northern Iraq, Syria, and southwestern Iran. While the precise details of his origin and rise to power are not known, scholars believe the story Sargon told about himself, at least, has likely been accurately preserved in the *Legend of Sargon*, written two centuries after his death as a purported autobiography. It is a familiar story of a scrappy young hero born in humble circumstances and rising on his own merits to become a great leader. The *Legend* relates how,

when Sargon was a baby, his unwed mother put him in a basket and cast it on the Euphrates River. A farmer found and raised him, and Ishtar loved Sargon and elevated him from a commoner to a great king and conqueror.

This interesting tale would have certainly been a powerful piece of propaganda justifying Sargon's rule and endearing him to the common people, and some of it may even be true. But from what historians can tell, Sargon's rise to power likely occurred during a period of turmoil as his kingdom of Kish, of which he had likely seized control, came under attack by another king named Lugalzagesi. Sargon's eventual defeat of Lugalzagesi and conquest of all of Sumer proved to be the beginning of a larger conquest of Mesopotamia. The Akkadian Empire that Sargon created lasted for about a century and a half, officially coming to an end in the year 2193 BCE (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.13 The World's First Empire. The Akkadian Empire reached its greatest geographic extent under its first emperor, Sargon of Akkad. At Sargon's death in 2279 BCE, it included all of Mesopotamia, and his armies were marching into Syria and Anatolia. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

One of the rivals of the Akkadian Empire was the city-state of Ebla, located in northwestern Syria. At some point, its people had adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their own language, which, like Akkadian, belonged to the Semitic family of languages, and archaeologists have discovered thousands of cuneiform tablets at the site. These tablets reveal that Ebla especially worshipped the storm god Adad, who was honored with the title "Ba'al" or lord. More than one thousand years later in the Iron Age, people in this region still worshipped Baal, who was the main rival of Yahweh for the affections of the ancient Israelites.

Other rivals of the Akkadians were the Elamites, who inhabited the region to the immediate southeast of Mesopotamia in southwest Iran and whose city of Susa arose around 4000 BCE. The art and architecture of the Elamites suggest a strong Sumerian influence. They developed their own writing system around 3000 BCE, even though they adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their language later in the third millennium BCE. The Elamites also worshipped their own distinct deities, such as Insushinak, the Lord of the Dead. Both Elam and Ebla eventually suffered defeat at the hands of the Akkadians.

In the year 2193 BCE, however, the Akkadian Empire collapsed. The precise reason is not entirely clear. However, some ancient accounts point to the incursions of the nomadic Gutu tribes, whose original homes were located in the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran, northwest of Mesopotamia. These Gutu were originally pastoralists, who lived off their herds of livestock and moved from place to place to find pasture for their animals. While the Gutu tribes certainly did move into the Akkadian Empire toward its end, modern scholarship suggests that the empire was likely experiencing internal decline and famine before this. The Gutu appear to have exploited this weakness rather than triggering it. Regardless, for around a century, the Gutu ruled over Sumer and adopted its culture as their own. Around 2120 BCE, however, the Sumerians came together under the leadership of the cities of Uruk and Ur and expelled the Gutu from their homeland.

Later Empires in Mesopotamia

While Sargon's empire lasted only a few generations, his conquests dramatically transformed politics in Mesopotamia. The era of independent city-states waned, and over the next few centuries, a string of powerful Mesopotamian rulers were able to build their own empires, often using the administrative techniques developed by Sargon as a model. For example, beginning about 2112 BCE, all Sumer was again united under the Third Dynasty of Ur as the Gutu were driven out. The rulers of this dynasty held the title of *lugal* of all Sumer and Akkad, and they were also honored as gods. They built temples in the Sumerian city of Nippur, which was sacred to the storm god Enlil, the ruler of the gods in the Sumerian pantheon. The most famous *lugal* of this dynasty was Ur-Nammu (c. 2150 BCE), renowned for his works of poetry as well as for the law code he published.

At its height, the Third Dynasty extended its control over both southern and northern Mesopotamia. But by the end of the third millennium, change was on the horizon. Foreign invaders from the north, east, and west put tremendous pressure on the empire, and its rulers increased their military preparedness and even constructed a 170-mile fortification wall to keep them out. While these strategies were somewhat effective, they appear to have only postponed the inevitable as Amorites, Elamites, and other groups eventually poured in and raided cities across the land. By about 2004 BCE, Sumer had crumbled, and even Ur was violently sacked by the invaders.

Link to Learning

The sack of Ur by the Elamites and others was the inspiration for a lament or song of mourning that became a classic of Sumerian literature. Read [The Lament for Urim](#) and pay attention to the way the writer attributes the destruction to the caprice of the gods; the actual invaders are merely tools. For descriptions of the destruction itself, focus on lines 161–229.

In the centuries after 2004 BCE, the migration of Amorites into Mesopotamia resulted in the gradual disappearance of Sumerian as a spoken language. People in the region came to speak Amorite, which belonged to the family of Semitic languages. Nonetheless, scribes continued to preserve and write works in Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform. Sumerian and Akkadian became the languages of religious rituals, hymns, and prayers, as well as classic literary works such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Consequently, the literary output of these earlier cultures was preserved and transmitted to the new settlers. When nomadic Amorite tribes settled in Mesopotamia, they eventually established new cities such as Mari, Asshur, and Babylon, and they adopted much of the culture they encountered. The ancient Sumerian cities of Larsa and Isin of this era also preserved these cultural traditions, even as they came under the rule of Amorite kings.

Hammurabi, the energetic ruler of Babylon during the first half of the eighteenth century BCE, defeated the kings of the rival cities of Mari and Larsa and created an empire that encompassed nearly all of Mesopotamia. To unify this new empire, Hammurabi initiated the construction of irrigation projects, built new temples at Nippur, and published his legal edicts throughout his realm. Hammurabi had these edicts inscribed on stone pillars erected in different places in the empire to inform his subjects about proper behavior and the laws of the land. Being especially clear, the Code of Hammurabi far outlived the king who created it. It also provides us with a fascinating window into how Mesopotamian society functioned at this time.

In Their Own Words

The Law in Old Babylon

Remarkable for its clarity, the Code of Hammurabi may have introduced concepts like the presumption of innocence and the use of evidence. It informed legal systems in Mesopotamia for many centuries after Hammurabi's death (Figure 3.14).





Figure 3.14 The Code of Hammurabi. This stele found in Susa (modern Iran) is the most complete example of Hammurabi's code. An engraving of Hammurabi standing before the sun-god Shamash tops the column, with a statement that the code is to "bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; [and] to further the well-being of mankind." (credit: "Stele of Hammurabi" by "Rlunaro"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Code of Hammurabi promoted the principle that punishment should fit the crime, but penalties often depended on social class:

199. If [a man] put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

Many edicts concern marriage, adultery, children, and marriage property.

129. If a man's wife be surprised with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.

150. If a man give his wife a field, garden, and house and a deed therefor, if then after the death of her husband the sons raise no claim, then the mother may bequeath all to one of her sons whom she prefers, and need leave nothing to his brothers.

A good number of the code's edicts concern the settling of commercial disputes:

9. If anyone lose an article, and find it in the possession of another [who says] "A merchant sold it to me, I paid for it before witnesses," . . . The judge shall examine their testimony—both of the witnesses before whom the price was paid, and of the witnesses who identify the lost article on oath. The merchant is then proved to be a thief and shall be put to death. The owner of the lost article receives his property, and he who bought it receives the money he paid from the estate of the merchant.

48. If anyone owe a debt for a loan, and a storm prostrates the grain, or the harvest fail, or the grain does not grow for lack of water; in that year he need not give his creditor any grain, he washes his debt-tablet in water and pays no rent for this year.

—"Hammurabi's Code of Laws," c. 1780 BCE, translated by L.W. King

- What do these edicts suggest about the different social tiers in Babylonian society? How were they organized?
- Was marriage similar to or different from marriage today?
- Do the edicts for resolving economic disputes seem fair to you? Why or why not?

While Hammurabi's empire lasted a century and a half, much of the territory he conquered began falling away from Babylon's control shortly after he died. The empire continued to dwindle in size until 1595 BCE, when an army of Hittites from central Anatolia in the north (modern Turkey) sacked the city of Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Kassites from the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran conquered Babylon and southern Mesopotamia and settled there, unlike the Hittites who had returned to their Anatolian home. The Kassites established a dynasty that ruled over Babylon for nearly five hundred years, to the very end of the Bronze Age. Like the Gutis and the Amorites before them, over time, the Kassite rulers adopted the culture of their Mesopotamian subjects.

Society and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia

Thanks to the preservation of cuneiform clay tablets and the discovery and translation of law codes and works of literature, historians have at their disposal a wealth of information about Mesopotamian society. The study of these documents and the archaeological excavations carried out in Mesopotamia have allowed them to reconstruct the empire's economy.

We know now that temples and royal palaces were not merely princely residences and places for religious rituals; they also functioned as economic redistribution centers. For example, agricultural goods were collected from farmers as taxes by civic and religious officials, who then stored them to provide payments to the artisans and merchants they employed. Palaces and temples thus needed to possess massive storage facilities. Scribes kept records in cuneiform of all the goods collected and distributed by these institutions. City gates served as areas where farmers, artisans, and merchants could congregate and exchange goods. Precious metals such as gold often served as a medium of exchange, but these goods had to be weighed and measured during commercial exchanges, since coinage and money as we understand it today did not emerge until the Iron Age, a millennium later.

Society in southern Mesopotamia was highly urban. About 70 to 80 percent of the population lived in cities, but not all were employed as artisans, merchants, or other traditional urban roles. Rather, agriculture and animal husbandry accounted for a majority of a city's economic production. Much of the land was controlled by the temples, kings, or other powerful landowners and was worked by semi-free peasants who were tied to the land. The rest of the land included numerous small plots worked by the free peasants who made up about half the population. A much smaller portion was made up of enslaved people, typically prisoners of war or persons who had committed crimes or gone into debt. A man could sell his own children into slavery to cover a debt.

Much of the hard labor performed in the fields was done by men and boys, while the wives, mothers, and daughters of merchants and artisans were sometimes fully engaged in running family businesses. Cuneiform tablets tell us that women oversaw the business affairs of their families, especially when husbands were merchants who often traveled far from home. For example, cuneiform tablets from circa 1900 BCE show that merchants from Ashur in northern Mesopotamia conducted trade with central Anatolia and wrote letters to their female family members back home. Women were also engaged in the production of textiles like wool and linen. They not only produced these textiles in workshops with their own hands, but some appear to have held managerial positions within the textile industry.

Free peasant farmers, artisans, and merchants were all commoners. This put them in a higher social position than the semi-free peasants and slaves but lower than the elite nobility, who made up a very small percentage of the population and whose ranks included priests, official scribes, and military leaders. This aristocratic elite often received land in payment for their services to the kings and collected rents in kind from their peasant tenants. Social distinctions were also reflected in the law. For example, aspects of Hammurabi's law code called for punishments for causing physical harm to another to be equal to the harm inflicted. This principle is best summarized in the line "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." However, the principle applied only to victims and perpetrators of the same social class. An aristocrat convicted of the murder of a fellow noble paid with their life, while an aristocrat who harmed or murdered a commoner might be required only to pay a fine.

Men and women were not equal under the Code of Hammurabi. A man was free to have multiple wives and divorce a wife at will, whereas a woman could divorce her husband only if she could prove he had been unkind to her without reason. However, a woman from a family of means could protect her position in a marriage if her family put up a dowry, which could be land or goods. Upon marriage, the husband obtained the dowry, but if he divorced or was unkind to his wife, he had to return it to her and her family.

Cuneiform tablets have also allowed historians to read stories about the gods and heroes of Mesopotamian cultures. Mesopotamians revered many different gods associated with forces of nature. These were anthropomorphic deities who not only had divine powers but also frequently acted on very human impulses like anger, fear, annoyance, and lust. Examples include Utu, the god of the sun (Figure 3.15); Inanna (known to the Akkadians as Ishtar), the goddess of fertility; and Enlil (whose equivalent in other Mesopotamian cultures was Marduk), the god of wind and rain. The ancient Mesopotamians held that the gods were visible in the sky as heavenly bodies like stars, the moon, the sun, and the planets. This belief led them to pay close attention to these bodies, and over time, they developed a sophisticated understanding of their movement. This knowledge allowed them to predict astronomical events like eclipses and informed their development of a twelve-month calendar.



Figure 3.15 The God Utu. This limestone relief of the Mesopotamian god Utu (known as Shamash among the Akkadians) is part of the larger Tablet of Shamash created in the early ninth century BCE. Here Utu is shown seated, holding the rod-and-ring, an ancient symbol reflecting the balance of power between the palace and the temple. (credit: "Tablet of Shamash" by "Katolophyromai"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

People in Mesopotamia believed human beings were created to serve the gods (Figure 3.16). They were expected to supply the gods with food through the sacrifice of sheep and cattle in religious rituals, and to honor them with temples, religious songs or hymns, and expensive gifts. People sought divine support from their gods. But they also feared that their worship might be insufficient and anger the deity. When that happened, the gods could bring death and devastation through floods and pestilence. Stories of gods wreaking great destruction, sometimes for petty reasons, are common in Mesopotamian myths. For example, in one Sumerian myth, the storm god Enlil nearly destroyed the entire human race with a flood when the noise made by humans annoyed him and kept him from sleep.



Figure 3.16 A Sumerian Worshiper. This one-foot-tall Sumerian statue of a worshiper with clasped hands from circa 2900–2600 BCE was placed in a temple to perpetually worship the god to whom it was dedicated. (credit: "Standing male worshiper" by Fletcher Fund, 1940/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The ancient Mesopotamians' belief that the gods were fickle, destructive, and easily stirred to anger is one reason many historians believe they had a generally pessimistic worldview. From the literature they left behind, we can see that while they hoped for the best, they were often resigned to accept the worst. Given the environment in which Mesopotamian civilization emerged, this pessimism is somewhat understandable. River flooding was common and could often be unpredictable and destructive. Wars between city-states and the destruction that comes with conflict were also common. Life was difficult in this unforgiving world, and the profiles of the various gods of the Mesopotamians reflect this harsh reality.

Evidence of Mesopotamians' pessimism is also present in their view of the afterlife. In their religion, after death all people spent eternity in a shadowy underworld sometimes called "the land of no return." Descriptions of this place differ somewhat in the details, but the common understanding was that it was a gloomy and frightening place where the dead were consumed by sorrow, eating dust and clay and longing pitifully and futilely to return to the land of the living.

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2.4: Ancient Egypt

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the unification of Ancient Egypt and the development of a distinct culture there
- Analyze the accomplishments of the pharaohs under the Old Kingdom
- Describe the changes in government and society in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom

The rich agricultural valleys historians refer to as the “Fertile Crescent,” due to the shape of this region on the map, witnessed the development of an early civilization as long ago as the fourth millennium BCE. Adjacent to this region was another fertile river valley formed by the Nile in northeast Africa. Here arose another civilization that was quite unique. Unlike the city-states of Sumer, which were not organized into an empire until the time of Sargon of Akkad, the peoples of the Nile River valley were brought together under a single ruler around 3150 BCE. Although brief intervals of disunity occurred, Egypt remained a united and powerful kingdom, the great superpower of the ancient Near East, until the end of the Bronze Age in about 1100 BCE.

The Origins of Ancient Egypt

Aside from the Nile, Egypt and the areas around it are today part of the expansive and very arid Sahara. But around 10,000 BCE, as the Neolithic Revolution was getting underway in parts of southwestern Asia, much of North Africa including Egypt was lush, wet, and dotted with lakes. The region was highly hospitable to the many Paleolithic peoples living there and surviving on its abundant resources.

However, beginning around 6000 BCE the grasslands and lakes began to give way to sand as the once green environment was transformed into the Sahara we recognize today. As the environment became more difficult for humans to survive in, they retreated to oases and rivers on the fringes. One of these areas was the Nile River valley, a long thin area of fertility running through the deserts of eastern North Africa and made possible by the regular flooding of the Nile. The Nile is the longest river in Africa, and the second-longest in the world after the Amazon. It originates deep in central Africa and flows thousands of miles north through Egypt before it spills into the Mediterranean Sea.

It was around this same time, about 7000 to 6000 BCE, that agricultural technology and knowledge about the domestication of wheat, barley, sheep, goats, and cattle were introduced into the Nile River valley, likely through contact with the Levant. The earliest evidence for the emergence of Egyptian culture dates from this era as well. Two related but different Neolithic cultures arose: one in the Nile delta, where the river runs into the Mediterranean, and the other upriver and to the south of this location. The people of these cultures lived in crude huts, survived on fishing and agriculture, developed distinctive pottery styles, and even practiced burial rituals. Over thousands of years, they developed into two separate kingdoms, Lower Egypt or the delta region, and Upper Egypt or the area upriver (Figure 3.17).



Figure 3.17 The Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt. The fertile Nile River valley became home to two different but related early Egyptian cultures, the Lower Kingdom in the north and the Upper Kingdom in the south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

A major political and cultural shift occurred in about 3150 BCE when Upper and Lower Egypt were unified into a single powerful kingdom. Some evidence suggests this achievement belongs to a king named Narmer. More recent records attribute it to a king called Menes, but many scholars now believe Menes and Narmer are one and the same (Figure 3.18).



Figure 3.18 The Narmer Palette. Often called the Narmer palette, this two-foot-high siltstone Egyptian artifact appears to depict Egypt's unification, which would place it from around 3150–3000 BCE. The large figure on one side (left image) is believed to be King Narmer wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and striking a prisoner, and the tall, left-most figure in the upper row on the other side (right image) is likely Narmer wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt in a procession. Two mythical creatures stand below, their necks artfully entwined. (credit: "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Unification gave rise to what scholars refer to as the Early Dynasty Period (about 3150 to 2613 BCE), or the era of the earliest dynasties to rule a unified Egypt. The powerful kings of these dynasties established a bureaucratic system, possibly influenced by the palace/temple redistributive economic system in place in ancient Sumer. But unlike Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt in the Bronze Age was now a single state instead of a number of warring rivals. Also unlike Mesopotamia, which was subject to periodic invasion, Egypt was protected by its geography. On both east and west, the Nile River valley was surrounded by large deserts that were difficult to cross and that made the kingdom into a kind of island in a hot, dry sea. During this time, many of the best-known cultural characteristics of ancient Egypt emerged in their earliest forms. They include the institution of the pharaoh, distinctive religious practices, and the Egyptian writing system.

The Pharaoh

The king of the united Egypt, the pharaoh, governed a kingdom much larger than any contemporary realm. Historians estimate that the population of the Egyptian state, when first united in about 3150 BCE, numbered as many as two million people, whereas a typical Sumerian *lugal* ruled about thirty thousand subjects. The temple/palace system in Egypt therefore operated on a much vaster scale than anywhere in Mesopotamia.

The term pharaoh in ancient Egyptian is translated as "big house," likely a reference to the size of the palaces along the Nile valley where the pharaoh resided and administered the lands. As in ancient Mesopotamia, the palace included large facilities for storing taxes in kind, as well as workshops for artisans who produced goods for the palace. Also, as in Mesopotamia, a large portion of the population were peasant farmers. They paid taxes in kind to support the artisans and others working in the pharaoh's palaces and temples and living nearby, inside the city. The ruling elite included scribes, priests, and the pharaoh's officials.

The pharaoh was not merely a political figure but also served as the high priest and was revered as a god. In the role of high priest, the pharaoh united the lands by performing religious rituals to honor the different gods worshipped up and down the Nile River valley. As a deity, the pharaoh was the human form or incarnation of Horus, the god of justice and truth. Egyptians believed the divine presence of the pharaoh as Horus maintained justice throughout the land, which, in turn, maintained peace and prosperity, as evidenced by the welcome annual flooding of the Nile.

Egyptian Religion

Like the people of Mesopotamia, Ancient Egyptians were polytheists and worshipped many deities who controlled the forces of nature. For example, Re was the god of the sun, and Isis was the earth goddess of fertility. Osiris was associated with the Nile. The annual flooding of the river, the central event of the Egyptian year, was explained through the myth of Osiris, who was murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the desert wind, but then resurrected by his devoted wife Isis. The Nile (Osiris) was at its lowest in the summer when the hot desert wind was blowing (Seth), but then it was “resurrected” when it flooded its banks and brought life-giving water to the earth (Isis). Horus (the pharaoh) was the child of Isis and Osiris. Since Osiris was a god who had died, he was also the lord of the underworld and the judge of the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed Osiris would reward people who had lived a righteous life with a blessed afterlife in the underworld, whereas he would punish wicked evildoers.

As these gods and myths indicate, the Nile played an important role in the development of Egyptian religion. Whereas the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Mesopotamia commonly brought destruction along with fresh alluvial deposits, the Nile’s summer flooding, predictable as clockwork, brought only welcome deposits of rich sediment. It provided Egyptians with a sense that the world was harmonious and organized around cycles. In later centuries, this notion developed into the concept of Ma’at (also personified as a goddess), which combined the ideas of order, truth, justice, and balance. In contrast to the apparently pessimistic people in Mesopotamia, Egyptians drew from their environment a feeling that their world was orderly, balanced, and geared toward a sense of cosmic justice. It was an Egyptian’s responsibility to live in harmony with this order.

In Their Own Words

Flooding, Stories, and Cosmology in Ancient Egypt and Sumer

Ancient Egypt (the first excerpt that follows) and Ancient Sumer (the second) both depended on life-giving rivers, but their reactions to periodic flooding were quite different. Note the way each discusses the flooding, those responsible, and the reasons for it.

*Hymn to the flood. Hail flood!
emerging from the earth, arriving to bring Egypt to life,
hidden of form, the darkness in the day,
the one whose followers sing to him, as he waters the plants,
created by Re to make every herd live,
who satisfies the desert hills removed from the water,
for it is his due that descends from the sky
—he, the beloved of Geb, controller of Nepri,
the one who makes the crafts of Ptah verdant.
Lord of fish, who allows south marsh fowl,
without a bird falling from heat.
Maker of barley, grower of emmer grain,
creator of festivals of the temples.
When he delays, then noses are blocked,
everyone is orphaned,
and if the offerings of the gods are distributed,
then a million men perish among mankind. . . .*

*Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.
Verdant the spirit at your coming.
Come to Egypt,
make its happiness.
Make the Two Riverbanks verdant, . . .
Men and herds are brought to life by your deliveries of the fields, . . .
Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.*

—Author unknown, *Hymn to the Nile*, 2000–1700 BCE

*I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, the mysterious story,
And one of the mysteries of the gods I will tell you.
The city of Shurippak, a city which, as you know,
Is situated on the bank of the river Euphrates. The gods within it
Decided to bring about a flood, even the great gods,
As many as there were. . . .
I saw the approach of the storm,
And I was afraid to witness the storm;
I entered the ship and shut the door.
I entrusted the guidance of the ship to the boat-man,
Entrusted the great house, and the contents therein.
As soon as early dawn appeared,
There rose up from the horizon a black cloud,
Within which the weather god thundered,
And the king of the gods went before it. . . .
The storm brought on by the gods swept even up to the heavens,
And all light was turned into darkness. It flooded the land; it blew with violence;
And in one day it rose above the mountains.
Like an onslaught in battle it rushed in on the people.
Brother could not save brother.
The gods even were afraid of the storm;
They retreated and took refuge in the heaven of Anu.
There the gods crouched down like dogs, in heaven they sat cowering.*

—Author unknown, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by R. Campbell Thompson and William Muse Arnold and compiled by Laura Getty

- What do these excerpts reveal about each people's view of their world and the supernatural?
- What do they suggest about each culture's relationship to its river(s)?

Egyptian Writing

Egyptians developed their own unique writing system, known today by the Greek word hieroglyphics (meaning “sacred writings”), though the Egyptians called it *medu-netjer* (“the god’s words”). The roots of hieroglyphic writing can be traced to the time before the Early Dynastic Period when the first written symbols emerged. But by at least 3000 BCE, the use of these symbols had developed into a sophisticated script. It used a combination of alphabetic signs, syllabic signs, word signs, and pictures of objects. In this complicated system, then known only to highly trained professional scribes, written symbols represented both sounds and

ideas (Figure 3.19). The Egyptians also developed a simplified version of this hieroglyphic script known as hieratic, which they often employed for more mundane purposes such as recordkeeping and issuing receipts in commercial transactions.

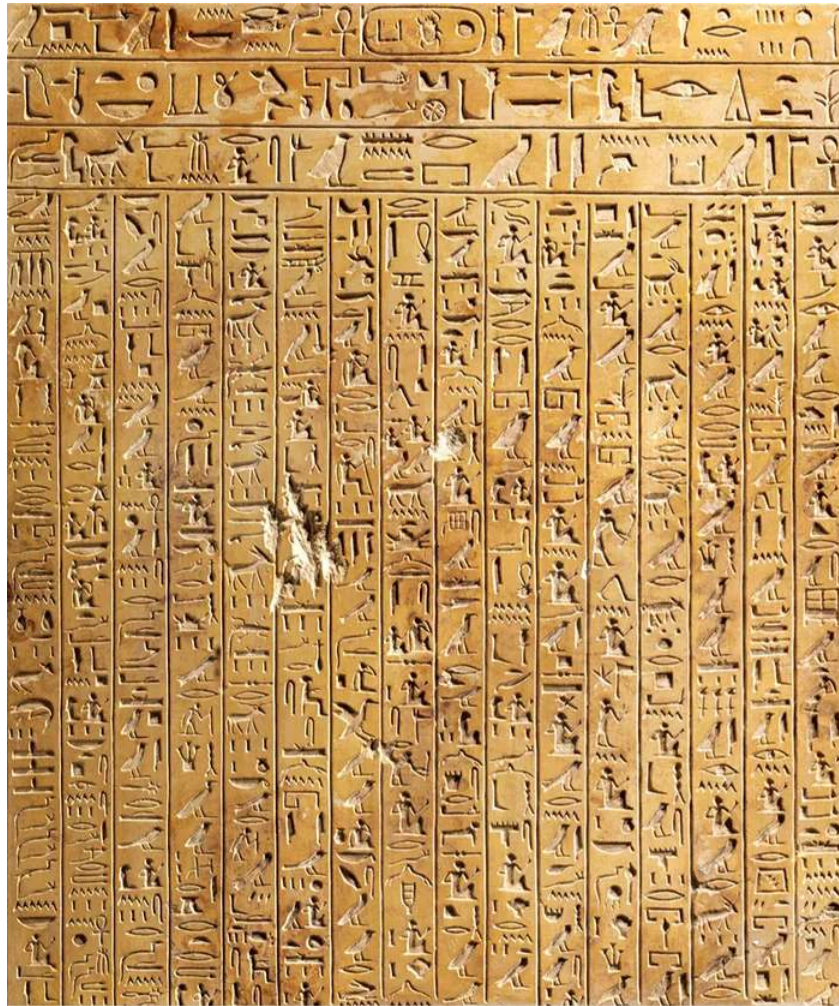


Figure 3.19 Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics in this Egyptian stele from circa 1944 BCE are far more stylized than the Egyptian writing produced a thousand years earlier. It took many centuries for the Egyptian script to evolve into the style of writing seen here. (credit: modification of work "Stela of the Steward Mentuweres" by Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1912/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Egyptian scribes recorded their ideas in stone inscriptions on the walls of temples and painted them on the walls of tombs, but they also used the fibers from a reed plant growing along the banks of the Nile to produce papyrus, a writing material like paper that could be rolled into scrolls and stored as records. Some of these papyrus rolls have survived for thousands of years because of the way the dry heat preserved them, and they proved very useful for modern historians and archaeologists after hieroglyphics were deciphered in the nineteenth century. They preserved Egyptian myths and poetry, popular stories, and lists of pharaohs, along with records of the daily life of ancient Egyptians.

The Age of Pyramid Building

By the 2600s BCE, the power of the pharaohs and the sophistication of the state in Egypt were such that the building of large-scale stone architecture became possible. Historians in the nineteenth century believed the significance of these developments was so great that it required a different name for the period. Today we call it the Old Kingdom (2613–2181 BCE), and it is best known for the massive stone pyramids that continue to awe visitors to Egypt today, many thousands of years after they were built (Table 3.1).

6000–3150 BCE	Pre-Dynastic Egypt
3150–2613 BCE	Early Dynastic Egypt

2613–2181 BCE	Old Kingdom Period
2181–2040 BCE	First Intermediate Period
2040–1782 BCE	Middle Kingdom Period
1782–1570 BCE	Second Intermediate Period
1570–1069 BCE	New Kingdom Period
1069–525 BCE	Third Intermediate Period

Table 3.1 The Ages of Egypt. These names for the different eras of ancient Egypt's history were developed by scholars in the nineteenth century. "Kingdom" describes a period of high centralized state organization. "Intermediate" describes a time of weak centralized state organization. While flawed in some ways, the labels continue to influence the way we understand the expansive chronology of ancient Egyptian history. (source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/egypt/>)

The pyramids were tombs for the pharaohs of Egypt, places where their bodies were stored and preserved after death. The preservation of the body was important and was directly related to Egyptian religious beliefs that a person was composed of a number of different elements. These included the *Ka*, *Ba*, *Ahk*, and others. A person's *Ka* was their spiritual double. After the physical body died, the *Ka* remained but had to stay in the tomb with the body and be nourished with offerings. The *Ba* was also a type of spiritual essence, but it separated from the body after death, going out in the world during the day and returning to the body each night. The duty of the *Ahk*, yet another type of spirit, was to travel to the underworld and the afterlife. The belief in concepts like the *Ka* and *Ba* was what made the practice of mummification and the creation of tombs important in Egyptian religion. Both elements needed the physical body to survive.

Before the pyramids, tombs and other architectural features were built of mud-brick and called *mastabas*. But during the Early Dynastic reign of the pharaoh Djoser, just before the start of the Old Kingdom, a brilliant architect named Imhotep decided to build a marvelous stone tomb for his king. Originally, it was intended to be merely a stone mastaba. However, Imhotep went beyond this plan and constructed additional smaller stone mastabas, one on top of the other. The result was a multitiered step pyramid (Figure 3.20). Surrounding it, Imhotep built a large complex that included temples.



Figure 3.20 The Pyramid of Djoser. The Pyramid of Djoser, sometimes called the step pyramid, is composed of six stone *mastabas* set atop each other, each slightly smaller than the one below. Built by the architect Imhotep during the reign of Pharaoh Djoser, it is the earliest large stone building in Egypt. (credit: "Pyramid of Djoser (Step Pyramid)" by Jorge Láscar/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The step pyramid of Djoser was revolutionary, but the more familiar smooth-sided style appeared a few decades later in the reign of Snefru, when three pyramids were constructed. The most impressive has become known as the Red Pyramid, because of the reddish limestone revealed after the original white limestone surface fell away over the centuries. It had smooth sides and rose to a height of 344 feet over the surrounding landscape. Still an impressive sight, it pales in comparison to the famed Great Pyramid built by Snefru's son Khufu at Giza near Cairo (Figure 3.21). The Great Pyramid at Giza was 756 feet long on each side and originally

481 feet high. Its base covers four city blocks and contains 2.3 million stone blocks, each weighing about 2.5 tons. Even more than the Pyramid of Djoser, the Great Pyramid is a testament to the organization and power of the Egyptian state.



Figure 3.21 The Great Pyramid at Giza. The Giza pyramid complex, located just outside modern Cairo, includes three large pyramids and many other monuments and minor pyramids. From left to right, the large pyramids shown here are the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre, and the Pyramid of Menkaure, all built between 2600 and 2500 BCE. (credit: "The Giza-pyramids and Giza Necropolis, Egypt" by "Robster1983"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Later pharaohs of the Old Kingdom built two additional but slightly smaller pyramids at the same location. All align with the position of the Dog Star Sirius in the summer months, when the Nile floods each year. Each was also linked to a temple along the Nile dedicated to the relevant pharaoh.

Egyptian rulers invested heavily in time and resources to construct these tombs. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus recorded that the pyramid of Khufu took 100,000 workers twenty years to construct. Herodotus lived two thousand years after this pyramid was built, however, so we might easily dismiss his report as exaggeration. Modern archaeologists suspect that a much smaller but still substantial workforce of around twenty thousand was likely employed. Excavations at the site reveal that these workers lived in cities built nearby that housed them as well as many others dedicated to feeding and caring for them. The workers were not enslaved, as is commonly assumed. Indeed, they likely enjoyed a higher standard of living than many other Egyptians at the time.

As the pyramid and temple complexes became larger and more numerous during the Old Kingdom, so too did the number of priests and administrators in charge of managing them. This required that ever-increasing amounts of wealth be redirected toward these individuals from the central state. Over time, the management of the large Egyptian state also required more support from the regional governors or nomarchs and administrators of other types, which meant the pharaohs had to delegate more authority to them. By around 2200 BCE, priests and regional governors possessed a degree of wealth and power that rivaled and sometimes surpassed that of the nobility. For all these reasons and more, centralized power in Old Kingdom Egypt weakened greatly during this time, and scholars since the nineteenth century have referred to it as the First Intermediate Period.

Scholars once claimed that this was a time of chaos and darkness. As evidence, they noted the decline in the building of large-scale monuments like the giant pyramids as well as a drop in the quality of artwork and historical records during these decades. Modern research, however, has demonstrated that this is a gross simplification. Power wasn't necessarily lost so much as redistributed from central to regional control. From the perspective of the reigning noble families, this may have seemed like chaos and disorder. But it was not necessarily the dark age older generations of historians believed it to be.

A Second Age of Egyptian Greatness

The First Intermediate Period came to an end around 2040 BCE as a series of powerful rulers, beginning with Mentuhotep II, was able to reestablish centralized control in Egypt. This led to the rise of what we now call the Middle Kingdom Period, which lasted nearly 260 years.

In the year 1991 BCE, Amenemhat, a former vizier (adviser) to the line of kings who established the Middle Kingdom, assumed control and founded a line of pharaohs who ruled Egypt for two centuries. Under the leadership of these pharaohs, Egypt acquired its first standing army, restarted the large-scale building projects known in earlier times, made contacts with surrounding peoples and kingdoms in the Levant and in Kush (modern Sudan), and generally held itself together with a strong centralized power structure.

Link to Learning

New Kingdom pharaohs circulated a work of literature that foretold the rise of Amenemhat, who would bring an end to disorder and restore Egypt to prosperity. This ancient work was called the [Prophecy of Neferty](#) and is presented as an English translation by University College London.

During the Middle Kingdom Period, pharaohs introduced the cult of the deity Amon-Re at Thebes. Amon-Re was a combination of the sun-god Re, the creator god worshipped in the north of Egypt, and Amon, a sky god revered in the south. He was portrayed as the king of the gods and the father of each reigning pharaoh. The pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom no longer constructed massive pyramids for their tombs. Instead, they focused on erecting massive temples to Amon-Re and his wife, the mother-goddess Mut, at Thebes (Figure 3.22). The ruins of these temples are located at Karnak in southern Egypt. Amon-Re's temples featured immense halls in which multiple columns or colonnades supported the roof, courtyards, and ceremonial gates. They housed the sacred images of the deities, which on festival days were brought out in ritual processions.



Figure 3.22 Temple of Amon-Re. The temple of Amon-Re, built around 2055 BCE, was plundered in ancient times for its stone. What remains are these ruins. The large ceremonial gates still stand, towering above the visitors who walk beneath them. (credit: modification of work "Karnak Temple Complex at Luxor, Egypt" by Daniel Csörföly/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Middle Kingdom Egypt reached its height in the 1870s and 1860s BCE during the reign of Senusret III, a powerful warrior pharaoh and capable administrator of the centralized state. He greatly expanded Egypt's territorial control, leading armies up the Nile into Kush and into the Levant. These efforts not only strengthened Egypt's ability to protect itself from invasion but also greatly increased the flow of trade from these regions. Kush was known for its rich gold deposits and capable warriors, and Senusret III's several campaigns there brought Egypt access not only to the gold but also to mercenaries from Kush.

Senusret also dramatically increased the degree of centralized power held by the pharaoh, reducing the authority and even the number of the nomarchs. Overall, Egypt now grew wealthier, safer, more centralized, and more powerful than it had ever been. As a result, his reign was also a time of cultural flourishing when Egyptian art, architecture, and literature grew in refinement and sophistication (Figure 3.23).



Figure 3.23 The Art of the Middle Kingdom. This pectoral, a form of jewelry worn over the chest, is an excellent example of the fine artwork of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom Period. It once belonged to an Egyptian princess called Sithathoryunet and is made of gold and semiprecious stones. (credit: modification of work "Pectoral and Necklace of Sithathoryunet with the Name of Senwosret II" by Purchase, Rogers Fund and Henry Walters Gift, 1916/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The deaths of Senusret III and his son Amenemhat III led indirectly to a rare but not unprecedented transfer of royal power to an Egyptian woman. Possibly Amenemhat IV's wife, sister, or both, Sobekneferu, the daughter of Amenemhat III, was the first woman to rule Egypt since before the Old Kingdom. She reigned for only a few years, and little is known of her accomplishments. But scholars have determined that she was the first pharaoh to associate herself with the Egyptian crocodile god Sobek. She may even have commissioned the construction of the city of Crocodilopolis to honor this important god. Because she died without having had children, she was the last in the long series of pharaohs in the line of Amenemhat I.

Even before the reign of Sobekneferu, Egypt was already experiencing some degree of decline. Over the next century, the pharaohs and their centralized control became steadily weaker. Increasing numbers of Semitic-speaking peoples from the Levant flowed into Egypt, possibly the result of increased trade between Egypt and the Levant at first. But by the late 1700s BCE, these Semitic-speaking groups had grown so numerous in the Nile delta region and centralized control of Egypt had grown so weak that some of

their chieftains began to assert control in a few areas. The Egyptians called these Semitic-speaking chieftains *Heqau-khasut* (rulers of foreign lands). Today they are more commonly called Hyksos, a Greek corruption of this Egyptian name.

By the time the Hyksos were asserting their control over parts of the Nile delta, Egypt was already well into what historians of the nineteenth century dubbed the Second Intermediate Period. Like the First Intermediate Period, the second was a time of reduced centralized control. Not only did the Egyptian nobles, ruling from their capital in Thebes, lose control of the delta, they also lost territory upriver to an increasingly powerful kingdom of Kush in the south. This meant that the territory once controlled by the powerful centralized state bureaucracy was effectively split into three regions: one ruled by Hyksos in the north, one by Kushite in the south, and one by the remnants of the Egyptian nobility in the center.

Despite the fragmentation, for most of this period, the three regions of Egypt appear to have maintained peaceful relationships. That changed, however, beginning in the 1550s BCE when a string of Theban Egyptian rulers was able to go on the offensive against the Hyksos. After the Hyksos were defeated and the Nile delta recaptured, the emboldened Egyptians turned their attention south to Kush, eventually extending their control over these regions as well. These efforts ushered in a new period of Egyptian greatness called the New Kingdom, the highest high-water mark of Egyptian power and cultural influence in the ancient world.

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2.5: North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the interactions between North Africa, the Levant, and Europe
- Analyze the trade routes from North Africa to the Mediterranean, the Sahara, and the Levant

The Mediterranean coast of North Africa has been a crossroads of civilizations for millennia. Beginning in the first millennium BCE, it was occupied successively by a string of invaders, including the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, and Arabs, and it has been the site of countless internal migrations, as in the case of the Mauri and Massylii peoples. One result of these interactions was a long-term process of cultural commingling, reabsorption, and acculturation that has left a rich tapestry of human societies in its wake.

North Africa and Egypt

The Phoenicians were responsible for the earliest known trade network that unified the Mediterranean world. A Semitic-speaking and seafaring people originally from the Levant, or eastern Mediterranean coast, the Phoenicians emerged initially from the areas around Tyre in what is present-day Lebanon (or Canaan in the Bible, which refers to the Phoenicians as the Canaanites). Around the end of the tenth century BCE, the Phoenicians began to found a series of trading posts and colonies along the Mediterranean coast, a loop of interconnected settlements that eventually stretched from Byblos in the east to Nîmes and Gadir (Cadiz) in the west and Leptis (Leptis Magna) in the south (Figure 9.19). In 814 BCE, they established what would become their greatest settlement, Carthage. Located on the North African coast in modern-day Tunisia, Carthage was in an ideal position to dominate the trade activities of the western Mediterranean.



Figure 9.19 Phoenician Settlements and Trade Routes. Beginning in the tenth century BCE, the Phoenicians established colonies and trading outposts along the Mediterranean coasts of North Africa and southern Europe. Areas that experienced either Phoenician contact or settlement are those identified with the green dotted line. Carthage, the most impressive Phoenician settlement, juts out into the western Mediterranean from the North African coast, making it an ideal place to manage and control trade in the sea. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The government of Carthage was originally a monarchy, but by the turn of the fourth century BCE, it had given way to a republic. The Carthaginian republic was singled out for praise by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who considered it the perfect balance between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. By this time, Carthage had been the dominant military power of the western Mediterranean for almost a century. By 300 BCE, the city controlled dozens of the trading towns that dotted the North African coast. Thus, by the start of the third century BCE, Carthaginian power and influence could be felt along a thousand-mile stretch of the Mediterranean.

At the time of Carthage's founding, the population of the Maghreb—the western half of North Africa, including most of present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—spoke indigenous languages and had adapted their lives to the landscape. Those who lived on the coastal plains were mostly settled farmers, while those who lived in the Atlas Mountain range were seminomadic pastoralists, and nomadic peoples lived in the Sahara. To the Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans, these North African natives were collectively known as Berbers¹, a pejorative term equating to “barbarian.” This simplification belies the political, social, and cultural complexities of what was actually a wide range of different African ethnic groups and societies, including the Mauri, Massylii, Musulamii, Masaesylii, Garamantes, and Gaetuli. These groups had built impressive societies of their own. For example, the Garamantes developed a major urban society in the Libyan Fezzan, and the Masaesyli established the kingdom of Numidia. Over centuries of interaction, cooperation, and tension, a rich tapestry of customs, values, and traditions developed among these groups—who typically refer to themselves as Amazigh, or Imazighen, rather than Berber—to produce societies and cultural practices well suited to the Maghreb region of North Africa.

A city like Carthage, with its republican form of government and leaders who exercised political authority, levied taxes, enforced laws, and employed armed forces for defense, was foreign to the indigenous systems of the area. Early in its history, Carthage adopted a pragmatic relationship with its neighbors; it paid tribute to them to forestall attacks and facilitate good relations. But that changed after 480 BCE, when Carthage stopped paying tribute and moved to subjugate the region's peoples. In time, not only were the coastal towns dominated by Punic-speaking elite of Carthaginian origin, but the peoples of the inland towns began to adapt and adopt Carthaginian culture. Not only did they speak Punic, the language of the Phoenicians, but on occasion they also spoke Greek, particularly if they held positions of power or engaged in trade with Carthage. Moreover, the urban elite in these towns began to emulate Carthage, and eventually they founded their own states inland, such as Mauretania, which was established by the Mauri and Massylii peoples of the Atlas Mountains.

Carthaginian control over North Africa did not go unchallenged. The most significant threat to its dominance emerged with the rise of the Roman Republic in the third century BCE. To that point, the Romans had been preoccupied with consolidating their control over the Italian peninsula south of the River Rubicon, a process finally brought to an end with the defeat of Magna Graecia (as southern Italy was then called) in the Pyrrhic War in 275 BCE. Rome's encounter with Carthage led to three long and exhaustive conflicts known as the Punic Wars. The first began in 264 BCE, and the third wrapped up in 146 BCE.

The most famous of these is the Second Punic or Hannibalic War, during which the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca (Figure 9.20) invaded Italy with tens of thousands of soldiers and dozens of war elephants. For over a decade, Hannibal terrorized the Romans, destroying their armies at Trebia (218 BCE), Lake Trasimene (217 BCE), and, in one of the most lethal battle days in history, the village of Cannae in 216 BCE. The Carthaginians were unable to inflict a decisive defeat on the Romans, however, and the deadlock remained unbroken until the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio took the war to Carthage, forcing Hannibal to return from Italy to North Africa to defend it.



Figure 9.20 Hannibal. This marble bust, believed to be of the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, was found in Capua, Italy, and may have been made in Hannibal's lifetime. (credit: "Image from page 299 of 'Republican Rome; her conquests, manners and institutions from the earliest times to the death of Caesar' (1914)" by Havell/Internet Archive Book Images/Flickr, Public Domain)

Carthage was finally defeated at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE, a victory that earned Scipio the honorary name *Africanus* (Figure 9.21). Five decades later, urged on by the conservative senator Marcus Portius Cato (known to history as Cato the Censor), Rome returned to finish the job. The Third Punic War (149–146 BCE) ended with the destruction of Carthage. Tunis, some twenty miles inland, became the capital of Rome's new African province.



Figure 9.21 Hannibal's War (218–203 BCE). This map shows the route taken by Hannibal's invading forces in the Second Punic War. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The absorption of North Africa into the Roman Empire greatly affected the Indigenous African peoples of the region. Carthage had needed very little from the peoples who lived beyond its hinterland. What food the population required was supplied by Carthaginian estates located on the outskirts of the city. Rome, on the other hand, needed a great deal from the Maghrebi interior, including grain and olive oil to feed the capital's growing urban population. Decades of Roman development of the inland territory resulted in farms that, by the first decades of the Common Era, were generating hundreds of thousands of gallons of olive oil and millions of tons of wheat per year—all destined to feed the residents of Rome. This bounty earned North Africa the nickname "the breadbasket of Rome."

The intensification of agricultural production in the Maghreb led to the institution of individual land ownership and huge seasonal migrations of nomads and their animals to the coastal plains for work. To help control the flow of people during these periods and to protect crops from migrating cattle, the Romans established *limes* (lee-meis), or lines of fortified frontier posts that marked out the territorial limits of Roman occupation. Agricultural production also led to new growth for the old Phoenician coastal cities, which became commercial centers for shipping produce and livestock to Rome.

Eastern North Africa was also the site of great change in antiquity. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great, king of Macedon in Greece, conquered Egypt, and before leaving to continue his advance into western Asia, he founded the great city of Alexandria on the Nile River. Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his generals warred with each other over control of the empire and eventually divided the vast territory among themselves. One officer, Ptolemy, took Egypt and founded a dynasty that ruled it for the next three centuries. Of necessity, the Ptolemies styled themselves as pharaohs to demonstrate continuity from pharaonic times through Alexander to themselves (Figure 9.22). They adapted the Egyptian style partially because they were awed by the history and grandeur of Egypt and also because the Ptolemies wanted the people to see them as legitimate rulers of Egypt, not foreigners. Like all the Hellenistic (or Greek-like) monarchs of the three-hundred-year period following the death of Alexander, they encouraged Greeks from around the Mediterranean to settle in one of the three Greek city-states established by the Macedonian conquerors,

including Alexandria. The Ptolemies also enticed Jewish people from Palestine to settle in northern Egypt, making Alexandria one of the most cosmopolitan cities in all antiquity.



Figure 9.22 Ptolemy III. As the Macedonian Greek rulers of Egypt, the Ptolemies styled themselves as pharaohs. This basalt statue from about 220 BCE is believed to be of Ptolemy III and shows him wearing Egyptian clothes and a pharaonic headdress. (credit: "Ptolemy III Euergetes" by "Szilas" in the Neues Museum, Berlin/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The focal point of Greek culture in Egypt was the *Museon* or Museum of Alexandria. This "Home of the Muses" was much more than a place to see artifacts from the past; it was also the world's largest library, housing some 700,000 scrolls representing all the knowledge of the known world. It had laboratories for the study of human anatomy and astronomy and was the home of dozens of intellectuals, who studied everything from geography and physics to literature and geometry. In many ways, it displaced the Academy at Athens as the ancient world's center of learning. It was at the *Museon*, for example, that the canonical versions of Homer's *Iliad* were identified, and that Eratosthenes developed his geographic understanding of the earth and estimated its circumference as between 24,500 and 29,000 miles (today we know it is 24,900 miles).

Day-to-day governance of Ptolemaic Egypt was in the hands of Egyptian officials and of Greek officials who brought Egyptian translators. To convincingly style themselves as pharaohs, the Ptolemies turned to religion. One of Ptolemy's first acts as ruler of Egypt was to seize the body of Alexander the Great as it was being transported from Babylon home to Macedonia. Ptolemy had an elaborate tomb built for Alexander and made it a focal point of the capital at Alexandria. He then declared Alexander a god, a move fully in keeping with the status bestowed upon him in life by Egypt's priests of Amun at Siwah in 332 BCE. In addition, Ptolemy had a temple dedicated to the new god Serapis built in the capital city. Serapis was an extraordinary deity demonstrating how astute Egypt's Greek rulers were. A fusion of the Egyptian deities Osiris and Apis and the Greek deities Zeus and Helios, Serapis allowed the very different subjects of Ptolemaic Egypt to find common ground in worship. To further cement their position as Egypt's legitimate rulers, the Ptolemies carried out the religious duties of the pharaoh, including dedicating new temples to Egyptian gods, visiting shrines throughout the country, and declaring themselves the inheritors of Alexander's godlike mantle.

The last of the Ptolemies was Cleopatra VII (Figure 9.23). A brilliant politician with a strong character, Cleopatra spoke upward of a dozen languages and was the only Greek ruler of Egypt fluent in Egyptian. Politically ambitious, she was determined to preserve what autonomy she could in the face of Rome's growing dominance of the Mediterranean. To this end, she had an affair with the Roman general and dictator Julius Caesar and bore him a child named Caesarion. When Caesar fell afoul of the Roman Senate (whose members suspected him of wanting to be king) and was assassinated in 44 BCE, Cleopatra shifted her affection to the inheritor of Caesar's armies, Marc Antony. This strategy was ill-fated, however, because Marc Antony was increasingly embroiled in a conflict with Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, which soon erupted in an all-out civil war between the two.



Figure 9.23 Cleopatra. This marble bust of Cleopatra (69–30 BCE), the last of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, was made during her lifetime. (credit: “Marble bust of Cleopatra VII of Egypt” by Altes Museum Berlin/Louis le Grand/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The climax of the war came at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, during which the naval forces of Octavian and Marcus Agrippa met to defeat those of Marc Antony and Cleopatra. Octavian pursued the vanquished pair, and soon after he invaded Egypt in 30 BCE, Marc Antony and Cleopatra died by suicide. Cleopatra's death ushered in the start of Roman rule in Egypt as it marked the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The Past Meets the Present

Ancient Perspectives on Cleopatra

Can we ever know history with certainty? Only the smallest fraction of anything ever written in antiquity survives today, and much of that was set down long after the events and people it describes, possibly by writers hostile to their subject matter. Figures such as Cleopatra have been the source of endless ancient propaganda and character assassinations. Read the following excerpts by ancient writers describing Cleopatra, and consider the information they provide.

Why Cleopatra, who heaped insults on our army, a woman worn out by her own attendants, who demanded the walls of Rome and the Senate bound to her rule, as a reward from her obscene husband? . . . Truly that whore, queen of incestuous Canopus, a fiery brand burned by the blood of Philip, dared to oppose our Jupiter with yapping Anubis, and forced Tiber to suffer the threats of Nile, banished the

Roman trumpet with the rattle of the sistrum, chased the Liburnian prow with a poled barge, spread her foul mosquito nets over the Tarpeian Rock, and gave judgements among Marius' weapons and statues.

—Propertius, Poems III

It would have been wrong, before today, to broach the Caecuban wines from out the ancient bins, while a maddened queen was still plotting the Capitol's and the empire's ruin, with her crowd of deeply-corrupted creatures sick with turpitude, she, violent with hope of all kinds, and intoxicated by Fortune's favor. But it calmed her frenzy that scarcely a single ship escaped the flames, and Caesar reduced the distracted thoughts, bred by Mareotic wine, to true fear, pursuing her close as she fled from Rome, out to capture that deadly monster, bind her, as the sparrow-hawk follows the gentle dove or the swift hunter chases the hare, over the snowy plains of Thessaly.

—Horace, Cleopatra

For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and a knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her rôle to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise. When she had perfected her schemes she entered the city (for she had been living outside of it), and by night without Ptolemy's knowledge went into the palace.

—Cassius Dio, Roman History XLII

For her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her; but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it. There was sweetness also in the tones of her voice; and her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased.

—Plutarch, Life of Antony XXVII

- Who was Cleopatra? What was her character like? What might have motivated these widely varying descriptions of her?
- How might have these ancient accounts gotten Cleopatra wrong? How much do you think we are likely to “know” about ancient people?

Link to Learning

The tradition of interpreting and [depicting Cleopatra](#) is presented in this article.

Rome's conquest of Egypt added yet another layer of complexity to Egyptian society. While Latin-speaking governors and administrators continued to run the affairs of state from Alexandria, they did so in Greek, which remained the language of

government. Rome invested heavily in the development of Egypt's largest cities and creating inviting cosmopolitan spaces eventually inhabited by Greeks, Jewish people, Romans, and assimilated Egyptians. Still, under the Romans, the majority of Egyptian subjects lived in rural areas. In more than two thousand villages scattered throughout the Nile delta and along the Nile valley, people labored to produce the tons of grain that supplied the imperial capital with bread. These people were also hardest hit by Roman taxation, a circumstance that inspired periodic revolts against the empire.

Roman imperial administration over North Africa remained constant until the fourth and fifth centuries CE, when the weakened Western Roman Empire confronted a new series of challenges, including widespread barbarian invasions. One invading group was the Vandals. A Germanic people originating in present-day Poland, the Vandals migrated westward in the second century CE and settled in the region of Silesia. By the third century, they had been contained in the Roman province of Pannonia (a sizable territory that included parts of modern-day Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia), but they pushed west in the face of the advance of the Huns, nomadic steppe people from central Asia.

By the fifth century, Vandals had migrated to Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula. Around 430, under their leader Genseric, they were invited by Bonifacius, Rome's governor in North Africa, to help him establish himself as a ruler independent of Rome. For the next several years, the Vandals fought Rome's imperial forces on behalf of Bonifacius, who died at the Battle of Remini in Italy in 432. Rome finally agreed to a peace treaty that granted the Vandals control of Mauretania and the western half of Numidia. Unsatisfied, Genseric then pursued a plan to extend his control over Roman North Africa by breaking the treaty and invading Carthage, which he seized in 439.

The Vandals remained in control of the Maghreb region of Roman North Africa until the early sixth century, when Byzantine forces under the general Belisarius reconquered the territory and forced the Vandal king Gelimer to surrender in 534. Less than a century later, a new power from the east threatened the Byzantine position in North Africa. Beginning in the 640s, the armies of Islam advanced, conquering Byzantine Egypt in 642. Using Egypt as a forward position, they then launched successive invasions across the region until the final Byzantine strongholds of North Africa including Carthage fell. By 709, the whole of North Africa had been conquered.

North African and Trans-Saharan Trade

Trans-Saharan trade—the movement of goods between oases and larger settlements in North and West Africa—has existed in one form or another since at least the ninth century BCE. Over time, this system grew from the relatively localized trade in agricultural products and iron goods centered on the Phoenician city of Carthage. It became a continent-wide system of exchange that moved commodities such as copper, salt, ivory, enslaved people, textiles, and gold between what is now Senegal in West Africa and Egypt in the east, reaching as far south as Niger and as far east as Somalia in the Horn of Africa (Figure 9.24). At its height, the trans-Saharan exchange of goods influenced commerce and finance across the whole of North Africa, as well as the economies of Europe and the Near East. This system of trade was made possible by the nomadic peoples of North and West Africa.



Figure 9.24 Trans-Saharan Trade. This map shows the historical trans-Saharan trade routes that crisscrossed ancient North Africa, linking cities on both sides of the Sahara in a network that grew and expanded over several hundred years. (credit: modification of work “Trade routes of the Western Sahara c. 1000-1500” by “Aa77zz”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

In the ninth century BCE, African farmers supplied the Phoenician towns of North Africa with food. In exchange, the Phoenicians introduced these peoples to innovative technologies such as ironworking. Over centuries of interaction, the two groups intermarried and became an integral part of North African society. From around the seventh century BCE, Phoenician merchants relied on the herders of the Atlas Mountains (in present-day Morocco) and the stretch of the northern Sahara to the south.

Indigenous peoples of North Africa had long maintained contact across the Sahara, but it could be tenuous due to the inherent risks of desert travel, including attacks on trading caravans and slave raids by the Garamantes desert people of Libya. Helping facilitate contact in the desert extremes were small settlements of seminomadic peoples at a fragile line of oases forging a point-to-point trading system. Thus, early trade in the Sahara was a matter not of transporting goods across the vast desert expanse but rather of passing them from oasis to oasis. A principal commodity exchanged during this early stage of trade was salt, which was carried to the south and acted as a sort of currency. Salt was highly prized in the agricultural communities south of the Sahara where the mineral is scarce. This is because humans require salt to maintain healthy bodily functions and must regularly consume salt to replace its loss through sweat and urination. The Saharan traders knew where the salt was located, accessed it for themselves, and traded in the substance for goods they could otherwise obtain. Only gradually were highly valuable trading goods introduced, such as gold and copper, which were then brought across the desert from tropical West Africa to the far reaches of the North African coast.

During the period of Carthaginian dominance in Tunisia, goods were carried by pack animals such as mules, horses, and donkeys between the Phoenician imperial capital and the independent African kingdoms in the mountainous and coastal regions to its west. These kingdoms, known to the Romans as Mauretania and Numidia, had extended their control of much of North Africa by the second century BCE as Carthage declined and Rome ascended. For a time, the Romans and the North African kingdoms enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous alliance, but gradual Roman interference in the domestic political affairs of the Numidian state caused their relations to sour, and eventually Rome conquered both Numidia and Mauretania.

In typical fashion, the Romans established large estates as well as towns in the newly conquered territories. Their administration outside these enclaves reached only so far, however. Beyond them, the region remained under the dominance of the people native to the area, in both language and culture. But it was in the strategic interests of Rome to secure the southernmost frontiers of these new provinces. Doing so effectively required not only establishing a border but also patrolling it. This was impossible with horses, so the Romans used the dromedary camel (one-hump camel) (Figure 9.25). Biologically equipped to survive desert extremes, the camel was the ideal means to help secure Rome's new southernmost frontier.



Figure 9.25 The Dromedary Camel. The widespread use of dromedary camels by the Romans in North Africa helped to popularize the animal's use in trans-Saharan trade. (credit: "Animals of Iran - Kavir National Park - Qom Province - Deir-e Gachin Caravansarai 20" by Mostafameraji/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The introduction of the dromedary camel originally from Arabia into North Africa revolutionized the trans-Saharan trade, but its adoption across the region was slow. The first camels in North Africa may have reached Egypt by as early as the ninth century BCE, but it was not until the third and fourth centuries CE that its use spread to the African nomad groups of the northern Sahara, likely helped along by Roman use of the animal. By the fifth century, it had become a major form of transportation in the region. The camel had many advantages over other pack animals. It could maintain a steady pace over much longer distances than oxen, and it could carry upward of three hundred pounds of goods an average of fifteen to eighteen miles a day. Further, the camel's

capacity to store fat and water enabled it to travel up to ten days without stopping for fresh water, more than twice the time and distance of almost every other pack animal. Added to this was the camel's unique splayed foot, which allowed it to walk easily in the soft, sandy conditions of the Saharan environment.

The camel enabled desert nomads to reach more distant oases than ever before and so open entirely new routes across the desert. Although desert travel remained precarious and filled with risk, it certainly became more reliable. For the first time, it was possible for desert travelers to consider dispatching large-scale and regular long-distance trading caravans across the Sahara. Despite this, desert transport remained largely in the hands of the nomadic peoples of the region, principally the Sanhaja in the west and the Tuareg of the central and southern Sahara. Although trans-Saharan trade was growing at this time, it was not yet full-time work, so these groups remained largely nomadic pastoralists, harvesting date palms and grazing their flocks and herds at oases.

In many cases, they tended goats and sheep, but they often also had camel and cattle and occasionally horses. These animals all had to graze, and when they were unable to do so at oases because of either distance or weather, the nomads were forced to find other grazing land. This was particularly the case during the hottest and driest seasons, when the nomads migrated their flocks and herds to the better grazing areas of the Maghreb in the north or the Sahel in the south. Inevitably, this brought them into contact with the more settled agricultural peoples of these areas, and often into conflict as they competed for precious resources in a hostile environment. Beyond these settlements, the nomadic pastoralists dominated the Sahara. Yet there were other peoples in the desert, including small groups such as the Haratin who also called the oases home. They harvested dates and dug salt to exchange for food but were often kept in a subordinate position by the nomads, who controlled the oases.

As the camel transformed desert transport, the products of sub-Saharan Africa became more readily available to the Mediterranean world. Trade in West African gold expanded, demand increased for such goods as ivory and ostrich feathers, and large animals were hunted to extinction in North Africa. As cross-desert traffic grew, several new settlements developed to aid the movement of goods north and south of the Sahara, including Sijilmasa, Ghat, Gao, Awdaghust, and Kano. At sites such as these, goods were exchanged, and camel caravans were unloaded and replenished to continue their journey across the desert. While the desert traffic in goods remained in the hands of nomads, the actual demand for and exchange of goods was largely the work of peoples of settled societies to the north and south of the Sahara.

Footnotes

- 1 There is a growing awareness about the use of the term *Berber* to describe indigenous North Africans, many of whom self-identify as Amazigh, or Imazighen (plural). With this understanding, although we have introduced the term *Berber* as the most commonly used name in English, we have generally preferred to use the term *Amazigh* in this text.

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2.6: The Persian Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the history of Persia through the reign of Darius I
- Describe the origin and tenets of Zoroastrianism
- Identify the achievements and innovations of the Persian Empire

In conquering Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt, the Neo-Assyrians created the largest empire the Near East had ever seen. Their dominance did not last, however, because Babylonia and Media destroyed the empire and carved up the spoils. But this proved to be a transitional period that set the stage for an empire that dwarfed even that of the Neo-Assyrians. Emerging from the area to the east of Mesopotamia, the founders of the Persian Empire proved to be both excellent warriors and efficient imperial organizers. Their kings commanded power, wealth, and authority over an area stretching from the Indus River to the Nile. Governors stationed in the many conquered regions served as extensions of the king's authority, and trade flowed along a large network of roads under Persian military protection. For two centuries, Persia was the undisputed superpower of the ancient world.

The Rise of Persia

The origins of the Persians are murky and stretch back to the arrival of nomadic Indo-European speakers in the Near East, possibly as early as 2000 BCE. Those who reached Persia (modern Iran) are often described as Indo-Iranians or Indo-Aryans. They were generally pastoralists, relying on animal husbandry, living a mostly migratory life, and using the horse-drawn chariot. The extent to which they displaced or blended with existing groups in the region is not clear. From written records of the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the ninth century BCE, we know the Assyrians conducted military campaigns against and exacted tribute from an Indo-Iranian group called the Persians. The Persians lived in the southern reaches of the Zagros Mountains and along the Persian Gulf, in general proximity to the Medes with whom they shared many cultural traits.

Much of what we know about the early Persians comes from the work of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who was born about 484 BCE (Figure 4.28). According to Herodotus, Persia was made a vassal of Media in the seventh century BCE but freed itself in the sixth century BCE under the leadership of Cyrus II, also called Cyrus the Great. Inscriptions from the period suggest that Cyrus was likely a member of the Persian royal family, the Achaemenid dynasty. Once in power, he reorganized the Persian state and its military to mirror those of the Median Empire. This step included creating divisions for cavalry, archers, and infantry and setting up special training for the cavalry. Then, in 550 BCE, just a few years into his reign, Cyrus sent his military to challenge the Medes, whereupon the Median troops revolted, handed over their king, and accepted Cyrus's rule. He then proceeded to integrate the Median elite and officials into his own government. The Median domains had become the Persian Empire.

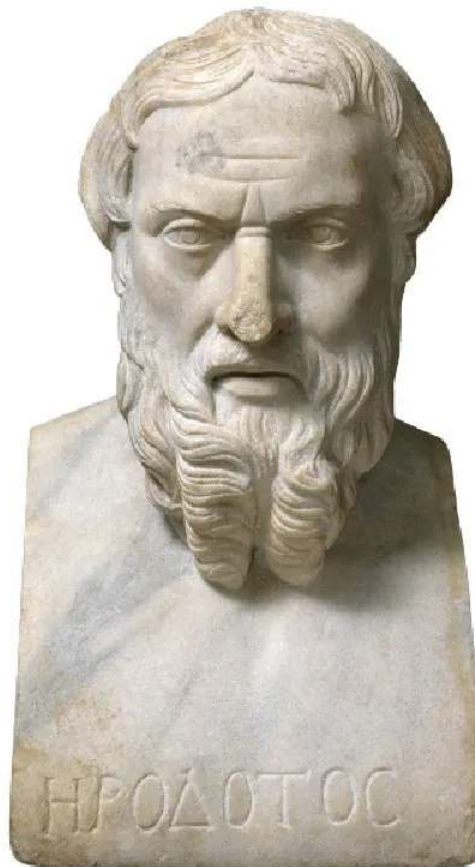


Figure 4.28 Herodotus. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus is one of our major sources for information about the Persian Empire. This roughly life-sized stone bust of him is a second-century Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE bronze statue. (credit: “Marble bust of Herodotos” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Between 550 and 539 BCE, Cyrus sent his armies east and west to expand his recently acquired realm. In 539 BCE, he turned his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, defeating its armies and marching into Babylon. His Persian Empire now incorporated the

territories controlled by Babylonia, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Judah, and had become the largest empire to have existed in the Near East to that point. Organizing and administering this massive domain required the use of governors, whom Cyrus generally selected from local areas, a prudent move in a world where rebellions were common.

Link to Learning

Cyrus the Great left a record of his conquest of Babylon inscribed on a clay spool about eight inches long. This artifact, now called the Cyrus Cylinder, was created in 539 BCE and promptly buried in the foundation of the city wall, to remain there until its discovery in 1879. Explore this link to the British Museum website to see a high-resolution image of the [Cyrus Cylinder](#) and a translation of its inscriptions.

Cyrus died in battle in 530 BCE, leaving the throne and empire to his son Cambyses II. The first task for Cambyses was to continue preparing for the invasion of Egypt his father had planned. A large fleet was built in the Mediterranean and a massive land force assembled for crossing the Sinai. The invasion began in 525 BCE. The defending Egyptians were soon overwhelmed, and the pharaoh retreated up the Nile but was captured. Having now added Egypt to his already large empire, Cambyses took on the role of pharaoh, adopting the proper titles and caring for the Egyptian religious institutions. This practice of respecting local traditions was a common feature of Persian expansion and helped to win support in newly acquired areas.

Under Cambyses II, the Persian Empire stretched from the edges of India to the shores of the Aral Sea, the Aegean coast of Anatolia, and the Nile River and included everything in between. Then, just as Cambyses was reaching the height of his power, a Persian revolt broke out in 522 BCE in support of his brother Bardiya. On his way to put down the rebellion, Cambyses II died, leaving the future of the empire uncertain but allowing for the rise of possibly Persia's most famous and powerful leader, Darius I.

Darius I and the Reorganization of the Empire

The events surrounding the rebellion of Cambyses II's brother Bardiya are unclear because a handful of different accounts survive. According to Herodotus, Cambyses ordered one of his trusted advisers to secretly murder Bardiya. Since no one knew Bardiya was dead, an impostor pretending to be him launched a rebellion against Cambyses, though after several months the false Bardiya was killed in a palace coup at the hands of Darius, an army officer who claimed descent from the royal house. Afterward, since neither Cambyses nor Bardiya had sons, Darius made himself king. Other accounts differ in some ways, and some scholars have speculated that Darius invented the story about a false Bardiya in order to legitimize his own coup against the real Bardiya and take the throne.

We may never know exactly what happened, but Darius was indeed able to grasp control of the Persian Empire in 522 BCE. However, it took more than a year for him to put down the ensuing rebellions, some possibly instigated by those who refused to recognize the legitimacy of his claim to the throne. Once these had been quelled, Darius commissioned an enormous relief inscription to be made on the cliff face of Mount Behistun. It shows a dominating figure of himself facing a number of bound former rebels, accompanied by lengthy descriptions of the rebellion and, in three different languages, Darius's version of the events that led to his rise to power (Figure 4.29). To further strengthen his claim on the throne, Darius integrated himself deeply into the royal line through a number of marriages, to the daughters of Cyrus II, the widow of Cambyses II, and two of Cambyses's sisters.

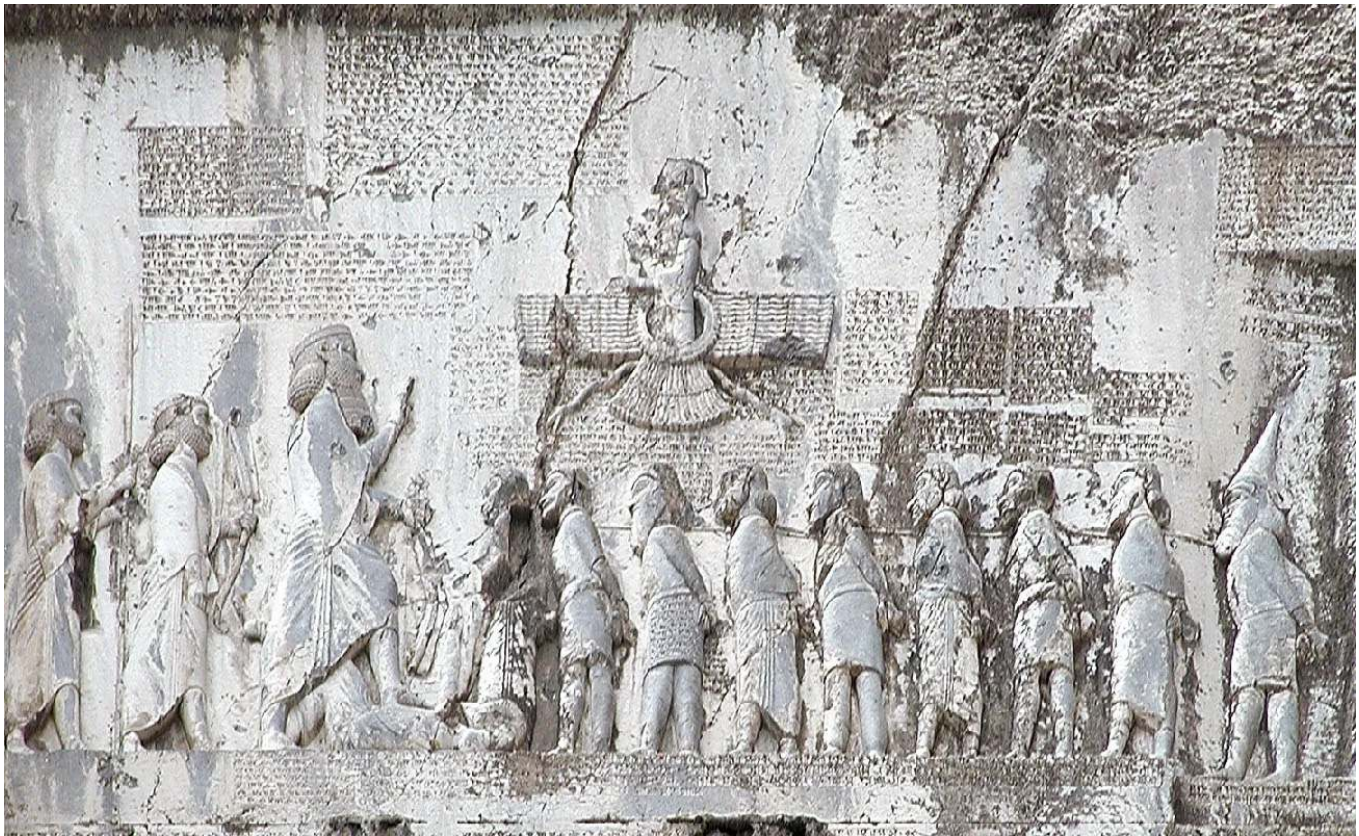


Figure 4.29 The Behistun Relief. The massive Behistun Relief, more than eighty feet long and almost fifty feet high, shows a crowned Darius (on the left) with his foot on the impostor he claimed to have overthrown. Captive rebels and a narrative in three languages of Darius's version of events complete the carving. (credit: "Behistun Inscription" by "Hara1603"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Darius now set about reorganizing the empire, carving it into twenty different governing districts called satrapies (Figure 4.30). Each satrapy was administered by a royal governor called a satrap, usually a trusted Persian or Median noble. Satraps answered directly to the king, had their own courts, wielded great power, and possessed vast lands within the satrapy. They often ruled from the large cities of the regions and were responsible for ensuring that their satrapy remained pacified and submitted its allotted taxes, though there were also local rulers within the region who managed affairs related to specific ethnic or religious groups. The only area not made into a satrapy was the Persian heartland, which was governed directly by the king.



Figure 4.30 The Persian Empire. The Persian Empire under Darius I reached from the edge of India in the east to Libya in the west. To manage this large empire, Darius divided it into twenty different satrapies. (credit: modification of work “Achaemenid Empire 500 BCE” by “Cattette”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Darius I and later kings had a number of tools at their disposal to keep the powerful satraps in line. For example, they frequently sent royal officials, known as the “eyes and ears of the great king,” to arrive unannounced and conduct audits, compiling detailed reports about how the satrapies were being governed that were sent directly to the king for review. If the reports were negative, the satraps could expect either removal or even execution at the hands of the region’s military garrison. These garrisons were used by the satraps to enforce the laws and maintain order, but they ultimately answered to the king and could discipline the satraps when necessary.

Communication between the satraps and the king was carried out through letters dictated to scribes and transmitted along royal roads. These roads constituted an impressive communication system that linked the many key cities of the empire with the Persian heartland and its cities, like Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae. While it was not new—the Neo-Assyrian Empire had its own network of roads that the Persians adopted and improved—it was a valuable tool for administering the large and complicated empire. Along the many royal roads of the empire were inns, resting places, and waystations with stables for horses. Safety was ensured by the troops stationed along the way, especially at key and vulnerable points. To move letters along the roads, a member of the army of mounted royal messengers would travel the roughly twenty miles to the first station, change horses, and continue to the next station. In this way, communication could move roughly two hundred miles in a single day.

The Past Meets the Present

Persia and the U.S. Postal Service

The Persian Empire required a sophisticated communications network to move messages across its vast territory, so it relied on speedy couriers who traveled roads first developed by the Assyrians and then improved. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus commented on Persian communications in his famous *Histories*:

There is nothing that travels faster, and yet is mortal, than these couriers; the Persians invented this system, which works as follows. It is said that there are as many horses and men posted at intervals as there are days required for the entire journey, so that

one horse and one man are assigned to each day. And neither snow nor rain nor heat nor dark of night keeps them from completing their appointed course as swiftly as possible. The first courier passes on the instructions to the second, the second to the third, and from there they are transmitted from one to another all the way through, just as the torchbearing relay is celebrated by the Hellenes in honor of Hephaistos. The Persians call this horse-posting system the angareion.

—Herodotus, *Histories*

Herodotus was not the only ancient author to describe the Persian courier system. The biblical Old Testament Book of Esther notes that not just horses were used:

And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus' name, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries.

—Esther 8:10 (KJV)

Even today, many still marvel at the efficiency of the Persian courier system. When the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City came across Herodotus's description, he thought it perfect for a large inscription on the new building (Figure 4.31). His paraphrase of Herodotus is still visible there. Popularly thought of as the U.S. Postal Service's unofficial motto, it reads as follows: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."



Figure 4.31 "Neither Snow nor Rain nor Heat nor Gloom of Night." The unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service, which once also described the Persian Empire's courier system, is inscribed on the face of this New York City building, over the colonnade. (credit: modification of work "Post Office, New York City" by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division/Library of Congress)

- What purposes might the Persian courier system have served? How might the empire have functioned in the absence or breakdown of such a system?

- Why might the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City have selected Herodotus' description?

Building projects were another important expression of Darius's power and authority. During his reign, he undertook the construction of elaborate palaces at Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae (Figure 4.32). These were constructed and decorated by skilled workers from many different locations and reflected artistic influences from around the empire, among them fluted columns designed by Greek stonemasons, Assyrian reliefs carved by Mesopotamians, and a variety of other features of Egyptian, Lydian, Babylonian, Elamite, and Median origin. The many workers—men, women, and children—who built these palaces migrated to the construction sites and often lived in nearby villages or encampments.



Figure 4.32 Persepolis. The ruins of the city of Persepolis, situated thirty-seven miles southwest of modern-day Shiraz (in modern Iran), reveal that the site was an impressive imperial center in Darius's time. (credit: modification of work "HDR image of Persepolis, Iran" by "Roodiparse"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Explore a reconstruction of the palace complex of [Persepolis](#) as it may have appeared to a visitor in ancient Persia via the Getty Museum's Persepolis Reimagined interactive exhibit.

Major infrastructure projects were also a feature of Darius's reign. For example, he ordered the construction of a long canal that would have allowed ships to pass from the Red Sea into Egypt's Nile River and thus to the Mediterranean. It is unclear whether he actually completed it. It seems unlikely, though Herodotus insists he did. Whatever the case, that Darius attempted this massive undertaking is a testament to the power and resources the kings of Persia had at their fingertips. Other infrastructure projects included the expansion and rebuilding of the many roads that crisscrossed the empire, as well as the construction of a number of *qanats* (Figure 4.33). These were long, underground tunnels used for carrying fresh water over many kilometers, usually for irrigation, and represented a major improvement over earlier technologies. They likely had been used before the Achaemenids, but their construction expanded with the rise of Persian power.

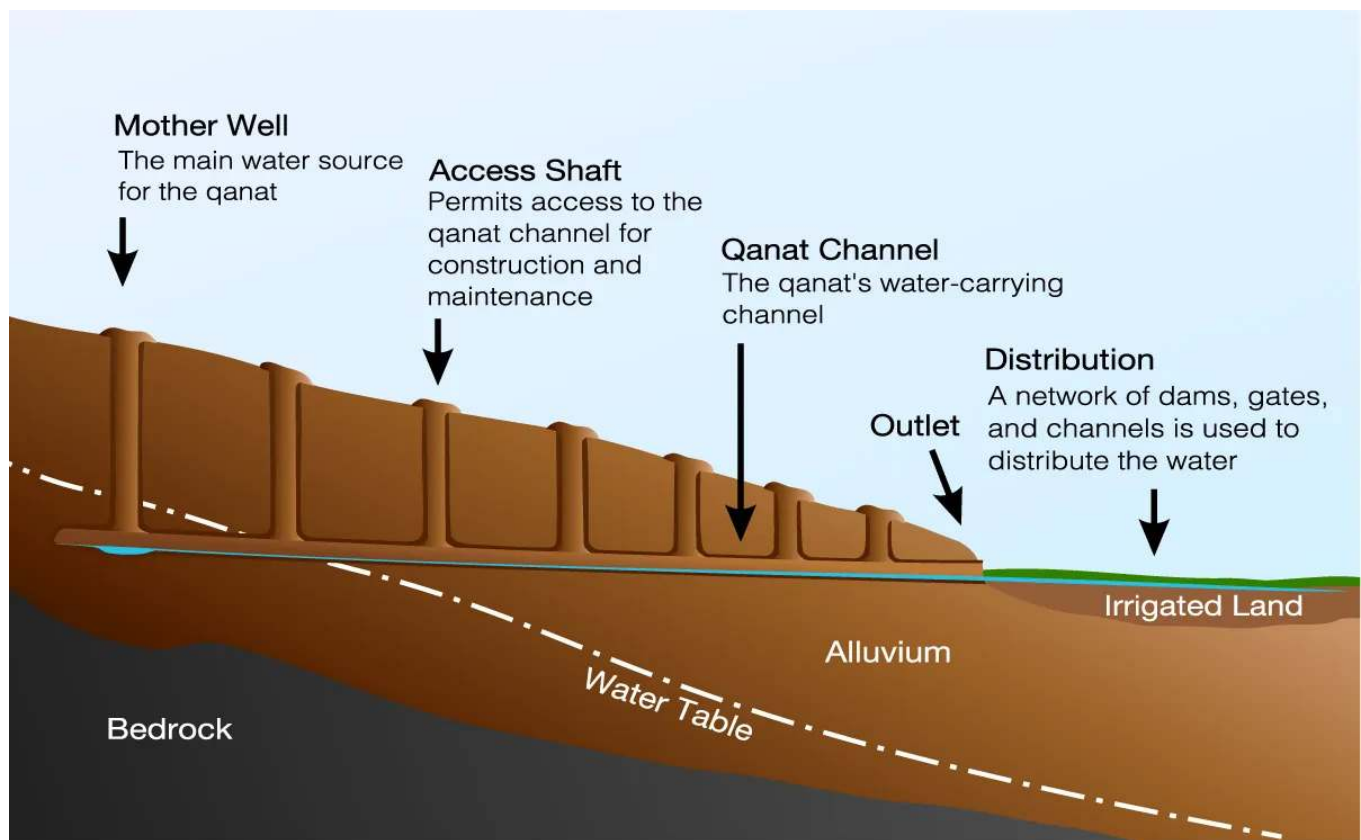


Figure 4.33 Qanats for Irrigation. The *qanats* built by Darius were designed to carry fresh water over long distances into populated areas or to irrigate land for farming. (credit: modification of work “Qanat cross section” by Samuel Bailey/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Persian Culture and Daily Life

The social order of the Persian Empire included a number of hierarchically organized groups. At the bottom were the enslaved. While the Persians did not have a long history of using slavery before becoming a major power, it was common in the regions they conquered. Over time, the Persian nobility adapted to the practice and used enslaved people to work their land.

Next in the hierarchy were the free peasants, who generally worked the land and lived in the villages of the empire. On the next level were the various kinds of artisans, and higher still were the educated classes of scribes, imperial recordkeepers, and important merchants. And higher than all of these was the ruling order, including priests, nobles, and warriors (Figure 4.34).



Figure 4.34 Persian Recordkeeping. Thousands of clay tablets like this one from the administrative archives at Persepolis have been key to helping historians understand the way the empire functioned and was socially organized. Like the rulers of earlier Near Eastern empires, the Persians also used cuneiform. (credit: “Persepolis tablet” by “Pentocelo”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Persian king occupied a place far above and removed from these groups. As the earthly representative of the god Ahura Mazda, he expected complete submission from everyone in the empire. Those in his presence had to position themselves on the ground to show his superiority over them. Servants who came near had to cover their mouths so as not to breathe on him. His power was absolute, though he was restrained by custom and the advice of leading nobles. One of the most important of these nobles was the “Commander of a Thousand,” who managed the large court, served as a gatekeeper to any audience with the king, and oversaw the king’s personal protection service. As was the case in the Assyrian Empire, kings were not necessarily eldest sons. Rather, the current king could select his heir and frequently chose a younger son for any number of reasons.

The Persian king and his court seem not to have remained in one centralized capital. Rather, they moved periodically between the cities and regions of Babylon, Susa, Rhagae, Parthia, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and possibly others. One motive was a desire to avoid extreme weather during certain seasons, but there were also political considerations. For example, by moving across the countryside, the king made himself visible not only to important individuals in the cities but also to the many peasants in the villages that dotted the landscape. Thus, he allowed them opportunities to present him with petitions or seek his guidance.

Moving the court in this way was no easy feat, however. It required the efforts of thousands of people including officials, soldiers, religious leaders, wives, other women, and servants of all types, and the transport of horses, chariots, religious objects, treasure, and military equipment. In many ways, it was as though the state itself migrated with the seasons. The arrival of this migrating state in any major location was met with elaborate public ceremonies of greeting and welcome. Some contemporary descriptions detail how flowers and incense were laid along the city roads where the king moved. His dramatic entry was followed by the proper sacrifices to the local gods and an opportunity for the people to bring gifts to the king, such as exotic animals, jewels, precious

metals, food, and wine. It was considered a great honor to present the king with a gift, and the gift-giving ceremonies served to strengthen the king's relationship with his subjects.

The vast army of Persia had its own ceremonies and customs. Herodotus records that it was made up of a great number of subject peoples from around the empire, all with their own colorful uniforms. Military training began at a very young age and included lessons in archery, horseback combat, and hand-to-hand combat. The most talented of the infantrymen in the Persian army might hope to rise to the ranks of the Immortals, an elite, heavy-infantry combat force that served both in war and in the king's personal guard. The larger army was made up of various units of infantry, archers, and cavalry. The largest unit was the corps, made up of ten thousand men. Each corps had a commanding officer who answered to the supreme commander. In battle, the archers would rapidly fire their arrows into the enemy as the cavalry and infantry advanced in their respective formations. Occasionally, when rebellions were put down or new territories added, the Persians deported the conquered populations elsewhere within the empire.

Because most records from the Persian Empire focus on kings, wars, the military, and high-level officials and bureaucrats, we know little about commoners. But we know that most ordinary Persians had diets of bread or mash made of barley, supplemented by figs, dates, plums, apples, almonds, and other fruits and nuts. Much more rarely, meals might also include goat, mutton, or poultry. Besides the military, the empire supported a host of other necessary occupations, such as sentinels, messengers, various types of attendants, architects, merchants, and numerous types of lower professions. The many agricultural workers grew traditional crops of the Near East, like wheat and barley, in addition to rice (brought from India) and alfalfa (for horse feed). Merchants in the Persian Empire benefited greatly from the stability created by the government and the extensive network of crisscrossing roads that connected the far-flung regions. Although long-distance trade was prohibitively expensive for most things except luxury goods, trade across short distances was apparently common.

The religion of the Persians was a tradition we describe today as Zoroastrianism. Its name comes from *Zoroaster*, the Greek pronunciation of the name of its founder, Zarathustra. Scholars today believe that Zoroaster likely lived at some point between 1400 and 900 BCE and was almost certainly a Persian priest, prophet, or both. His followers likely practiced a polytheistic religion similar in many ways to the Vedic traditions held by Indo-European speakers who migrated into India. Among Zoroastrians' many gods were both powerful heavenly deities and more terrestrial nature gods. Ceremonies included various rituals similar to those of other polytheistic religions, such as the sacrifice of animals on outdoor altars.

Zoroaster appears to have emphasized the perpetual conflict between the forces of justice and those of wickedness. Over time, he developed supernatural personifications of these forces: Ahura Mazda was the lord of wisdom and the force of good (Figure 4.35), and Angra Mainu was the destructive spirit and the force of evil. Each was supported by lesser supernatural beings. On the side of Ahura Mazda were the *ahuras* who worked to bring good to the world, and on the side of Angra Mainu were the *daevas* who served the interests of evil.



Figure 4.35 Ahura Mazda. The Persian god Ahura Mazda was the principal source of good as understood by followers of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion. This large stone carving of him adorns a gate at the ruins of Persepolis (in modern Iran). (credit: "Persepolis, Tripylon, eastern gate (2)" by Marco Prins/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The Persian followers of Zoroastrianism believed Ahura Mazda had created the world as an entirely good place. However, Angra Mainu was dedicated to destroying this perfection with evil, so the two forces fought for the supremacy of good or evil on Earth.

The world the Persians saw around them was the product of their pitched battle. However, the fight would not last forever. At some appointed time in the future, Ahura Mazda would overcome the forces of Angra Mainu, and the followers of evil would face judgment and punishment for their crimes. It was up to humans to decide for themselves what path to follow. At the final judgment, the dead would be resurrected and made to walk through a river of fire. Those consumed by the fire were unworthy and would be condemned to torment in hell, while those who survived would live forever in a paradise with no evil.

While Zoroaster's beliefs were not readily accepted by his own people, he found protection and a following among others, and in the centuries after his death, his ideas spread and changed. For example, the Medes incorporated their own priestly class into the Zoroastrian traditions. The Achaemenids borrowed artistic traditions from the Mesopotamians to depict Ahura Mazda in the same way they styled their important gods. Later, Judeans within the Persian Empire, who were from the Canaanite kingdom of Judah and followers of Judaism, incorporated many Zoroastrian ideas into their own religious traditions. These ideas went on to influence the religions of Christianity and Islam.

The Past Meets the Present

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity may have emerged in the ancient world, but they are all still practiced today. And while in modern times these religions appear quite different, they share important similarities.

Consider these modern similarities between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Both accept the idea of a powerful god as the source of all good, the existence of evil and deceptive forces that plague the world, a final judgment that occurs when the forces of evil have been vanquished forever, and a pleasant afterlife for those who follow the path of righteousness. These similarities are not the product of random accident. Rather, the connections between Zoroastrianism and Christianity date to developments within Judaism in the centuries before the birth of Christ.

It was likely that when the Judeans were members of the Persian Empire, they became acquainted with some of the ideas of Zoroastrianism, and these ideas influenced the way they understood their own monotheistic religion. The notion that a force of evil was responsible for the many problems in the world may have been a comforting thought for those who wanted to believe that God was both all-powerful and thoroughly benevolent. The concept of a final judgment was also appealing to Judeans, who held that they were not only God's chosen people but also persecuted by the forces of evil. While these ideas begin to appear in Judean writings only in the centuries after the fall of Persia, the seeds had likely been planted much earlier through a growing familiarity with the tenets of Zoroastrianism. In the second century BCE, many followers of Judaism had come to accept the idea of a final judgment. It was this form of Judaism that ultimately influenced the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

- What do the connections between Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity suggest about the way religions borrow from each other? Can you think of other examples?
- How might modern Christianity be different had Judaism not been influenced by Zoroastrianism?

While the religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, the empire included people of different religions, including Armenians, Nubians, Libyans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Ionian Greeks, Bactrians, Judeans, and many others. Indeed, it was the Persian king Cyrus II who permitted the Judeans exiled in Babylon to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. The empire expected loyalty and the payment of tribute, but its kings were not interested in transforming their diverse peoples into Persians. Instead, they developed an imperial system that supported the maintenance of a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious empire.

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2.7: The Hebrews

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the history of the Hebrews in the context of the development of the Near East
- Explain how the Hebrew faith differed from others in the same region and time period

The Hebrews, a Semitic-speaking Canaanite people known for their monotheistic religion of Judaism or the Jewish religion, have preserved a history of their people that claims very ancient origins and includes descriptions of early leaders, kings, religious traditions, prophets, and numerous divine interventions. That history, often called the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible in the Jewish tradition and the Old Testament in the Christian tradition, has survived for many centuries and influenced the emergence of the two other major monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam. While fundamentalist Christians and Orthodox Jews hold that the Bible is both divinely inspired and inerrant, historians must scrutinize the text and the rich history it records. This study and the careful work of archaeologists in the Near East have revealed a number of problems with accepting as infallible the story as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, but research has also opened our eyes to a history that is perhaps even more interesting than the account traditionally preserved.

The History of the Hebrews

The history of the Hebrews recorded in the Bible starts with the beginning of time and the creation of the first man, Adam. However, it is with the life of the patriarch Abraham that we begin to see the emergence of the Hebrews as a distinct group. Abraham, we are told, descended from Noah a thousand years before, and Noah himself descended from Adam a thousand years before that. Relying on the ages and generations referenced in the Hebrew Bible, we can deduce that Abraham was born around 2150 BCE in the Mesopotamian city of Ur. At the age of seventy-five, he left this city and traveled to the land of Canaan in the eastern Mediterranean. There Abraham and his wife Sarah had their first son together, Isaac. Isaac then had a son, Jacob, and Jacob gave birth to twelve sons. From these twelve sons, the traditional Twelve Tribes of Israel descend (Figure 4.36).



Figure 4.36 Biblical Abraham. The Bible explains that Abraham migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, as represented in this nineteenth-century painting by a Hungarian artist, and there he eventually had children and grandchildren. (credit: “The Departure of Abraham” by Hungarian National Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While this chronology explains how the Hebrews found themselves in Canaan, there is little to support it. There are no archaeological sites we can reference, and the only evidence we have for Abraham, his trip from Mesopotamia, and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren comes from the Hebrew Bible. This has led some to suspect that the stories of Abraham and his family may have been developed much later than the Bible suggests. And in fact, historians have traced the story of Abraham to sources written down between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE. It is possible that Abraham was a historical person and part of an ancient migration recounted for centuries in oral form, but without additional records or archaeological discoveries that attest to his existence, we cannot know for sure.

The Hebrew Bible notes that Joseph, one of Abraham’s twelve great-grandsons, ended up in Egypt. Later, around 1800 BCE based on the biblical chronology, Joseph’s family joined him, and his descendants lived there for several generations. During this long time in Egypt, the Bible explains that the descendants of Joseph experienced increasingly poor treatment, including being enslaved by the (unnamed) Egyptian pharaoh and put to work on building projects in the Nile delta (Figure 4.37). Later, the pharaoh decided to kill all the male Hebrew children, but one was saved from the slaughter by being hidden in a basket to float down the Nile. He was discovered by the pharaoh’s daughter, who named him Moses and raised him among the Egyptian royalty as her own.

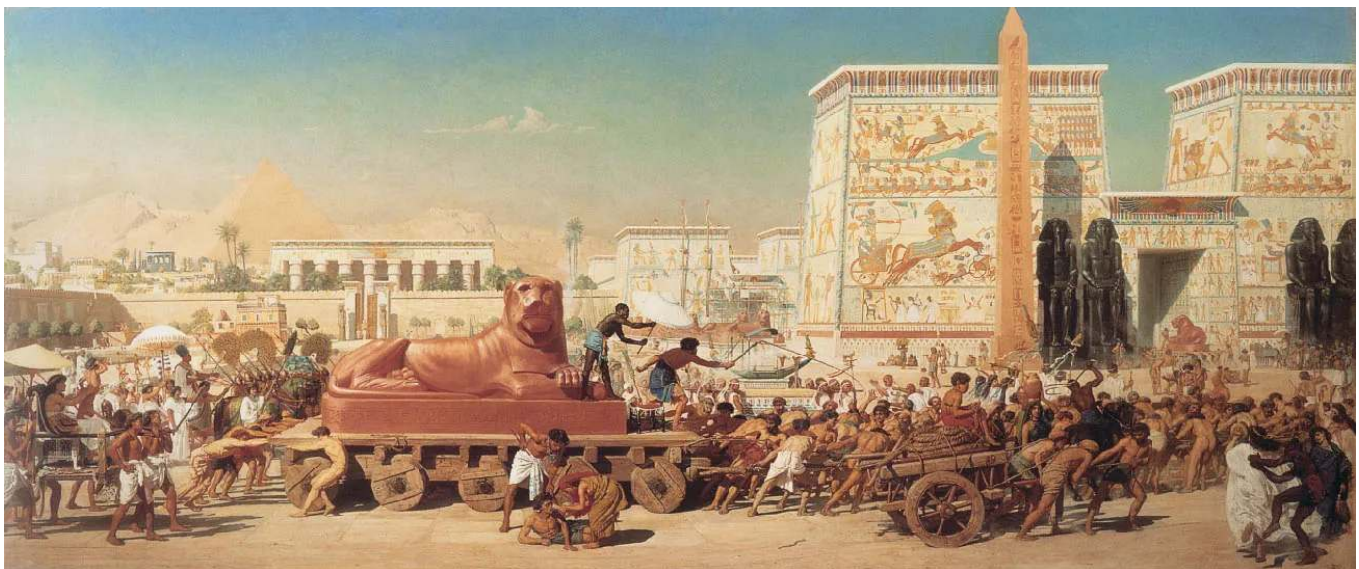


Figure 4.37 The Hebrews in Egypt. The Bible explains that, as represented in this monumental nineteenth-century painting by the English artist Edward Poynter, the Hebrews were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt. (credit: “Israel in Egypt” by Guildhall Art Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Bible continues the story by explaining that the adult Moses discovered who he actually was and demanded that the pharaoh release the Hebrews and allow them to return to Canaan. After experiencing a number of divine punishments issued by the Hebrew god, the pharaoh reluctantly agreed. The Hebrews’ flight from Egypt included a protracted trek across the Sinai desert and into Canaan, during which they agreed to worship only the single god Yahweh and obey his laws. This period of their history is often called the Exodus, because it records their mass migration out of Egypt and eventually to Canaan. Once in Canaan, Moses’s general Joshua led several military campaigns against the inhabitants, which allowed the Hebrews to settle the land.

The details in the biblical account of the Hebrews’ life in Egypt and their exodus from that kingdom have led some scholars to associate these stories with the period of Hyksos rule. It was then, during the Second Intermediate Period, that the Canaanites flooded into the Nile delta and took control, and it may be that the story of Joseph and his family entering Egypt preserves a memory of that process. The exact time of the exodus from Egypt has been difficult for historians to determine for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Bible does not name the Egyptian pharaohs of the Exodus period.

Yet some features of the biblical account indicate there was in fact some type of exodus. For example, Moses’s name is Egyptian and not Hebrew, suggesting he came from Egypt. The Bible also names the two midwives who traveled with the group, leading

some scholars to conclude there was some oral tradition about a very small group that may have crossed the Sinai into Canaan, though not the very large group described in the Bible. As for the story of the conquests of Joshua, the archaeological record simply does not support this. Even at the site of Jericho, extensive archaeological work has been unable to prove that the city was destroyed when and in the way the Bible describes. This absence of strong evidence has led most to conclude that there likely was no conquest, and that there was already a population of Hebrews in Canaan who were later joined by a smaller group from Egypt.

In Their Own Words

What Is in a Name?

Without archaeological or other evidence, historians have had to rely on the Hebrew Bible for clues about the Exodus. One possible hint comes from the Bible's book of Exodus, which describes the birth of Moses, his mother's effort to save him from slaughter, and his discovery and adoption by the pharaoh's daughter (Figure 4.38).



Figure 4.38 The Infant Moses. This 1904 Anglo-Dutch painting called *The Finding of Moses* represents the biblical account of the pharaoh's daughter discovering the infant Moses floating in a basket on the Nile. (credit: "The Finding of Moses" by Lawrence Alma-Tadema/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to witness what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and

said, This is one of the Hebrews' children. Then said his [Moses's] sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.

—Exodus 2:1-10 (KJV)

As this story explains, the pharaoh's daughter named Moses to reflect the fact that she "drew him out of the water." Some scholars believe this phrase is a reference to the Hebrew word *mashah*, meaning to "draw out," which sounds similar to the Hebrew pronunciation of Moses, *Mosheh*. That explanation would have made sense to Hebrew readers of the Bible, but it does not make sense that an Egyptian princess would speak Hebrew. While this problem makes it difficult to take the story seriously as evidence, it does raise an interesting question.

Is the biblical account actually an attempt to explain a Hebrew man's name that was not Hebrew but Egyptian? In Egyptian, Moses means "child of." It would have been part of a larger name such as Thutmose, which means "child of [the god] Thoth." The fact that Hebrew tradition tried to explain his Egyptian name suggests to some that Moses may have been a real person with Egyptian heritage. That, in turn, suggests there is some validity to the Exodus story itself.

- Does the scholarly interpretation of the name Moses as Egyptian in origin seem credible to you? Why or why not?
- What does this story reveal about family relationships in the period?

The biblical book of Judges describes how the Hebrews moved into the hills of Canaan and lived as members of twelve tribes. In the book of Samuel, we hear how they faced oppression from the Philistines, one of the many Sea Peoples groups. To better defend themselves against the Philistines, the Hebrews organized themselves into a kingdom they called Israel. Their first leader, Saul, became king around 1030 BCE but failed to rule properly. The second king, David, not only ruled effectively but also was able to drive back the Philistines.

The Hebrews, properly referred to as Israelites in this period because of their formation of the Kingdom of Israel, now entered a golden age in their history. David suppressed the surrounding kingdoms, made Jerusalem his capital, and established a shrine there to the Israelite god Yahweh. This more organized kingdom was then left to David's son Solomon, who furthered the organization of Israel, made alliances with surrounding kingdoms, and embarked on numerous construction projects, the most important of which was a large temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem.

Historians call the period of these three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—the united monarchy period. Archaeological work and extrabiblical sources support many biblical claims about the era. For example, there was a threat to the Hebrews from the Philistines, who were likely one of the many groups of migrants moving, often violently, around the eastern Mediterranean during the period of the Late Bronze Age Collapse. We have Egyptian and other records of these migrants, some specifically mentioning the Philistines by name. It seems likely that the founding of Israel was a response to this threat.

As for the existence of Saul and David, things are less clear. The Bible provides several conflicting accounts of how these two men became king. For example, Saul is made king when he is found hiding among some baggage, but also after leading troops in a dramatic rescue. Similar confusion surrounds David, though it seems clear he became an enemy of Saul at some point and was able to make himself king. Despite these contradictions, there is one piece of archaeological evidence for the existence of King David. The Tel Dan stele discovered in the Golan Heights in the 1990s makes reference to the "house of David," meaning the kingdom of David (Figure 4.39). However, no similar archaeological evidence has been unearthed for David's son Solomon. Indeed, evidence of Solomon's most famous achievement, the building of the first temple in Jerusalem, has yet to be discovered. However, we have strong archaeological evidence for some of his other public works projects, such as the three-thousand-year-old gates discovered at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo.



Figure 4.39 Evidence for the Existence of David? This stone fragment from the Tel Dan stele dates from the ninth century BCE and was discovered in the 1990s. It includes an inscription that reads “house of David,” making it the only non-biblical source attesting to the existence of King David. (credit: modification of work “Aramaic Inscription on Basalt Monument, Dan, 9th Century BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0)

After the death of Solomon, the period of the united monarchy came to an end, and Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This inaugurated the period of the divided monarchy (Figure 4.40). Jerusalem remained the capital of Judah, while Samaria was the capital of Israel. The northern kingdom was the larger and wealthier of the two and exerted influence over and sometimes warred with Judah. The biblical account often puts the kings of the northern kingdom in a negative light, noting that they abused their subjects and incorporated elements of foreign religious traditions in their worship of Yahweh.

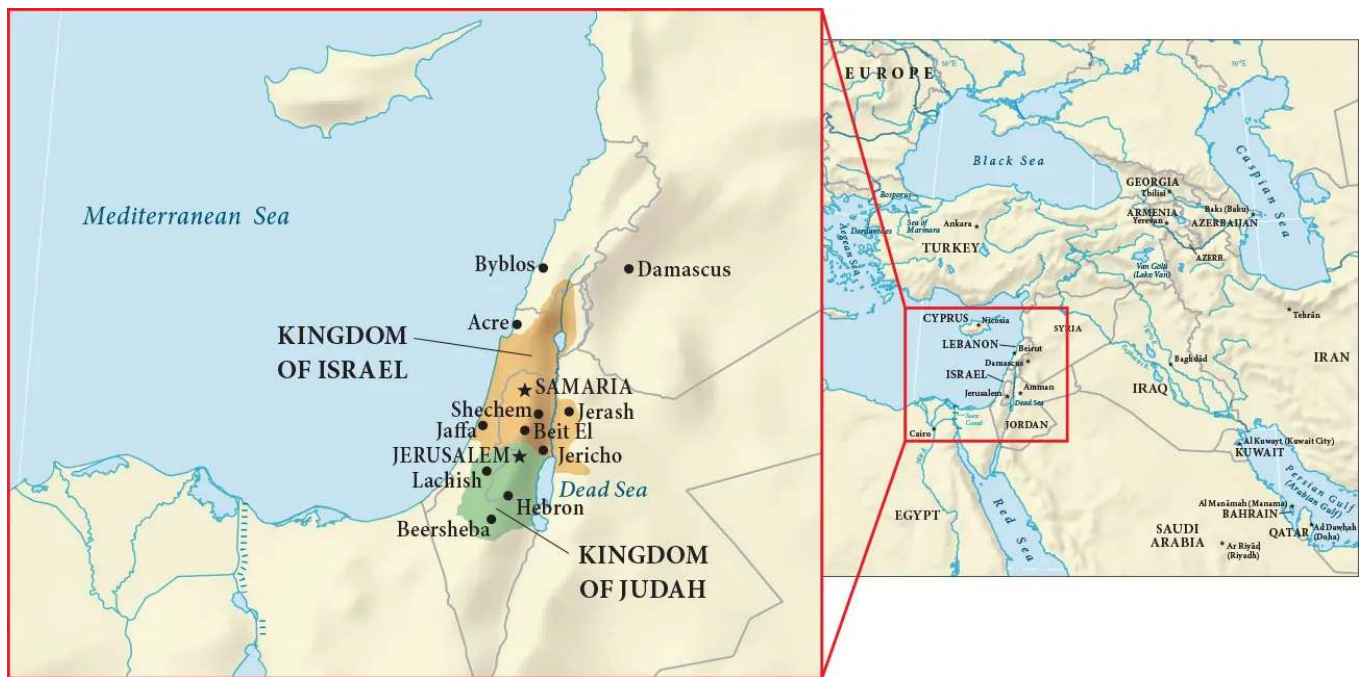


Figure 4.40 The Divided Monarchy. After the reign of Solomon, the united monarchy of the Israelites split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.(CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its expansion into Canaan, Israel and Judah entered a new era under foreign domination within the Assyrian-controlled Near East. Anti-Assyrian sentiment in both kingdoms and the Neo-Assyrians' desire to control the eastern Mediterranean eventually led to multiple Assyrian attacks on Israel. The most devastating occurred in 722 BCE, when thousands of Israelites were deported to other parts of the empire, as was the Assyrians' custom.

Prophets in Judah interpreted the destruction of Israel as punishment for its having veered from the covenant with Yahweh. They called for religious reforms in Judah in order to avoid a similar fate. While Judah was incorporated into the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it avoided the destruction experienced by Israel. However, the defeat of Assyria by the Neo-Babylonians brought new challenges to Judah. Resistance to Babylon led to punishments and forced deportations in 597 BCE, and finally to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BCE.

The many Judeans deported to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem were settled in Mesopotamia and expected to help repopulate areas that had been devastated by wars. Many assimilated into Babylonian culture and became largely indistinguishable from other Mesopotamians. Some, however, retained their Judean culture and religious beliefs. For these Judeans, the Babylonian exile, as it was called, was a time of cultural and religious revival. They edited various earlier Hebrew writings and combined them into a larger work, thus giving shape to the core of the Hebrew Bible. Finally, with the rise of the Persian Empire and its conquest of Babylonia, the Persian king Cyrus the Great permitted the unassimilated Judeans to return to Judah. They went in two major waves over the next few decades and began a process of reconstruction that eventually included the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple at Jerusalem.

The Culture of the Hebrews

The most salient feature of Hebrew culture during this period was its then-unusual monotheism. The Bible suggests this tradition began with Abraham, who was said to have entered into a covenant with Yahweh as far back as 2100 BCE. With the emergence of Moses in the Bible, Hebrew monotheism really began to take shape. As the Bible explains, during the exodus from Egypt, Moses was given the laws directly from Yahweh, including the command that only Yahweh be worshipped. This account suggests that pure monotheism was commonly practiced by the Hebrews from that time forward. Yet closer inspection of the biblical stories reveals a much more complicated and gradual process toward monotheism.

For example, the first of the commandments given to Moses by Yahweh demands that the Hebrews “have no other gods before me.” This language implies that there are in fact other gods, but those gods are not to be worshipped. In other places in the Bible, God is referred to as plural or occasionally as part of an assembly of gods. This textual evidence likely preserves small elements of the earlier Canaanite polytheistic religious traditions. These include the veneration of El, the head of the pantheon and often associated with Yahweh, and of Yahweh's consort Asherah, the storm god Baal, the fertility goddess Astarte, and many others. Archaeologists' discoveries of temples and figurines representing these gods attest to the fact that they were worshipped in some form well into the eighth century BCE.

Many portions of the Bible describe how the Hebrews frequently fell away from Yahweh and back into their polytheistic traditions. This backsliding is usually condemned in the Bible and occasionally results in efforts by biblical heroes to restore Moses's covenant with God. King Hezekiah of Judah (727–697 BCE), for example, conducted a cleansing campaign against unauthorized worship around his kingdom. He removed local shrines, destroyed sacred monuments, and smashed cult objects. His son, King Manasseh, however, restored some of these cultic practices and shrines. Setting aside the bias of the Bible's writers, Manasseh may have been attempting to rescue long-standing religious traditions that had been under assault by his reform-minded father. However, as early as the mid-seventh century BCE, the religious reformers who promoted the centralized worship of Yahweh and obedience to the laws of Moses had clearly gained the upper hand. Their interpretation of Hebrew history and religion was then on the rise.

The backsliding theme of the Hebrew Bible was partly a way for its writers to account for the vestiges of Canaanite religious practices that did not fit neatly with their view of the Hebrews as having been monotheistic from the time of Moses. The abandonment of Yahweh accounted for the disasters that befell the Hebrews in Israel and Judah, especially the destruction of the temple and forced deportation to Babylon. Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia were merely tools, the biblical writers and the prophets they record attest, used by Yahweh to compel the Hebrews to follow the correct path or face punishment. This version of Israelite history was kindled and strengthened during the Babylonian exile, when the core portion of the Hebrew Bible was being edited and assembled.

By the time the Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, the basic framework of what we understand today as Judaism had emerged and been largely accepted. The Jews (or people from Judah) were expected to worship only Yahweh, live moral lives consistent with his dictates, and closely follow the laws of Moses. For example, they were prohibited from murdering, stealing, and committing adultery. They were barred from consuming specific foods such as pork, shellfish, insects, and meat that had been mixed with dairy. Food had to be properly prepared, which included ritual slaughter for animals. Jewish people were also prohibited from working on the seventh day of the week and were compelled to treat wives with respect and give to charity, among many other acts. And of course there were important rules about the worship of Yahweh, including loving him, fearing him, emulating him, and not profaning his name.

Since the Hebrews could trace their origins back to agricultural clans, a number of the laws of Moses dealt with agricultural issues, like prohibitions against eating ripe grains from the harvest before they are made into an offering. The festival of Sukkot, meaning “huts,” was a harvest festival when Jewish people were expected to erect huts, possibly as a way to remember the time when they were primarily agriculturalists. However, as the Hebrews grew in number and began living in cities and adopting urban

occupations, these agricultural traditions were relegated primarily to symbolic religious practice. In cities, Jewish people found economic opportunities as craftspeople, traders, and merchants. As Jerusalem grew in the centuries after the Babylonian exile, their religion became ever more adapted to urban life.

At the center of urban life in Jerusalem was the temple, completed around 515 BCE (Figure 4.41). It included courtyards as well as an enclosed sanctuary with altars and a special location kept in total darkness, referred to as the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh was present. In the temple, the priests organized various religious festivals and performed elaborate rituals, including special sacrifices of animals supplied by worshippers seeking the favor of Yahweh.



Figure 4.41 The Second Temple. This contemporary model of the Second Temple complex in Jerusalem shows the way it would have looked after extensive expansions were completed in the first century BCE. (credit: “Second Temple” by “Ariely”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

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2.8: Ancient China

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the early dynasties of ancient China
- Analyze the impact of the Warring States Period on ancient Chinese politics and culture
- Explain the connections between ancient Chinese philosophy and its political and social context

Ancient China was not the first area in Asia to practice agriculture and develop cities. But it was home to some of the world's earliest political dynasties, and it produced written scripts, influential schools of thought and religion, and innovations in architecture and metallurgy, such as the manufacture of bronze and iron agricultural implements, weapons, chariots, and jewelry. A climate of constant regional warfare between small Chinese states imparted to kings and philosophers alike a sense of urgency to build institutions and systems that would bring stability to their realms. Against this background, China's first empire, the Qin, presided over the creation of some of the ancient world's greatest historical treasures, including the Terracotta Army and an early form of the Great Wall.

Prehistoric China

Recent studies of Paleolithic and Neolithic China suggest it was home to several distinct cultural complexes that developed independently of one another and exhibited notable regional variations in agriculture, social organization, language, and religion.

Human beings set foot on the Chinese subcontinent more than a million years ago. Evidence indicates the presence there of an archaic member of the human lineage known as *Homo erectus*, a term meaning “upright man.” One example is the well-known Peking Man, a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China in 1929. The species *Homo sapiens* (meaning “wise man” and including all modern humans) appeared later, around 100,000 years ago. These communities of hunter-gatherers followed the mammoth, elk, and moose on which they subsisted into northern China. Later they learned to fish along China's many rivers and long coastlines and supplemented their food stores by foraging from a rich variety of plants, including many grasses, beans, yams, and roots.

Archaeological evidence from this stage of China's prehistory, the Paleolithic period from roughly 100,000 to 10,000 BCE, confirms that these groups developed symbolic language, which enabled them to evolve ideas about abstractions like kinship and an afterlife and thus produce the foundations for a shared culture and society. Their tools, such as those used for grinding plants, were simple and fashioned primarily of stone, but also of bone and wood. Early humans arrived in China from Africa and western Asia in waves separated by hundreds of years, but they were far from uniform. Thus, they eventually produced early societies that spoke a variety of languages, differed in their spiritual beliefs, and developed the capacity for agriculture independently of one another.

China's diverse geography, climate, and terrain reinforced regional variations in these early cultures as well (Figure 5.4). The country today stretches for roughly a thousand miles from north to south and east to west, occupying a temperate zone dominated by two major river systems, the Yellow and the Yangtze. Mountains, deserts, grasslands, high plateaus, jungles, and a variety of climates exist, such as the frozen environs surrounding the city of Harbin in the north and the subtropical climate around Hong Kong in the south. Most of the early cultures and later dynasties that produced Chinese civilization lay in a much smaller area, within a series of provinces along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, ringed by the outer areas of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Today these provinces make up the most densely populated areas of the People's Republic of China, inhabited almost entirely by the majority ethnic group in China, Han Chinese. The outlying areas have been the traditional homelands of a great many religious and ethnic minorities, such as Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Manchu, who did not become incorporated into the first dynasties of ancient China. Early inhabitants of China found that each region offered advantages and challenges to meeting the necessities of daily life: food, shelter, and security.

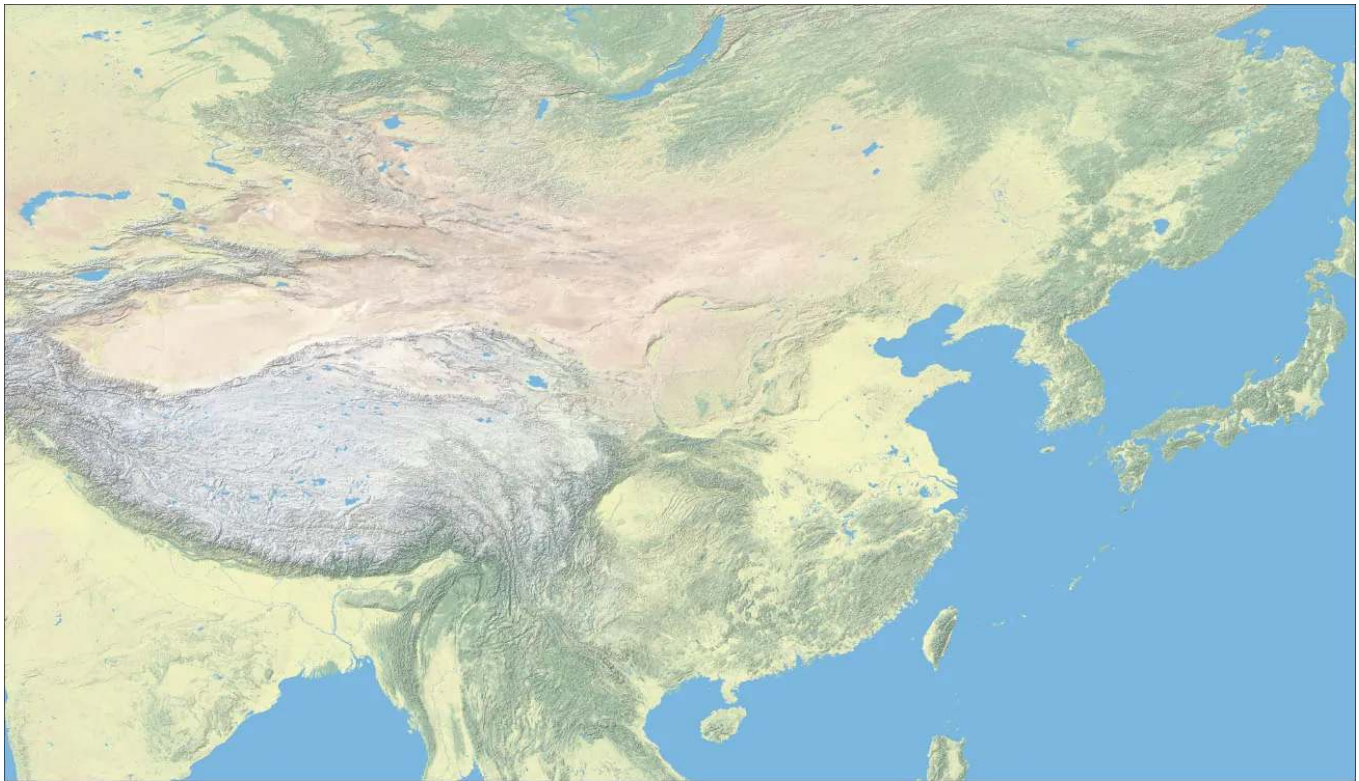


Figure 5.4 Topography of Ancient China. This map shows the varied topography of ancient China, which included fertile plains, river valleys, numerous mountain ranges, deserts, and a long running coastline on the eastern edge. (credit: “China topography” by Tom Patterson, US National Park Service Natural Earth/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

More than twenty sites that produced unique Neolithic cultures have been found in China. The earliest such culture was the Nanzhuangtou (8500 to 7700 BCE) in Hebei, a province in the northeast, and the last known was the Yueshi culture (1900 to 1500 BCE) found in Shandong, an eastern coastal province. All were capable of farming, domesticating animals, and manufacturing textiles and ceramics.

China’s Neolithic cultures are notable for their independent growth and regional diversity, and for the differences between those in the north and those in the south. For example, in the southeastern part of the country, near Shanghai, a site dated to around 8000 BCE was home to people who cultivated rice, used boats, constructed standing homes, and made pottery with geometric designs. Evidence suggests their language was more closely related to those of the peoples living in Southeast Asia today, so calling them “Chinese” is open to debate. To the north, the colder climate forced early communities in today’s Hebei province to rely on another grain, millet, for their primary foodstuff. These farmers used stone tools such as sickles and made simple jars to store their grain. Wooden spears and hoes were more common in the south than stone tools, and while both north and south domesticated dogs and pigs, in the north grazing animals such as sheep were tamed, while in the south farmers harnessed the power of water buffalo.

There were distinctive Neolithic cultures in the east and west of China. From about 4100 to 2600 BCE, the Dawenkou culture arose near Shandong in the east, characterized by the manufacture of exquisite works of pottery and the use of turquoise, ivory, and jade. The burial practices of the Dawenkou became more elaborate over time, eventually leading to the use of wooden coffins and the creation of ledges of earth to surround the graves. Later eastern cultures lavished treasures on the deceased, burying them with necklaces and beads, showing an increasing sophistication in the decorative arts.

To the west lay the Yangshao culture, dating to 5000 BCE, whose people farmed millet and dug homes in the earth to protect themselves from a cool climate. In Yangshao, burying the dead was a simpler process, but artists decorated pottery with painted

designs and intricate geometric patterns. To the east there are few examples of painted bowls, jars, or cups. Instead, eastern cultures devoted their creative efforts to the slow, painstaking process of shaping jade. The Hongshan culture in Liaoning province and the Liangzhu complex in Jiangsu fashioned beautiful jade talismans, ornaments, and treasures for spiritual ceremonies. The great distance between these two cultures—with Hongshan far in the northeast near today's border with North Korea and the Liangzhu located around the Yangtze River delta in the southeast—shows the breadth of jade's influence along China's eastern seaboard. In the west, jade remained a much rarer object.

Later networks of exchange connected these regional cultures, which increasingly borrowed from each other, accelerating change, innovation, and collision. From roughly 3000 to 2000 BCE, China's Neolithic cultures created and shared new implements for cooking and artistic styles such as geometric patterns on ceramics. With contact, however, came growing conflict as well, suggested in the archaeological record by the emergence of metalworking and cities defended by walls of rammed earth. The need to coordinate defense and construct such ramparts likely required a political evolution within these cultures, giving rise to an elite military class led by chiefs. Thereafter, military elites were shrouded in spiritual rituals revolving around human sacrifice, possibly of captives of war, who were entombed beneath buildings in sites found in northern China. Increasing exchange between Neolithic cultures and the prominence of war may also have led to greater social differentiation. Burial sites for elites show evidence of increasingly elaborate ceremonies to please the gods or ancestors and to honor the deceased and denote their status.

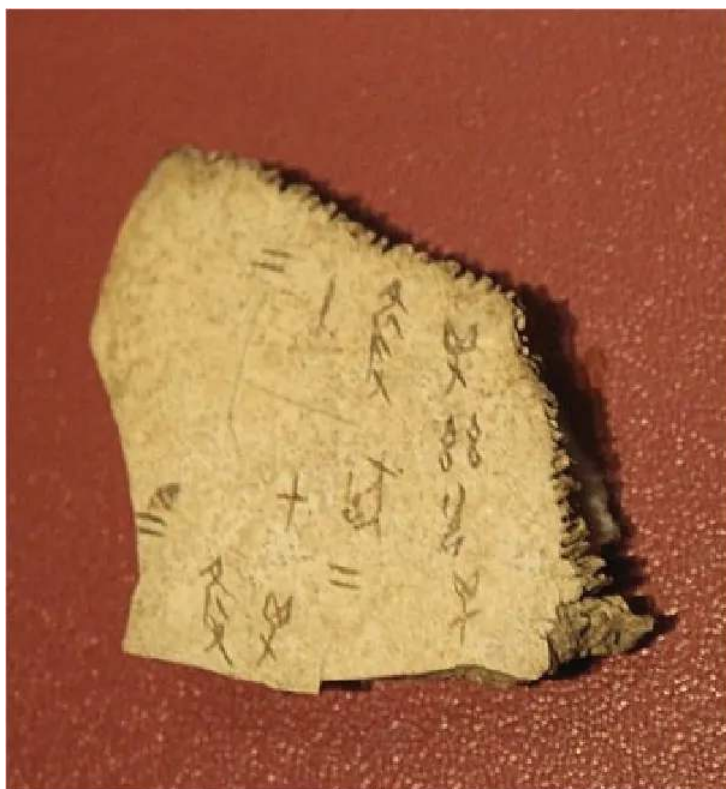
Women were often buried with the same quantity of items and laid in the same position as their male counterparts. Archaeological remains such as graves, figurines, tools, and other materials suggest that many Neolithic Chinese communities were matrilineal societies, in which lines of kinship were traced through the mother's family. While weaving textiles became an important occupation for many women, the division of labor was far less rigid in this period. Carvings depicting goddesses, symbols of fertility, and women's genitalia are prevalent in many of the cultures and seem to suggest women were on a par with men in the Neolithic era, especially when compared with later periods in Chinese history.

Early Dynastic China

The Yellow River had an enormous impact on the development of Chinese civilization. It stretches for more than 3,395 miles, beginning in the mountains of western China and emptying into the Bohai Sea from Shandong province. (Only the Yangtze River to the south is longer.) Critical to the development of farming and human settlement along the Yellow River was the soil, which is loess—a sediment that is highly fertile, but easily moved by winds roaming the plain and driven along as silt by the power of the river. This portability of the soil and the human-built dikes along the river have caused it to constantly evolve and change over the centuries, leaving the surrounding areas prone to regular flooding and subjecting farmers to recurring cycles of bountiful harvests and natural disasters. Rainfall around the Yellow River is limited to around twenty inches annually, meaning that the river's floods have usually been paired with periodic droughts.

Near the Yellow River, the site of Erlitou in Henan province reveals a culture defined by the building of palaces, the creation of bronze vessels for rituals, and the practice of forms of ancestor worship. Sites such as these have led to debate about whether they prove the existence of the Xia dynasty, a fabled kingdom said to have been founded by one of China's mythological heroes, the Great Yu. No site has yet been found with documents written by the Xia. Instead, all references to it come from records written many centuries after the possible mythical kingdom ceased to exist.

The first Chinese dynasty for which we have solid evidence is the Shang. It created a complex, socially stratified Bronze Age civilization whose signature achievement was the creation of a written script. The Shang were long thought to be a mythological dynasty like the Xia until scholars in the late nineteenth century discovered old turtle shells inscribed with Chinese characters in a medicine shop. Eventually, these shells and other "oracle bones," once used in the art of divination, were found to be written records from China's first dynasty (Figure 5.5).



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.5 Bronze Age Script. (a) This ancient oracle bone is carved with early variations of Chinese characters. (b) Oracle bone script went through a number of stages to evolve into the contemporary form of script we see today, as evidenced by the early iterations of the characters for the word “autumn,” shown here. (credit a: modification of work “Shang Ox Bone Oracle Bone” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Comparison of Chinese characters for autumn” by “Pat457”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Shang kings exerted their authority through rituals of ancestor worship drawn from the Erlitou culture and adapted to the art of bone divination. First carving written characters onto shells and animal bones and then applying heat to crack and shatter them, they posed questions to spirits and divined from the bones the spirits’ predictions regarding impending harvests, military campaigns, or the arrival of an heir. From there, the Shang developed a logographic script whose characters visually represented words and ideas, combining symbols to make new concepts and sounds as needed. These characters served in a number of tasks such as keeping records, making calendars and organizing time, and preserving knowledge and communicating it from generation to generation.

The earliest forms of Chinese writing were likely forged on fragile materials such as bamboo or even silk and have not survived. But the Shang’s passing on to future dynasties a logographic script, rather than a phonographic alphabet, meant that for centuries literacy was the preserve of elites. Reading required memorizing hundreds and eventually thousands of symbols and their meanings, rather than learning the sounds of a far fewer number of letters as is the case with an alphabet. Chinese ideas, values, and

spiritual beliefs stored in this logographic script long outlived the Shang, becoming a key element of continuity from one dynasty to the next.

Through their invention of writing, the Shang were also able to command enormous resources for two centuries. They developed the organizational capacity to mine metal ores and transport them to foundries to make bronze cups, goblets, and cauldrons that grew to weigh hundreds of pounds. Shang artisans began weaving silk into cloth, and the city walls around an early capital in Zhengzhou were erected by ten thousand workers moving earth into bulwarks that stood thirty feet high and sixty feet wide.

But the Shang became China's first dynasty largely because of their military prowess, expanding their power through conquest, unlike the earlier and more trade-oriented cultures. Through warfare and the construction of a network of walled towns, the Shang built one of the world's first large territorial states controlled by a noble warrior class. This area included territory in Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Hebei, and Shanxi provinces. The Shang used bronze spears, bows, and later horse-drawn chariots to make raids against neighboring cultures, distributing the prizes to vassals and making enemies into allies for a share of the plunder. The prizes included captives of war, enslaved by the Shang warrior elite or sacrificed. An aristocratic and militaristic culture, the Shang also organized royal hunts for game such as deer, bear, and even tigers and elephants to hone their skills.

Link to Learning

Visit this website and read a [detailed summary of the importance to ancient Chinese cultures of ritual killing](#) to learn more about and see visual examples of the Shang's ritualistic vessels, art of divination, and burial customs.

The oracle bones suggest that religion and ritual were the backbone of Shang society. The kings were not just military leaders but high priests who worshipped their ancestors and the supreme deity known as Di. Shang queens and princesses were also active in politics and warfare, with a few notable women such as the general Fu Hao leading large armies onto the battlefield. Aristocratic women also regularly served as priests in the royal ancestral cult. Like many other ancient societies, the Shang dynasty exhibited a theocratic dimension, with the kings claiming the exclusive right to act as intermediaries between their subjects and the spirit world.

To stage this royal role, the Shang built palaces, temples, and altars for worship in their capital cities, served by artisans making a host of goods. They developed enormous tombs tunneled beneath the earth for royals and nobility, signifying their capacity to organize labor and resources on a vast scale. Fu Hao's tomb, for example, was small by comparison to many others for Shang royals, but it was dug twenty-five feet deep into the earth and was large enough to hold sixteen human sacrifices and hundreds of bronze weapons, mirrors, bells, and other items fashioned from bone, jade, ivory, and stone. A comparison of early Shang tombs in Zhengzhou with those of a later period discovered in Anyang suggests that human sacrifices became ever more spiritually significant, and also more extreme. Later kings were found buried not with a few victims but with hundreds of servants and prisoners of war, as well as animals such as dogs and horses. By spilling human blood, Shang royalty hoped to appease Di and their ancestors to ward off problems such as famine. But the scale of these rituals ballooned, with one record indicating that King Wu Ding went so far as to sacrifice more than nine thousand victims in one ritual bloodletting.

Under the sway of the Shang, the disparate Neolithic cultures of northern China grew more uniform, while even groups beyond the Shang's control in the Yangtze River valley and the west were influenced by their artistic styles and motifs. Yet over the course of their reign, the Shang's reliance on constant warfare and a religion centered on human sacrifices bred discontent and may have fueled the perception of their kings as corrupt and sadistic. It might even have precipitated revolt against the Shang rulers and the culture's eventual demise.

The Zhou Dynasty

The Zhou dynasty, which supplanted the Shang dynasty in 1045 BCE, borrowed extensively from its predecessors. But the Zhou people were originally independent of the Shang, with their homeland lying in today's Shaanxi province in north-central China, in a large fertile basin surrounded by mountains just beyond the core Shang territory that lay to the east. Once settled there, Zhou nobility became vassals of the Shang kings, equipped to defend them and campaign against their hated rivals the Qiang, a proto-Tibetan tribe.

The Zhou combined the practices of farming learned from the Shang with livestock raising learned from nomadic groups living outside the Chinese core. From the Shang, the Zhou also acquired the arts of bronze-making and divination before later developing their own ritual vessels and spiritual practices. Armed by the Shang with chariots, bows, and bronze armor, the Zhou eventually overthrew the Shang kings and founded a new dynastic ruling house. Inheriting the Shang logographic script, the Zhou dynasty

became the first to transmit texts such as the *Book of Documents*, records of dozens of speeches and announcements attributed to historical leaders, from the ancient world directly to future generations.

But for all that the Zhou inherited from the Shang, their dynasty also introduced influential changes to ancient China. Likely in order to distance themselves from the Shang, the Zhou allowed the scale of human sacrifices in burials to decline and phased out the use of divination with oracle bones. Above the deity Di, they introduced the concept of a higher power referred to as heaven, and they situated themselves as mediators by performing rituals designed to show that the cosmos legitimated their right to rule (Table 5.1).

Chinese Dynasty	Approximate Duration
Shang dynasty	1600–1050 BCE
Zhou (<i>pronounced “Jeo”</i>) dynasty - Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE) - Eastern Zhou dynasty (c. 771–256 BCE)	1046–256 BCE
Qin (<i>pronounced “chin”</i>) dynasty	221–206 BCE
Han dynasty - Western/Former Han dynasty (206–9 CE) - Eastern/Later Han dynasty (25–220 CE)	206 BCE–220 CE
Six Dynasties Period - Three Kingdoms dynasty (220–265 CE) - Jin dynasty (265–420 CE) - Period of the Northern and Southern dynasties (386–589 CE)	220–589 CE
Sui (<i>pronounced “sway”</i>) dynasty	581–618 CE
Tang dynasty	618–906 CE
Five Dynasties Period	907–960 CE
Song dynasty - Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) - Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)	960–1279
Yuan dynasty	1279–1368
Ming dynasty	1368–1644
Qing dynasty	1644–1912

Table 5.1 China’s Dynasties This table marks the duration of China’s dynasties, from the start of the Shang dynasty to the fall of the last, the Qing, in 1912. The physical borders of Chinese civilization fluctuated from one dynasty to the next.

(<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timeli...line-keyevents>)

More than just spiritual changes, these policy shifts helped the Zhou spread a political ideology that fostered a shared cultural identity that was formative to Chinese civilization. According to the Zhou, the Shang rulers over time had grown despotic, ruining the lives of their subjects and squandering the bountiful resources of China. Around 1046 BCE, the Zhou, having grown tired of their abuses, rose up against the Shang and, led by King Wu, defeated them in battle.

The Zhou victory and Shang defeat were recorded in various Chinese classical texts as proof that the heavens had revoked the Shang’s right to rule and conferred it upon the new Zhou dynasty. This “Mandate of Heaven” shaped Chinese ideology and understanding of dynastic cycles for centuries to come (Figure 5.6). It justified the overthrow of bad governments and corrupt or inept rulers and reinforced a common conviction that in order to govern, a ruling house must demonstrate morality and order to retain heaven’s favor. The concept also pressured dynastic rulers to deserve the mandate by exhibiting moral leadership and proving their legitimacy through support for agriculture, the arts, and the welfare of the common people. Thereafter, natural disasters such as flood or famine and social upheaval in the form of rebellions or poverty were read as signs that a dynasty was in peril of having its mandate to rule rescinded.

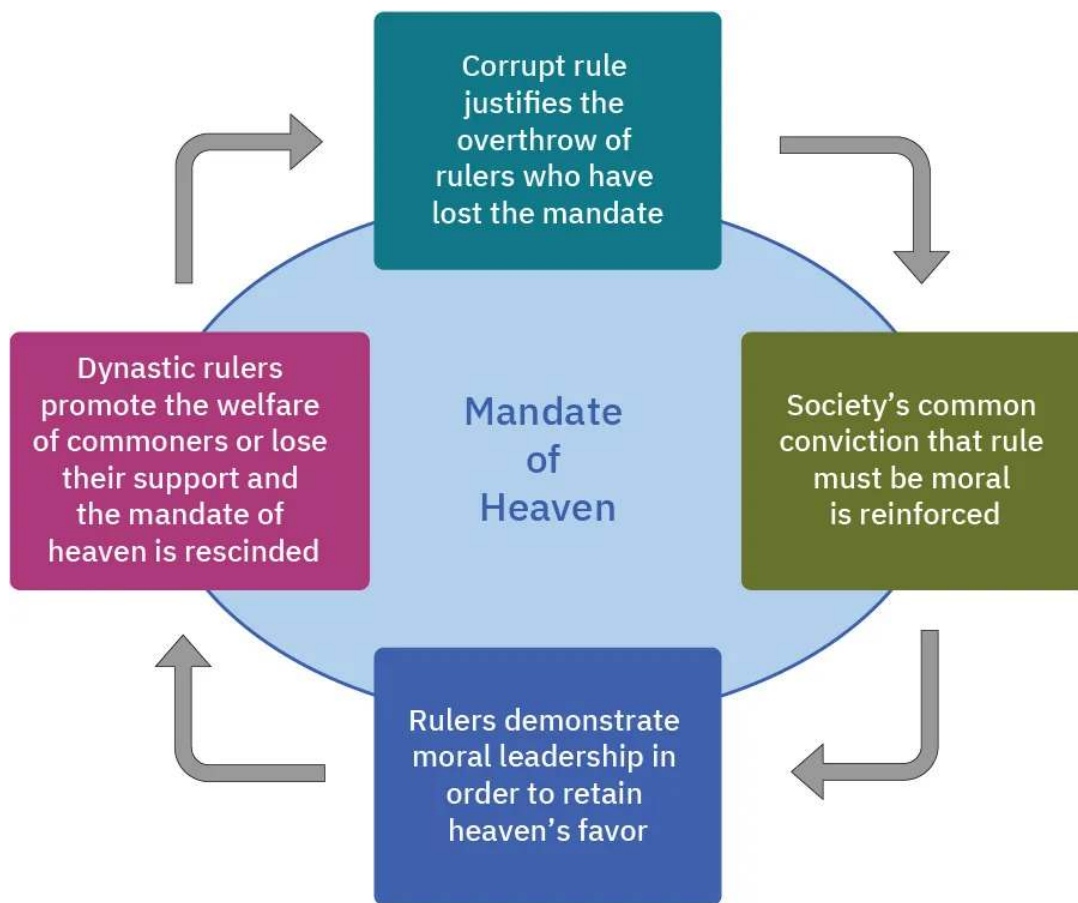


Figure 5.6 The Mandate of Heaven. The Zhou dynasty's belief that imperial rule must be sanctioned by a mandate from the gods shaped China's history and culture for centuries to follow. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Mandate of Heaven also ensured continuity between dynasties because it became an element of a core ideology passed from one ruling house to the next, even as non-Chinese groups such as Mongols and Jurchen later invoked it as conquerors. Thus, the mandate created a basis for increasing political unity of the Chinese under a supreme sovereign, while also promoting dissent and latent revolution against unpopular rulers. From this ideology sprang new terms for subjects, identified as denizens of Zhongguo (China), a name formed from the terms for *central* and *state*, or as Huaxia (Chinese) in the Zhou dynasty, to express their membership in a shared culture defined by farming, writing, and metalworking and inherited from mythical figures and common ancestors.

To consolidate their political control, the early Zhou rulers led military campaigns to extend their territory east over the Yellow River and relied on a complex system of decentralized rule. Leniency was shown to the Shang, with a son of the dynasty left to rule his own city and preside over rituals to honor his ancestors. Other Shang nobles were uprooted and moved to new cities to keep them under the watch of the Zhou, whose relatives and trusted advisors governed walled garrisons and cities on the frontier to guard against rising threats. In other areas, the Zhou cooperated with largely autonomous leaders, granting aristocratic titles in return for tribute and military service from local chiefs and nobility. To cement these ties, the Zhou brokered marriages between the royal line and the families of local lords, who within their own domains performed the same spiritual and administrative functions as the ruling family. Like the Zhou, local lords were served by ministers, scribes, court attendants, and warriors, and they enjoyed the fruits of the efforts of ordinary laborers and farmers who lived on their estates.

The Zhou proved more durable than the Shang but, especially in later centuries, their power was diffused among many smaller, competing kingdoms only nominally under their control. The Zhou's decentralized feudal system, in which land and power was granted by the king to local leaders in return for special privileges, gradually weakened as those regional lords ignored the commands of kings, instead amassing armies and searching for alliances and technological advantages over their neighbors.

As a result, scholars typically divide the Zhou dynasty into several periods. The Western Zhou (c. 1046–771 BCE) refers to the first half of the dynasty's rule, from its founding to the sack of its capital in Haojing by nomadic armies in 771 BCE. Afterwards the

Zhou reestablished their capital in the east, in Luoyang, inaugurating the period called the Eastern Zhou (771–256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou dynasty itself is often divided into two halves—the Spring and Autumn (771–476 BCE) and the Warring States (475–256 BCE) periods. The first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty derives its name from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. That chronicle, from about the fifth century BCE, documents the gradual erosion of the Zhou kings' power as outlying territories such as Chu, Qin, and Yan became increasingly autonomous. Not surprisingly, then, the Warring States era was characterized by open warfare between these regional powers to enlarge their territories, absorb neighboring kingdoms, and replace the Zhou as the new sovereigns of ancient China.

Bridging the two eras of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States was a period defined by a flourishing of literature and philosophy known as the Hundred Schools of Thought (770–221 BCE). Inspired by political turmoil and rivalries between various Chinese states, those who wished to retain power were drawn to the study of the military arts, diplomacy, and political intrigue. Those who lamented the lack of order and waning loyalty to authority and tradition turned to the study of morality and ethics. In a political climate of competition and reform, new schools of thought informed a swelling class of capable administrators and military strategists contesting for the patronage of rulers. Philosophers such as Mozi and Sunzi, author of *The Art of War*, created their own rival traditions and contributed to courtly debates on morality, war, government, technology, and law.

In this marketplace of ideas, Chinese civilization as a whole rapidly grew more sophisticated. At the same time, rulers sought to expand their revenues, increase the size of their populations, implement new techniques for farming such as draining marshes, and create new forms of currency such as bolts of silk. This era also fostered dynamic new forms of art as the Zhou court became home to musicians skilled with chimes, drums, lutes, flutes, and bells. States such as Chu and Zheng became famous for their artists and styles of dance, while popular hymns were later translated into poems and recorded in the *Book of Songs*. These intellectual traditions and cultural forms, though varied, served as the foundational core for Chinese politics, education, and art in the ancient world.

Foremost among the new schools of thought was Confucianism, a philosophical system that shaped morality, governance, and social relations in China before spreading to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan in later centuries. Its founding philosopher, known as Kong Fuzi, or Confucius, was probably born about 551 BCE and lived in relative obscurity as a teacher in the small state of Lu. Later his descendants and disciples made his teachings on the family, society, and politics known in ancient China via *The Analects*, a collection of brief statements attributed to him and recorded long after his death. Later scholars influenced by Confucius, such as Mengzi, went on to win renown for their teachings, attracting throngs of new students while gaining influential positions as advisers in the service of rulers.

A central tenet of Confucianism is the importance of exemplifying virtuous leadership by living a moral life, studiously observing rituals, and being tirelessly devoted to the duties owed to the leader's subjects. Confucian texts such as the *Book of Documents* promoted habits like literacy, critical thinking, the search for universal truth, humility, respect for ancestors and elders, and the valuing of merit over aristocratic privilege. Confucius also considered family relationships to be central to an orderly society. Specifically, he delineated five cordial relationships—between king and subjects, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger siblings, and friends. Each relationship consisted of an authority figure who required obedience and honor from the other person or persons, except for friends who were to honor one another. In return, the person in authority was supposed to embody *ren*, an attitude of generosity and empathy for those beneath him. So long as everyone behaved as they should, good order would flourish.

Later Confucian teachers such as Xun Kuang (also known as Xunzi), witnessing the violence of the Warring States period, argued that humanity's base impulses necessitated rigorous self-cultivation and discipline. Among devout Confucians, such ideas spawned a constant search for internal self-improvement and concern for the well-being of others and society as a whole. During this period, Zhou kings presided over rites to honor royal ancestors, but they also made greater use of written works to magnify their prestige and power. *Yijing*, or *The Book of Changes*, presented a new system of divination later included as a seminal text in the Confucian canon.

In Their Own Words

The Analects of Confucius

Over many decades following Confucius's death, his students and followers collected his words of wisdom in *The Analects*. *The Analects* consists of twenty short books, each of which includes a series of short quotations on a particular theme. Confucius's main concern was to teach people how to become *junzi*, compassionate and moral beings more concerned with doing what was right than with satisfying their own desires. The *junzi* understood their duties to others and fulfilled all the

ancient ritual obligations. Confucius believed *junzi* could be created through education, and that society would be harmonious and peaceful if the government was guided by *junzi*. The following are some excerpts from Book 2.

CHAP. I. The Master [Confucius] said, “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it.”

CHAP. II. The Master said, “In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—Having no depraved thoughts.”

CHAP. III. 1. The Master said, “If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. 2. “If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good.”

CHAP. IV. 1. The Master said, “At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. 2. “At thirty, I stood firm. 3. “At forty, I had no doubts. 4. “At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. 5. “At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. 6. “At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.”

—Confucius, The Analects, translated by James Legge

- Why would Confucius think it important to be able to feel shame?
- How would the values expressed here help make a person a better leader?
- What connection, if any, can you see between the teachings of Confucius and the Zhou concept of the Mandate of Heaven?

Link to Learning

You can read the full text of [The Analects](#) at the Project Gutenberg website.

A mystical indigenous religion that venerated nature, Daoism borrowed from various ideological systems, such as the dualism of *yin-yang* with its emphasis on the complementary poles of light and dark cosmological forces. Daoism's thousands of texts, temples, and priests did not flower until the later Han dynasty, but during the Zhou era, this school emerged as a major influence thanks to teachers like Laozi and Zhuang Zhou (commonly known as Zhuangzi) and the circulation of the books attributed to them, the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi*. From them, Daoists learned a litany of poems, sayings, parables, and folktales teaching that *dao* (or “the way”) was an underlying influence that shaped and infused all humans, the natural world, and the cosmos. Daoists encouraged dwelling on the beauty of the natural world, exploring mystic rituals, and contemplating the comparative insignificance of the individual against the vastness of time and space. Perhaps the most important political concept introduced by Daoists was the idea of *wuwei* (or “nonaction”), implying to those in power that the best form of governance was a minimalist approach that avoided interfering in the lives of their subjects.

Counter to the Daoist tradition and Confucianism ran the school of thought known as Legalism, the focal point of which was the accumulation of power. Legalists argued that governments drew power from a written legal code backed by an expansive system of rewards and punishments to ensure enforcement and order. A few of its exponents, like the thinker Han Feizi, studied Confucianism first, but came to see its proponents and teachings as too idealistic and naïve. Legalists downplayed the need for morality and asserted that the bedrock of a good government was a “rich country and a strong army.”

While Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism remained distinct, they borrowed liberally from each other and incorporated values, themes, and terminology to round out their own philosophies. All were open, eclectic systems reacting to historical circumstances and conditions. Moreover, each of these schools of thought and even the more minor traditions formed a common frame of reference within which Chinese rulers, philosophers, scribes, and even hermits expressed their own views. Confucianism and Legalism encouraged the study of texts over mystic rites, or society and its history over the supernatural and the afterlife, while other thinkers continued to ponder the yin and yang and work out principles applicable to astronomy, medicine, and the calendar.

The world of spirits, ancestor worship, and folktales was no less prevalent than before. Still, it was the emergence of these new systems and their contributions that make this era an “axial age,” a critical stage in the evolution of not just Chinese civilization but the world.

The Warring States Era and Qin Unification

Over the course of the long Eastern Zhou era (771–256 BCE), the means and methods of warfare changed, with dramatic consequences for ancient China. Initially war was regulated by chivalrous codes of conduct, complete with rituals of divination conducted before and after battle. Battles were fought according to a set of established rules by armies of a few thousand soldiers fighting for small Chinese states. The seasons and the rhythms of agricultural life limited the scope of campaigns. Victorious armies followed the precedent set by the early Zhou conquerors, sparing aristocratic leaders in order to maintain lines of kinship and preserve an heir who would perform rites of ancestor worship.

With the advent of the Warring States era (475–256 BCE), these rules were cast aside, and values such as honor and mercy went out of fashion. New military technologies provided the catalyst for these changes. The invention of the crossbow made the advantages once owned by cavalry and chariots nearly obsolete. The result was ballooning conscript armies of hundreds of thousands, making military service nearly universal for men. Protected by leather armor and iron helmets, soldiers skilled in the art of mounted archery trickled into Chinese states from the steppes. Discipline, drilling, logistics, organization, and strategy became paramount to success. Treatises on deceptive military maneuvers and the art of siege craft proliferated among the various states of the Zhou.

Not all the changes wrought by war in the late Zhou period were unwelcome. For example, common farmers gained the right to include their family names on registration rolls and pressure sovereigns for improvements to their lands such as new irrigation channels. Iron technology was developed for weapons, but was also used for new agricultural tools. Together, increasing agricultural productivity and advancements in iron technology were part of a late Zhou surge in economic growth. Mobilization for war stimulated a cross-regional trade in furs, copper, salt, and horses. And with that long-distance trade came increased coinage. The destruction of states through war also created social volatility, reducing the status of formerly great aristocratic families while giving rise to new forms of gentry and a more powerful merchant class. The only way back up the social ladder was through merit, and many lower-level aristocrats proved themselves as eager bureaucrats in the service of new sovereigns.

One of the many warring states in this period, the state of Qin, capitalized on these economic and social changes by adopting Legalist reforms to justify an agenda of power and expansionism. The arrival of Lord Shang, a migrant born in a rival territory in approximately 390 BCE, who soon took the position of prime minister, was the turning point, when Legalism came to dominate the thinking of Qin’s elite. Before this, the Qin state had been a marginal area within the lands of the Zhou, a frontier state on the western border charged with defending the borderlands and raising horses. The Qin state leveraged this location by trading with peoples from central Asia. At the same time, their vulnerability on the periphery kept them in a state of constant alert and readiness for war, creating a more militaristic culture and an experienced army that proved invaluable when set against their Chinese neighbors in the east.

To offset their initial disadvantages, the Qin leaders wisely embraced immigrant talent such as Lord Shang and solicited help from advisors, militarists, and diplomats from rival domains. They adopted new techniques of governance, appointing officials and delegates to centralize rule rather than relying on hereditary nobles. Theirs became a society with new opportunities for social advancement based on talent and merit. Under Shang’s advisement, the Qin scorned tradition and introduced new legal codes, unified weights and measures, and applied a system of incentives for able administrators that helped create an army and bureaucracy based more on merit than on birth. Over time, these changes produced an obedient populace, full coffers, and higher agricultural productivity.

The Qin state’s rising strength soon overwhelmed its rivals, propelling to victory its king Ying Zheng, who anointed himself China’s first emperor and was known as Qin Shi Huang, or Shihuangdi, literally “first emperor” (Figure 5.7). The Qin war machine defeated the states of Han, Wei, Zhao, Chu, Yan, and Qi in less than a decade. Under Shihuangdi’s rule, the tenets of Legalism fostered unity as the emperor standardized the writing system, coins, and the law throughout northern China. Defeated aristocratic families were forced to uproot themselves and move to the new capital near Xi’an. To consolidate political control and reverse the fragmentation of the Zhou era, officials appointed by the emperor were dispatched to govern on his behalf, which cast aside the older feudal system of governance. Officials who performed poorly were removed and severely punished. Those who did well wrote regular detailed reports closely read by the emperor himself.



Figure 5.7 Qin Shi Huang. This image of China's first emperor was painted by an anonymous eighteenth-century Chinese artist for an album of emperors' portraits. Shihuangdi's reign was typified by expansionist campaigns and enormous construction projects such as his tomb. (credit: "A portrait painting of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty" by Richard R. Wertz/18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes, British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Qin militarism also turned outward, enlarging the bounds of Chinese territory as far as the Ordos Desert in the northwest. In the south, Shihuangdi's armies ranged into modern-day Vietnam, laying a Chinese claim to the people and territory in this area for the first time in history. These expansions and the need for defense generated new infrastructure, such as fortified towns and thousands of miles of new roads to transport the Qin's armies to the borders. Northern nomadic and tribal civilizations known to Chinese as the Hu (or Donghu) and Yuezhi were seen as formidable threats. To guard against these "barbarians," hundreds of thousands of laborers, convicts, and farmers were sent to connect a series of defensive structures of rammed earth built earlier by states in northern China. Once completed, the Qin's Great Wall illustrated how fortifying the north and guarding against the steppes became the focal point of statecraft in ancient China. Successive empires in China followed a similar wall-building pattern. The walls commonly referred to as the Great Wall of China today are in fact Ming dynasty walls built between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries CE.

Shihuangdi was also ruthless in defending himself from criticism at home. Informed by his chancellor in 213 BCE that literate Chinese were using commentary on classical texts and literary works to critique his rule, the emperor ordered the destruction of thousands of texts, hoping to leave in print only technical treatises on topics such as agriculture or medicine. An oft-cited story of Shihuangdi's brutality credits him with calling for the execution of hundreds of Confucian and Daoist intellectuals by burying them alive. Recent scholars have scrutinized these tales, questioning how much about his reign was distorted and exaggerated by the scholars of his successors, the Han dynasty, to strengthen their own legitimacy. In studying the ancient past, we must likewise always question the veracity of historical sources and not just reproduce a history "written by the winners."

Another monumental feat of Shihuangdi's reign was the creation of the Terracotta Army, thousands of life-sized clay soldiers fully armed with bronze weaponry and horses. From the time he was a young boy, the emperor had survived a series of assassination

attempts, leaving him paranoid and yearning for immortality. Trusted servants were sent in search of paradise and magical elixirs, while hundreds of thousands of others were charged with the years-long process of constructing an enormous secret tomb to protect him in the afterlife. Almost immediately upon ascending the throne in 221 BCE, Shihuangdi began planning for this imperial tomb to be filled with clay replicas of his imperial palace, army, and servants. The massive underground pits, which cover an area of approximately thirty-eight square miles, were discovered with their innumerable contents near Xi'an in the 1970s (Figure 5.8). Labor for projects such as the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army came from commoners as a form of tax or as a requirement under the Qin's law codes. Penalties for violating the criminal code were severe—forced labor, banishment, slavery, or death.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.8 The Terracotta Army. (a) Discovered in the 1970s, the buried treasures of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, include thousands of life-size clay soldiers, known today as the Terracotta Army. (b) Small details of their dress and facial features distinguish the individual soldiers. (credit a: modification of work "Terracotta Soldier Panorama" by Walter-Wilhelm/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work "Terracotta warriors exhibit" by "scott1346"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Link to Learning

Shihuangdi's mausoleum has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Use the tabs at the UNESCO website to view pictures and to access the videos of the [Terracotta Army](#) to learn more.

The Qin Empire quickly collapsed in the wake of the emperor's death in 210 BCE. Conspiracy within the royal court by one of the emperor's sons led to the deaths of his rightful heir, a loyal general, and a talented chancellor. Beyond the court, the Legalist philosophy and practices that had helped the Qin accrue strength now made them brittle. Imperial power exercised in the form of direct rule and harsh laws inspired revolts by generals and great families calling for a restoration of the aristocratic feudal society of the Zhou.

The armies of the Qin's second emperor failed against Liu Bang, a commoner who rose to become Emperor Gaozu of the newly formed Han dynasty. The Han's early emperors distanced themselves from Shihuangdi's legacy by reducing taxes and burdens on the common people. But the Qin's imperial blueprint—uniform laws, consistent weights and measurements, a centralized bureaucracy, and early focus on expansionism to ward off "barbarians" in the north—provided the scaffolding for the Han's greatness.

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2.9: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss how geography and climate change influenced the early history of Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- Describe the cultural exchanges between ancient Korea and Japan
- Compare daily life in ancient Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were notable in the ancient world as homes to cultures uniquely engaged with the wider world. Via trade, religion, and diplomacy, Korea and Japan borrowed and adapted from Chinese civilization, but even more importantly from each other. Ties between Southeast Asia and India likewise proved formative in the eras in which many cultures evolved from small cities and agrarian villages into trade-post empires with monumental architecture. Conversely, geography, climate, and the early cultural forms produced by the first migrants meant that each area also produced its own indigenous systems. For example, Buddhist missionaries traveled from the Indian subcontinent across the Silk Roads and pilgrims trekked to temples to study and eventually bring home tools to convert their native cultures, but in each destination the faith was transformed into hundreds of new sects and interpretations of the path to enlightenment.

Ancient Korea

The earliest humans to reach the Korean peninsula did so around thirty thousand years ago. The land is very hilly, and mountains in the north form a barrier with Manchuria. Important rivers include the Daedong, the Han, and the Yalu. Winters are cold and snowy in the north, while summer months in the south feature blistering heat and torrential rains. Archaeologists have found evidence of bronze weapons dating back to 1300 BCE, but no clear proof that Korea at that time produced a Bronze Age civilization. The earliest written records of the first Koreans come from China, where the *Book of Documents* recounts the creation of a fief known as Joseon, located in northern Korea and awarded to a Chinese noble referred to as Gija. Later records in Chinese documents from 200 BCE to 313 CE provide descriptions of various small states in areas of Korea and Manchuria.

Seen from the vantage point of Chinese authors, our picture of ancient Korea begins to take shape during China's Han dynasty, when the peninsula was home to a number of small tribes, cultures, and communities living near the borders of the Chinese empire. From these Chinese records it is also clear that the earliest Koreans were in constant contact and exchange with not just the Chinese but also Inner Asian Steppe peoples like the Xiongnu as well as settlers in Japan. Thus, ethnicity in ancient Korea was quite fluid and prone to change. Groups borrowed liberally from each other's cultures, traded, and were absorbed and transformed by conquest.

The transformation of Korea into a unified culture and civilization is a story with many stops and starts. Historians often begin with the narrative of the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian, which tells of the dynasty's efforts to suppress the Xiongnu by invading northern Korea and establishing four garrisons there, from the Liao River to near today's Seoul. The presence of Chinese generals, troops, and settlers spurred exchange with societies on the Korean peninsula, which borrowed from Chinese culture the ideas of coins, seals, artwork, and building techniques to make roads and mounded tombs. Adopted by tribal chieftains and aristocratic warrior families, Chinese culture provided a wealth of material needed to engineer the first Korean states by controlling large areas of the northern half of the peninsula.

When unable to trade, Korean tribal societies mimicked the Xiongnu and raided the Chinese settlements, drawing strength and forging their own war bands. Among the early Korean polities noted in Chinese records in the north were Joseon, Goguryeo, and Buyeo, a frequent ally of the Han. With the collapse of the Han, each of these Korean societies lost a valuable partner and source of weapons, technology, and wealth. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, all three struggled to defend themselves against rising powers in the north, such as the Xianbei.

In roughly the same time frame, in the central and southern parts of the Korean Peninsula, and therefore beyond the reach of Chinese administration, three groups known collectively as the Three Han established their territories. Chinese sources from the time refer to people in the southwest as the Mahan, those in the southeast as Jinhan, and between them a group known as the Byeonhan. These societies were ruled by aristocratic families that chose a chief and controlled the lives of lower-ranking commoners, servants, and enslaved people.

The Three Han were far less formidable military powers than their counterparts to the north, in part because they lacked horses and fought primarily on foot. On the other hand, they showed considerable cultural fluidity and knowledge of their neighbors. In Jinhan, many tattooed their bodies in decorative patterns like those found on the bodies of the Wa living in Japan, not surprising given that groups moved relatively freely between Japan and Korea in this age. Residents of Korea traveled to Japan, sometimes as traders and fishers and other times as migrants and permanent settlers. In Mahan, clothing and hairstyles mimicked a style used by the Xianbei on the Inner Asian Steppe, even as their lifestyles revolved around farming rather than a nomadic culture lived on horseback. Indeed, it appears that early Korean societies were quite selective in their borrowing.

Practices such as the *levirate*, in which a young male marries his elder brother's widow, were used widely by Inner Asian Steppe peoples and adopted by a number of early Korean ruling families. But the decision whether to emulate the Chinese, Japanese, or other neighbors presented a range of options and cultural choices for chieftains and elite families to build on in this age.

The decline of Chinese power in the fourth century unleashed a wave of refugees that proved pivotal in speeding up the process of state-building in Korea, opening an age known as the Three Kingdoms (313–668 CE). The three kingdoms in questions were Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla (Figure 5.11). Chinese immigrants resettling within the bounds of Korea provided a source of knowledge about political practices that strengthened the rule of elites, transforming them into kings. These kings commanded large armies, drawing legitimacy from their military prowess and creating mound tombs that required vast resources and labor. From the struggles against groups such as the Khitan and Xianbei in the north emerged the kingdom of Goguryeo. In the late fourth century, under the leadership of King Gwanggaeto, this kingdom drove southward in a series of expansionist wars against its main rival, the Korean kingdom of Baekje and its allies from Japan, the Wa. In doing so, Goguryeo managed to make the third of the Three Kingdoms, Silla, a vassal by the early fifth century.

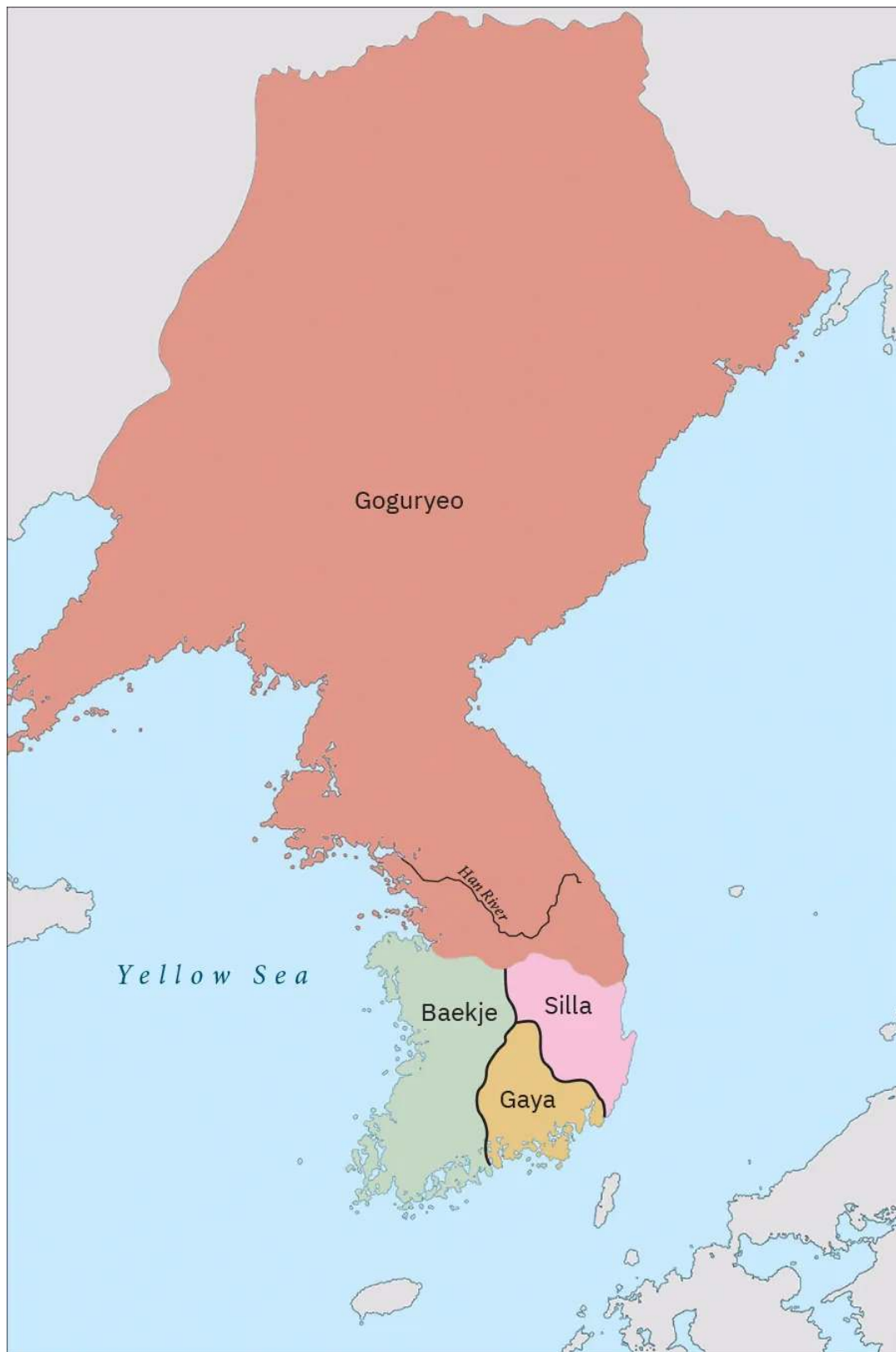


Figure 5.11 Ancient Korea. Three pivotal kingdoms—Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla—dominated trade and cultural exchange with China and Japan and vied to unify all of Korea under their rule. A fourth kingdom, Gaya, remained relatively weak in this period and in 532 CE was absorbed by Silla. (credit: modification of work “Map of Goguryeo (476)” by “solicitatia”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Beyond Goguryeo’s militarism, its expansion was marked by two other critical developments. The first was its skillful use of diplomacy and regional politics to manage alliances and threats, playing off groups within and around the Korean peninsula to secure its power. The second was the adoption of a written script from China, evidenced by 414 CE in a stone slab inscribed to note the accomplishments of King Gwanggaeto upon his death. Goguryeo’s elites also learned from the Chinese the art of adorning their large, mounded tombs with colorful murals depicting the lives of royals surrounded by dancers, servants, and enslaved people. Images of large battles, wrestling matches, and mythical creatures such as the phoenix in other mural scenes suggest the emergence of a rich courtly life.

During the Three Kingdoms era, the Chinese writing system spread throughout Korea, allowing those excluded from the ranks of aristocratic families a chance to seek appointment as scribes. The literacy necessary to study Confucian texts or Buddhist sutras, teachings of the Buddha, was a rare and very valuable skill. Knowledge of Chinese culture was another means to a life within the Korean courts, especially when writing poetry became a favorite pastime of Korean royalty and composing an eloquent verse was a critical sign of nobility and refinement. Many kingdoms sent royals, aristocrats, traders, scholars, and monks to China as apprentices to acquire skills and expertise they could bring home. These groups had an indelible impact on early Korean culture and society, particularly as Buddhism developed and grew into distinct sects and traditions. A few Korean Buddhist monks even traveled as far as India and central Asia, while others worked as teachers in the Three Kingdoms, inspiring new forms of painting, sculpture, and jewelry, and later the famed Buddhist monument, the first-century Seokguram Grotto (Figure 5.12).



Figure 5.12 The Seokguram Grotto. Created in the eighth century CE, this Buddhist monument lies in an enormous temple complex on the slopes of Mount Toshan, an architectural marvel and exemplar of Buddhist motifs that modern Koreans consider a national treasure. (credit: “Front view of Seokguram from front chamber” by Cultural Heritage Administration/Wikimedia Commons, Korea Open Government License Type I: Attribution)

These changes to the Korean political, social, and spiritual landscape also powered Goguryeo’s rival state Baekje. The kingdom of Baekje emerged from its home near the Liao River in Manchuria to conquer and absorb the Mahan territory in 369. To consolidate their control over the southwestern area of the peninsula, Baekje’s rulers created a Chinese-style bureaucracy with a chief minister and carried on a successful maritime trade with China and Japan. Demand for Chinese culture, weapons, and Buddhism gave Baekje influence and prestige in Japan. However, a military defeat by Goguryeo and Silla in 475 kept Baekje hemmed in below the Han River. Afterward, Baekje turned its energy to upsetting the balance of power on the Korean peninsula by entreating Silla to rise against Goguryeo, its protector and overlord.

Ultimately, however, it was Silla that emerged from these plots to unify a larger share of today’s Korea than any kingdom that preceded it. The smallest kingdom at the beginning of the era, located in the southeastern corner of the peninsula, Silla was ruled by powerful families that, like their neighbors, eventually copied models from China to wield power. Silla’s rulers created Chinese-style ministries and codes of law and supported the practice of Buddhism to enhance their prestige and legitimacy. Maritime trade later proved a channel for Silla to form an alliance with a reunified China under the Sui and then the Tang dynasties. Conflict between Goguryeo and the Sui began in the 590s and lasted for decades. Later, the Tang supplanted the Sui and renewed Chinese ambitions to dominate the Korean peninsula.

By the 640s, the skillful diplomacy of Queen Seondeok of Silla (Figure 5.13) had leveraged the hostility between Goguryeo and the Chinese into the means for a Silla alliance with the Tang. Her kingdom's ships proved invaluable in ferrying Chinese armies onto the peninsula to lay conquest. Together, Silla and the Tang first subjugated Baekje and then eliminated Goguryeo in the north. Then, while the Tang set up bureaucracies to administer Korea, Seondeok's successors in Silla conspired with the defeated forces of their rivals to evict the invaders. Together, the remnants of the Baekje and Goguryeo's armies under the sway of Silla expelled Chinese forces in 676, ushering in a new era of unified rule over much of the peninsula that lasted from 668 to 892 CE. For a time, Silla severed its relations with the Tang, forgoing a critical resource that had powered its survival for centuries. But by the eighth century, new threats to both the Tang and Silla had emerged in the north. As a result, Silla once again sent tribute to the Chinese in return for protection and trade.



Figure 5.13 The Gold Crown of Silla. The kingdom of Silla left behind examples of its impressive and famous gold working skill. This gold crown, likely owned by a queen in the fifth century BCE, was found in a tomb in the early twentieth century in Gyeongju, the capital of Silla. While we can't know for sure, Queen Seondeok likely wore a similar crown. (credit: "Gold Crown of Silla Kingdom" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

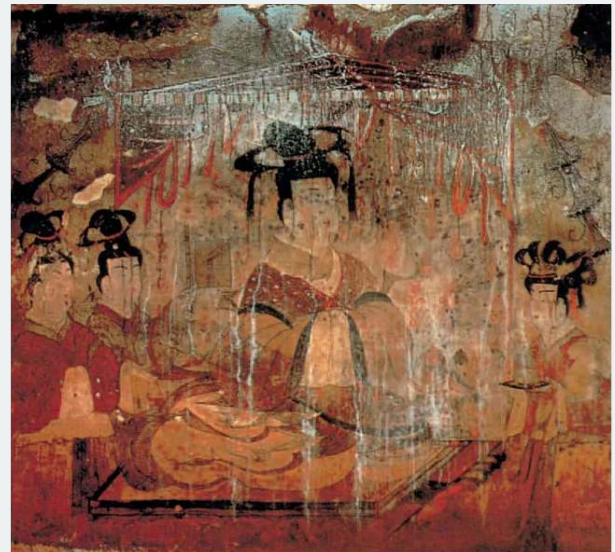
Part of Queen Seondeok's legacy was a period of unprecedented female rule, during which new art forms emerged that in later centuries became distinctive Korean traditions. In ancient Korea, women wielded power as royal princesses, and affluent women often served as advisors and regents. But Queen Seondeok's reign paved the way for future queens of Silla, Jindeok, and Jinseong, to inherit the throne. Over time, Korean artisans learned from China how to make celadon ceramic, known for its lustrous green glaze, creating exquisite vases, jugs, bowls, and even pillows with Buddhist motifs such as cranes and clouds. In later centuries these works helped support a robust trade network running from China through Korea to Japan.

The Tombs of Goguryeo

Chinese rulers were not the only ones to build tombs that provide us with clues about what they valued in life. The rulers of the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo also constructed tombs decorated with murals depicting everyday scenes, presumably representing the lives they had lived and the lives they hoped to have after death. Shown here (Figure 5.14) are murals from the tomb of a Goguryeo man who was buried in the fourth century CE, not long after the end of China's Qin dynasty. As you study the images, consider what they tell us about life among the Goguryeo elite at this time.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 5.14 A Tomb of Goguryeo. (a) The tomb's owner is depicted. (b) A woman, most likely his wife, is shown, which was painted on the wall close to the image of the man so that she faces him. Image (c) shows a procession, complete with carts and mounted soldiers, from the tomb's corridor. (credit a: modification of work "A drawing in one of the chambers of the Goguryeo tombs. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Mural Art in Anak Tomb No. 3. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of work "Preserved wall mural of Anak tomb 3 (procession scene)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What do these murals tell you about the lives of Goguryeo's elite? What did they value and what were their concerns?
- Do you see any Chinese influences in these depictions? If so, where are they?

Ancient Japan

As in Korea, geography shaped much of Japan's early development and history. Four main islands make up Japan. The northernmost is Hokkaido. Then comes Honshu, which is home to Tokyo and the largest present-day population. Continuing south, the next island is Shikoku, and finally Kyushu, which is closest to the Asian mainland. Japan today also includes the islands of Okinawa and thousands of others strewn across the Pacific. But much of the story of ancient Japan concerns only the main isles, the inland Sea of Japan, the country's countless mountains, and a few fertile plains fed by monsoon rains that sustain agriculture.

Critical to the formation of the main islands and their geographical features is the belt known as the Ring of Fire (Figure 5.15), mapped by a horseshoe-shaped line drawn around the rim of the Pacific Ocean to mark a zone of frequent earthquake and volcanic activity that has generated countless tsunamis in Japan's distant past and modern day.

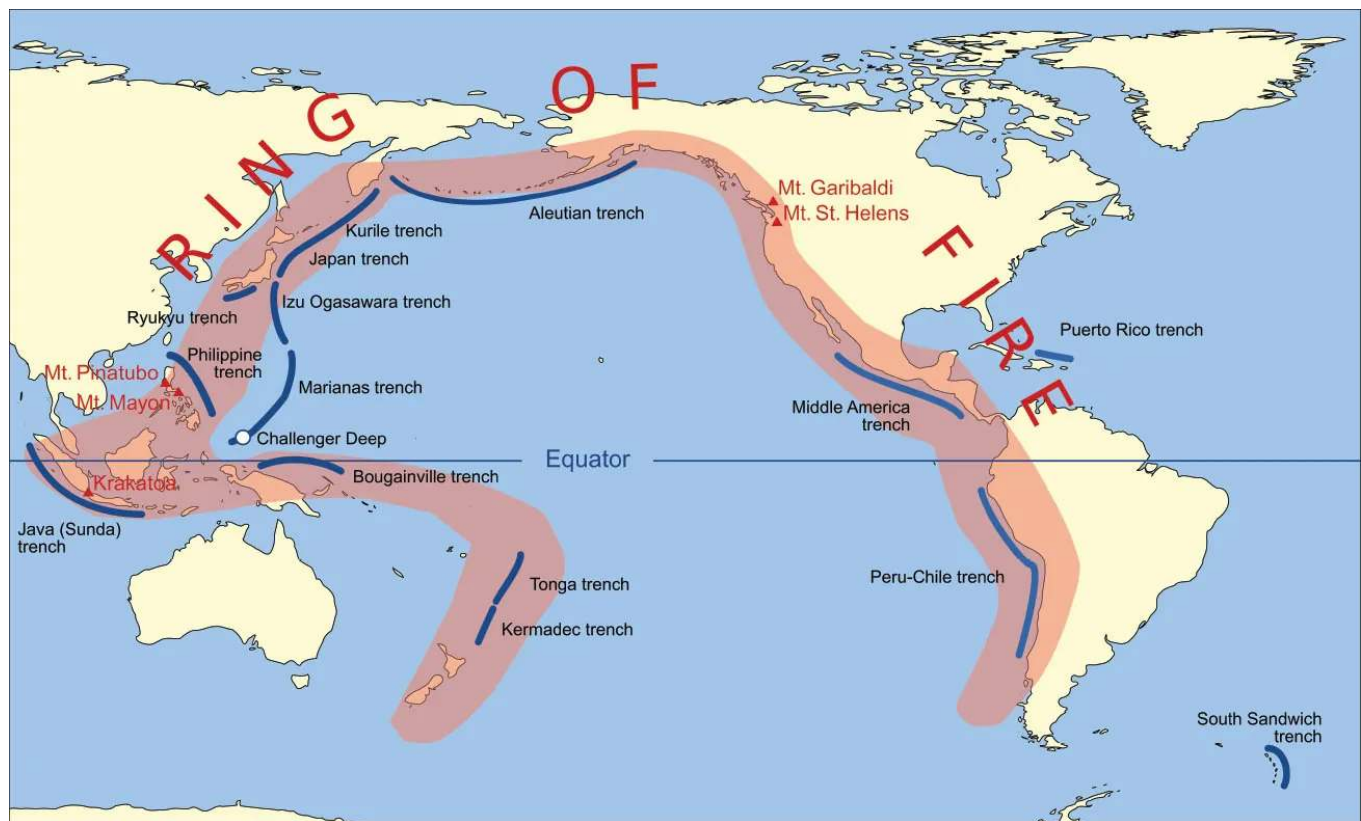


Figure 5.15 The Ring of Fire. A horseshoe-shaped line running around the rim of the Pacific Ocean marks the Ring of Fire, an area where frequent shifts of tectonic plates cause earthquakes, volcanic activity, and tsunamis that have plagued Japan for centuries. (credit: "Pacific Ring of Fire" by "Gringer"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The story of prehistoric Japan is typically divided into two halves: the era of Jōmon hunters, ranging from 14,500 to 300 BCE, and that of the Yayoi agriculturalists who emerged after them to dominate the centuries from 300 BCE to 300 CE. These groups had no concept of themselves as "Japanese" in a sense recognizable to us today. But they left their imprint on the main isles via migration, settlement, and the development of practices for making the fertile plains, mountainous forests, and innumerable ocean bays and rivers their homes. Without written records, our knowledge of the Jōmon and Yayoi is almost wholly based on the archaeological

evidence and contemporary theories about the pathways humanity followed out of Africa and across the world. Early hominids likely made their way to the Japanese archipelago when it was still connected to the Asian continent, perhaps over 100,000 years ago. Hunting giant mammals such as elephants, wolves, and enormous deer, many of these early hunters moved to an area near today's Sea of Japan. Much later, changing climates led ocean levels to slowly rise and cover the stretches of land that connected Japan to the Asian mainland.

Linguists theorize that ultimately three early waves of foragers and hunters made their way overland or across the Tsushima Strait that separates the four main isles from the Asian mainland. These groups were descended from Ural-Altaic, Chinese, and Austro-Asiatic peoples. The climate shift that severed Japan from the Asian continent around twelve thousand years ago transformed the newly formed isles and the game these people once hunted. Grasslands for bison disappeared, for example, and wolves became smaller.

But the early inhabitants adapted, inventing new technologies to enhance their chances for survival. In the caves of Kyushu, archaeologists have found evidence of one of the world's earliest technological breakthroughs, the development of pottery. Known for its elaborate handles and distinctive cord patterns around rims, this pottery allowed Japan's inhabitants to become more sedentary and less dependent on finding wild game and foraging for edible plants. First used to store vegetables and boil water from the sea to make salt, the pottery called Jōmon was likely later used for rituals to promote unity and cooperation (Figure 5.16). The increasingly sophisticated culture of the people, also called Jōmon, was characterized by settlements with shared spaces for burials, food storage, and elaborate ceremonies. Among the important cultural symbols were earthenware figurines known as *dogu*.



Figure 5.16 Jōmon Artifacts. (a) This Jōmon pottery food container (c. 3500–2500 BCE) is among the earliest examples of the craft of pottery found in the world. (b) The *dogu* figurine (c. 1000–300 BCE) likely represents a female god, hinting at the spiritual life of the early inhabitants of Japan's main isles. Such figures are thought to have served as forms of sympathetic magic that healed illness and helped with childbirth. (credit a: modification of work “Deep Vessel” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Dogū (Clay Figurine)” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Skeletal remains of the Jōmon people suggest that despite their diverse diet of fruits, nuts, and seafood such as clams and fish, they lived with the constant threat of starvation and malnutrition. Another shift in the region's climate produced a deadly drop in temperatures that led to a decline in the populations of game such as deer and boar. To survive, many Jōmon moved to the coastal areas to supplement their food supply by fishing. Others likely began experimenting with early forms of agriculture; evidence

suggests the cultivation of yams and lily-bulbs in the years from 3000 to 2400 BCE. Further evidence of early agriculture comes from traces of rice found in jars dated to the later years of the Jōmon era.

Agriculture and the Yayoi

The next phase of Japan's prehistory is marked by the leap into agriculture and is known by the name of a separate people and culture, the Yayoi. Beginning in 300 BCE, a new wave of migrants descended from groups in northern Asia began arriving on the southern island of Kyushu. They brought with them knowledge about cultivating barley, buckwheat, and later rice, and gradually they overwhelmed and replaced the Jōmon. Later, the Yayoi built impressive storehouses for grain and domesticated horses and dogs. Other archaeological sites show that, as Yayoi culture spread, the people developed the capacity to engineer the landscape for farming by creating irrigation canals, wells, and pits. Agriculture brought stability and growth, and the Yayoi population is estimated to have ballooned to more than half a million people by the first centuries of the common era.

The Yayoi period marked a turning point in Japan's prehistory. From this point forward, Korea, China, and Japan were in more consistent contact than in the centuries before. This was especially the case because in the Bronze Age, with copper in short supply on the islands of Japan, the Yayoi were forced to import much of the material. The Yayoi period also marked the beginning of a written record of Japan.

Han conquests and the construction of garrisons on the Korean peninsula began a period of trade in bronze mirrors, iron weapons, and agricultural practices transmitted via Korea to Japan. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and later the kingdom of Cao Wei (220–265 CE) also sent occasional envoys to Japan (which the Han called the Wa kingdom). These envoys left behind the first written records of the lives and cultures of the Yayoi. Their observations show a slow but gradual transformation of society and politics. Despite increasing food surpluses and material abundance, the Yayoi people at first remained largely communal, sharing wooden tools and public spaces. Over time, the appeal of certain areas and sites for agriculture led to competition and increasing warfare and, by extension, the emergence of states to provide for defense.

Chinese records also note the distinctive style of dual governance—in which power was shared between male and female rulers—that developed in early Japanese states at the end of the Yayoi era. Among the notable rulers was Queen Himiko, who ruled in the early third century and, in return for paying tribute to the Chinese emperor, was recognized as an ally and given a golden seal. Ruling alongside Himiko was her younger brother, who handled the administration of her realm. The Cao Wei's records show that Himiko was at war with a neighboring king and staked the legitimacy of her rule on her spiritual powers, expressed in elaborate burials, the practice of divination, and other sacred rituals. Through such specialization, ancient Japanese women exercised political power and influence, possibly built upon the legacy of the Jōmon, whose *dogu* figurines depicted women as deities ensuring fertility and safety.

Chinese envoys noted that Japan was also home to an increasingly stratified society that included aristocratic families, merchants, skilled divers and fishers, farmers, and other commoners. With warfare constant, palaces looked more like garrisons, but granaries and markets were full and lively. And while these early Japanese lacked a written script, the Yayoi did develop a rich art form literally written on their bodies, as the practice of tattooing patterns to denote rank, status, and family was widespread in this era.

The Dawn of the Yamato Age

Records of Queen Himiko's era also suggest a growing concentration of political power and control over territories held by a loose confederation of states and powerful families. This period, known as the Yamato era, was marked by the construction of tombs for deceased royals like Himiko, who were buried with an impressive array of treasures and human sacrifices to accompany them in the afterlife.

It may be that the onset of the Yamato era was produced by a changing climate and constant turmoil in Japan, as a result of which many of the island's inhabitants despaired and abandoned deities who seemed negligent in their duty to protect them. Instead, new gods associated with an imported technology—mirrors from China and Korea—arose to take their place. Powerful rulers and a new military class forged from warfare associated themselves with these new gods, or more importantly, with the female god of the Sun, Amaterasu, who soon became the ancestral figurehead of the imperial household. Yamato kings further accrued power by brokering alliances, managing trade, giving symbolic gifts, and presiding over ceremonies designed to forge a common culture across Japan.

As co-rulers of a kingdom or heads of households, women continued to wield political clout by using expertise in sorcery via items such as mirrors and often expressing their triumphs in gold jewelry and earrings. Many spiritual practices were imported from earlier Chinese dynasties such as the Shang dynasty. For example, during the burial of Queen Himiko, Chinese envoys recorded that Japanese employed the art of divining the future with heated bones by reading their cracks to foretell the outcome of harvests

and wars. Other burial practices such as water purification were more indigenous to Japan and left an imprint on later religions such as Shintoism. Later, new foreign religions such as Buddhism were used by women such as Empress Suiko, who ruled in the early seventh century CE and sought to preserve women's role in politics through practices such as piety, rigorous study of sutras, and the construction of shrines and temples.

Regardless, it was the construction of large keyhole-style tombs and control over the burial rituals that brought the Yamato rulers power over the area stretching from western Honshu to northern Kyushu. Employing laborers and skilled artisans such as blacksmiths, the Yamato tomb makers showed their wealth and organizational capacity, skills they used later to create capital cities with large markets and highways to the countryside and the coastal ports. To centralize power, kings soon began issuing law codes, such as Prince Shotoku's Seventeen Article Constitution in 604. The emphasis on law as the basis for rule, the creation of a bureaucracy to help rulers govern, and Confucian values embedded in the document show the Yamato's reliance on Chinese culture as a source of ideas and inspiration. Borrowing from the Chinese model for imperial statecraft, the Yamato strengthened their rule with mythology and bejeweled regalia, elevating kings to godlike status and eventually transforming them into emperors. Later legal codes such as the Kiyomihara Codes in 689 organized monasteries, created a judiciary, and managed relations between the king's advisors and vassals. These set the stage for the evolution of Japan's culture and political system in the later Heian and Nara periods.

Link to Learning

Prince Shotoku's "Seventeen Article Constitution" was an effort to reform the Japanese state along the lines of the Chinese imperial model. Read the [translated law codes](#) at Columbia University's Asia for Educators site.

To the north, beyond the lands of the Yamato, was another group descended from the early Jōmon foragers who had lived on and resisted the sweep of Yayoi settled agriculture. Later, they continued to forage and hunt and practice their own spiritual beliefs, rejecting the Yamato cultural sphere and its borrowings from China, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and the idea of large states governed by kings and emperors. While the later Japanese imperial courts in Nara and Heian deepened ties with China's Tang dynasty, these northern people existed in another orbit defined by contact with smaller northern Asian cultures, such as the Satsumon people of Hokkaido. Relations with the descendants of the Yamato to the south soured over these centuries, as Nara and Heian came to call the northerners *Emishi*, or "barbarians." The Emishi survived from the seventh to the eleventh century despite repeated attempts by emperors and militarists from the south to subjugate them. They resisted via war, moved to remote areas, and used other forms of evasion, but the culture of Japan's south moved inexorably north, and the smaller remnants of the Emishi were subdued by the end of the ninth century.

Southeast Asia

The term "Southeast Asia" describes a large area in subtropical Asia that can also include thousands of islands in the Pacific. Today it often refers to Brunei, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. For much of human history, travel across this area was far easier by boat along the shore and between islands than overland. Lands were more sparsely populated than in India, China, Japan, and Korea, and most communities were isolated from their closest neighbors by forests and mountains. Early on, however, they became able to engage with other peoples through the sea lanes.

In general, communities in Southeast Asia settled first along coastlines near rivers, lakes, and the oceans and seas. But archaeological sites in Thailand, Burma, and Laos prove that many chose to make upland regions their homes as well. As in India, early agriculture was driven by the rhythms of monsoon season. Farmers developed rainwater tanks to manage their supply of water and learned how to grow rice in paddies. A reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture meant that many Southeast Asians had to migrate after the soil had been exhausted, making the population fluid as people moved from one area to the next. The social structure, too, was less stratified than in India and China. Only with the later arrival of new religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism did priestly and kingly classes start to form and play a central role in religion and politics.

Despite its great territorial expanse and varying climates and topography, the region does have broad commonalities that make it useful to see Southeast Asia as one geographic and cultural zone (Figure 5.17). For example, its location between India and China led to the growth of royal courts that borrowed from foreign traditions to develop rituals and diplomatic relations, assert control over ordinary farmers and fishers, and create trading-post empires. The region's geography and climate also made sailing a universally efficient craft. For centuries, merchants and adventurers traveling from the Indian landmass along the coastlines of Asia have exploited monsoon winds from June to November that easily push boats all the way to the Malaysian peninsula. Return voyages were made possible by a second set of monsoon winds blowing in the opposite direction from December to May. The

holdover period between the two monsoon seasons proved ample time for merchants and missionaries to transplant customs, religion, and art from India to new environs in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the arrival of boats and merchants traveling from Vietnam and Malaysia to China and back as early as 300 BCE meant residents of Southeast Asia enjoyed a rich marketplace of ideas, goods, and cultures at a very early stage in world history.

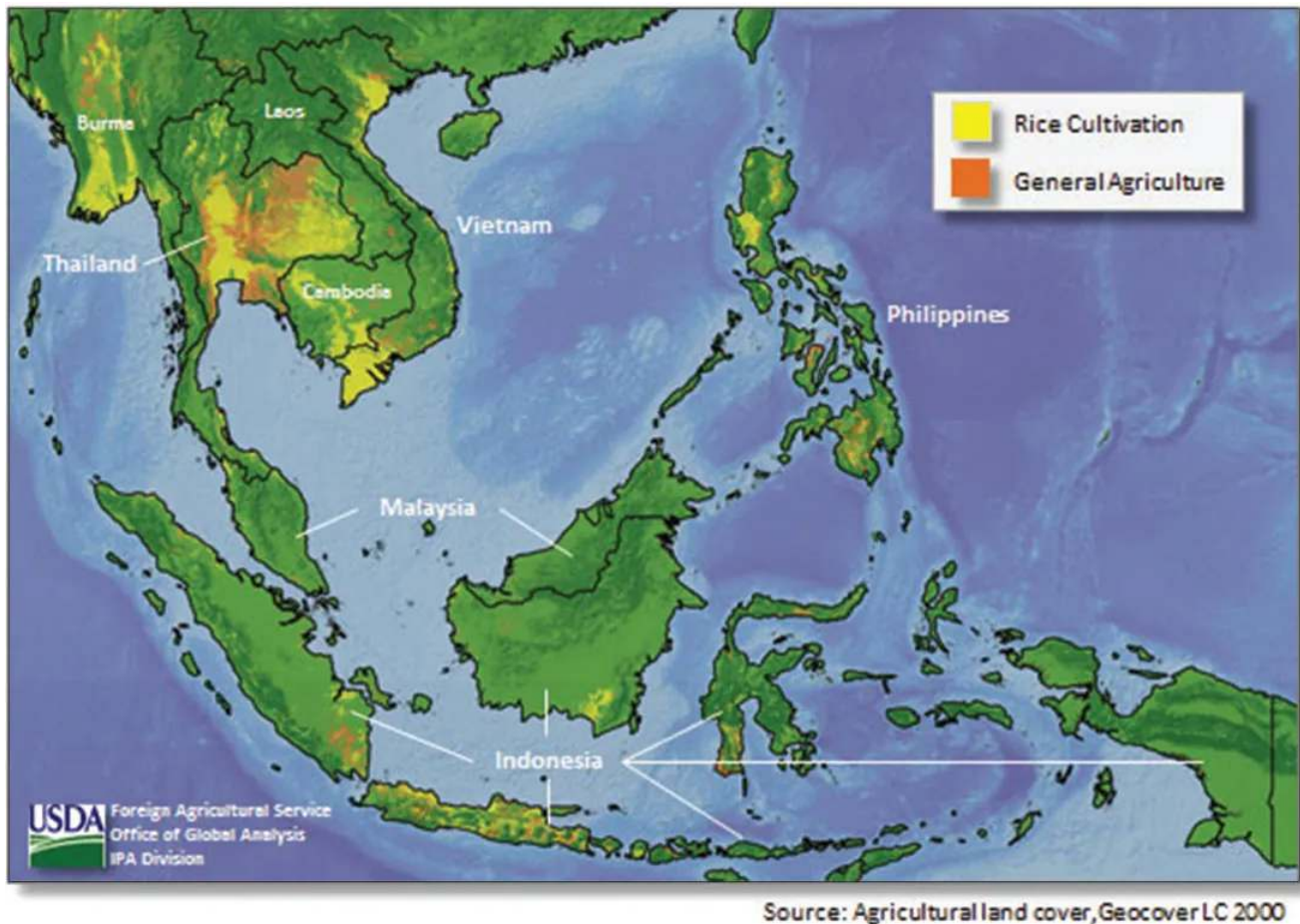


Figure 5.17 Southeast Asia. The expanse of Southeast Asia includes varied topographies and climates but also some common historical and cultural features, such as the practice of wet-rice agriculture and religions such as Buddhism. (credit: “SE Asia: Distribution of Agricultural Lands” by Agricultural land cover, Geocover LC 2000”/USDA: Foreign Agricultural Service, Public Domain)

While the influx of foreign ideas was critical to the development of societies across Southeast Asia, each local community made selective adaptations and preserved its indigenous customs. For example, the importance of the individual family was a point of commonality for many societies in Southeast Asia, in contrast to the weight given extended families and clans in India and China. Most peasant communities in Southeast Asia also afforded women higher status than their counterparts in China were allowed under the stricter Confucian values system.

Archaeological remains of the region’s prehistory show that inhabitants of northeast Thailand used bronze and mastered agriculture as early as 3000 BCE. Evidence found at Non Nok Tha shows that they grew rice and cast bronze in factories using molds, later producing iron objects. The spread of rice cultivation produced densely populated centers along the region’s smaller fertile plains. Expanding populations were often forced into hilly regions, which they made suitable for farming by creating terraces. Migration chains and artifacts such as simple tools suggest that by the time the inhabitants of India began making contact with Southeast Asia, the islands and coastline settlements there were dominated by peoples related to Malays, who had made their way from southern China. Expert sailors working with finished stone tools and navigating by the stars, these peoples developed long, narrow boats that navigated Southeast Asia’s water with speed and grace. Moreover, they left behind cultures with maritime traditions that echo today with Malaysians, Indonesians, and the people of Singapore.

The archaeological record of Southeast Asia's prehistory is less clear than that of many other areas of the world, however, and its study has been hampered by many circumstances, including the political volatility of countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia after 1945. As a result, historians often look to the region's villages and families for insights into its remote past. For example, cultivating rice in terraced rice paddies requires skill and cooperation among many families, likely making this task the basis for village leadership and unity. Elders with experience in selecting breeds, transplanting young plants, and negotiating water resources likely used their authority to foster consensus around values and politics oriented toward giving deference to seniority. It is also possible that growing rice is particularly suited to cultures with animist religions, which venerate deities and spirits thought to inhabit nature. Rites and festivals to honor grains and timber and to appease forces that control wind and rain are still important to local cultures in Southeast Asia today, even as many people also participate in universal religions such as Buddhism.

Occupations offer another important point of continuity. Fishing, farming, and craftwork in fabrics are depicted in carvings found in caves, temples, and mountainsides and remain the primary labor activities of rural peoples today. For example, in Brunei many people still live much of their life on the water—at work as fishers and divers as well as at play when racing boats and swimming. Houses and many other buildings are still situated in the hills or on stilts to protect them from flooding, and many people share a diet of fish, simple grains, and coconut, just as their ancestors did.

In early Southeast Asia, trade and the arrival of outside religion were critical to the development of larger states and powerful kingdoms. Even in the interior, Buddhist artwork and texts flowed in steadily from 300 to 600 CE. The mouths of great rivers linked the interiors and the coasts, and capitals and small principalities that developed there taxed the trade on goods traveling to and from the wider world. During these centuries, Southeast Asians also traveled to India to trade and learn Sanskrit. When Indian elites and literate Buddhists arrived, they came to be known as *purohita*, advisers to Southeast Asia's powerful chiefs and nobility. Other immigrants became teachers and founded temples across the region's landscape, critical hubs that promoted travel, learning, and commerce.

As they did in India, Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted with local religions in much of Southeast Asia. In areas such as the kingdom of Srivijaya, which ruled over the island of Sumatra and southern Malaya Peninsula from the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE, Indian merchants and missionaries were welcomed, while the people retained their own religious traditions rooted in the worship of spirits that inhabited trees, rocks, water, and various physical features of the land. Proclaiming themselves “Lord of the Mountains,” Srivijaya's rulers patronized Buddhism to foster trade relations across the Malaccan Straits and Indian Ocean.

Other communities, such as nearby Borobudur, which controlled central Java in Indonesia, were more firmly devoted to Buddhism. There, Buddhism inspired countless converts and the later Shailendra Kings (775–860 CE) to erect the world's largest Buddhist monument, a structure more than one hundred feet above the ground and adorned with magnificent artwork (Figure 5.18). Buddhists from all over Southeast Asia made pilgrimages to Borobudur, leaving behind thousands of clay tablets and pots as offerings. Wreckage from a nearby ship dated to the ninth century shows that the people of Borobudur were engaged in commerce that connected them to Islamic and Arabic cultures in the Middle East. Like many heads of Southeast Asian states, Borobudur rulers staked their political legitimacy on setting a pious example for their subjects and thrived economically by opening their ports to the wider world. Thus India's centrality to much of Southeast Asia in the ancient world was founded on trade, religion, and art. India was a repository of desired goods and a source of inspiration for religion and state-building, but also a bridge to the wider Eurasian world.



Figure 5.18 Borobudur. This 1913 photograph of the temple of Borobudur shows one side of the massive Buddhist structure with the local mountains in the background. In the upper left, one can see several of the seventy-two perforated stupas surrounding the central dome. Behind and to the left of the man posing for the photograph are just some of the over 2,600 decorated relief panels that adorn the site. (credit: modification of work “A terrace on the temple of Borobudur, Java, Indonesia, 1913” by State Library of New South Wales, PXD 162/150/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While much of Southeast Asia faced west toward India as the center of trade, culture, and religion, the area near today’s Vietnam fell within the orbit of China’s cultural sphere emanating from the east. The natural geography of Vietnam creates three distinct zones that shaped the evolution of the country from ancient times to the present: one area in the north surrounding the Red River delta; below that, in the south, another densely populated center on the Mekong River delta; and lastly, a long narrow land bridge

along the coast squeezing between mountains to join the other two areas together. Humans practicing wet-field rice agriculture developed settlements in the northern zone sometime around 2500 BCE, and a millennium after, there is evidence of bronze-making by the region's inhabitants. But the most notable contribution to world history from this area in northern Vietnam came from the Dong Son culture (c. 600 BCE–200 CE), defined by its remarkable bronze drums decorated with cords and images of animals such as frogs. Dong Son drums have been found at sites all over Southeast Asia.

Whether the Dong Son culture and its drums originated in Vietnam or inside China near Yunnan province is the subject of debate. Evidence suggests that southeast China below the Yangtze River was once home to peoples who were more strongly linked, culturally and linguistically, to Southeast Asia than to the dynasties in the north such as the Shang and Zhou. During the Zhou dynasty, many non-Chinese societies and kingdoms inhabiting provinces such as Fujian and Yunnan were known as the Yue, the Mandarin version of “Viet.” These areas and groups remained independent of Chinese control for centuries. Chinese records of the Yue demonstrate their sophistication and diversity. They were known for practicing wet-field rice cultivation, adorning their bodies with tattoos, and traveling widely by boat along the seas and the Red River that linked China to Vietnam.

These Chinese records further indicate that many early Vietnamese groups spoke a multitude of languages and were divided into as many as one hundred small polities, kingdoms, tribal clans, and autonomous villages. Unlike in northern China, there appears to have been no successful drive to centralize power under a unified dynasty in Vietnam's prehistory. In later centuries, many Vietnamese accepted the mythological lore of a mighty king known as Van-Lang, who in the seventh century BCE united the various tribes of the Yue and established a dynastic line of Hung kings. This origin tale eventually evolved to include a divine origin for the Vietnamese people, telling of a union between a dragon lord and a female mountain deity that produced the Hung royalty.

At best, Vietnam's prehistoric record can only validate the idea that chiefdoms grew increasingly large around 258 BCE. By then, the rulers of a new kingdom known as Au Lac had constructed an impressive capital arranged in the shape of a widening spiral near today's Hanoi. Later, around 179 BCE, Au Lac was conquered by another kingdom, Nam Viet, an offshoot of China's Qin dynasty. The area was later retaken by the Han dynasty, which attempted to establish permanent control by dividing its territory spanning southern China and northern Vietnam into nine administrative units. In 40 CE, Han control of the Red River delta ran afoul of two rebellious daughters of a Vietnamese general known as Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The uprising launched by these women rallied native resistance from southern China to central Vietnam (Figure 5.19). Briefly victorious, the Trung sisters' rebellion was eventually squashed. Their legacy was indelible, however, and stories of their exploits riding elephants into battle became a source of Vietnamese nationalist pride and rejection of encroachment by outsiders such as the Chinese and, much later, the French.



Figure 5.19 Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The sisters Trung Trac and Trung Nhi launched a short-lived rebellion against Chinese domination that has lived on popular memory as a potent symbol of Vietnamese national identity. Images such as this folk painting

of them riding elephants into battle have long been a source of inspiration for resistance to foreign empires and, more recently, helped promote a role for women in politics and the military. (credit: “Hai ba trung Dong Ho painting” by “LuckyBirdie”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The end of the Trung sisters’ uprising began a period of more direct Chinese governance, with the aim of assimilating the region and its inhabitants. Over time, however, the families of the Han generals and officials who were sent as administrators took on many local habits and customs, blurring the boundaries between Chinese and Vietnamese culture in the ancient world. By that time, the area around the Red River delta had become critical to the Han’s maritime trade in Southeast Asia. Thus, even after the dynasty collapsed, China’s political dominance of northern Vietnam lasted into the next few centuries. Sporadic uprisings continued, occasionally resulting in independence for rulers in northern Vietnam. But the Sui and Tang relaunched campaigns to reabsorb the Red River delta. Thus, northern Vietnam remained on the border of the Chinese imperial frontier for centuries.

Farther south, an area known in the ancient world as Champa was settled by a wave of people arriving from the sea around 500 BCE. Distinct from the Dong Son culture, these people engaged in trade across the waterways of Asia, from India to the Philippines. Chinese records of a civilization in this central region of Vietnam describe a unique people who reserved a higher status for women than for men, and who used an Indian script written on leaves from trees. Indeed, all the remaining inscriptions on artifacts found within this region until the ninth century are written in Sanskrit.

Another import from India to central Vietnam was the idea of a society led by a priestly Brahman class and deities such as Shiva, identified with the Champa kings. Still, indigenous spirits and ancestors were worshipped as well, coexisting alongside the Indian imports whose foreignness faded slowly over the centuries. Lacking a large agricultural region to supply a powerful state, Champa may have been a region with many centers, loosely knit by trading networks exchanging rice, salt, horns, and sandalwood.

Even farther to the south, people known as the Khmers had made the Mekong River delta their home by the early centuries of the common era. Chinese texts referring to this region named it Funan, and its history shows many similarities to that of Champa, its neighbor to the north. Funan too was engaged in wide trade. Archaeological remains show items that made their way to Vietnam from India, the Middle East, and Rome. Funan’s inhabitants and rulers imported features of Indian culture such as Sanskrit to help create royal courts, but little writing survived until the development of the powerful Khmer empire in the ninth century.

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2.10: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the caste system and the way it functioned in Indian society
- Identify the main elements of Buddhism
- Describe India's faith traditions: Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

Few areas of the world are as important to our understanding of the emergence of human civilizations as India. Occupying an enormous subcontinent in South Asia, India has three distinct geographic zones: a northern area defined by the Himalayas that forms a natural barrier to the rest of the Asian mainland, the densely populated river valleys of the Indus and Ganges Rivers that lie to the south and northwest of that area, and lastly the tropical south, cut off from those valleys by many mountains and thick forests (Figure 5.20).

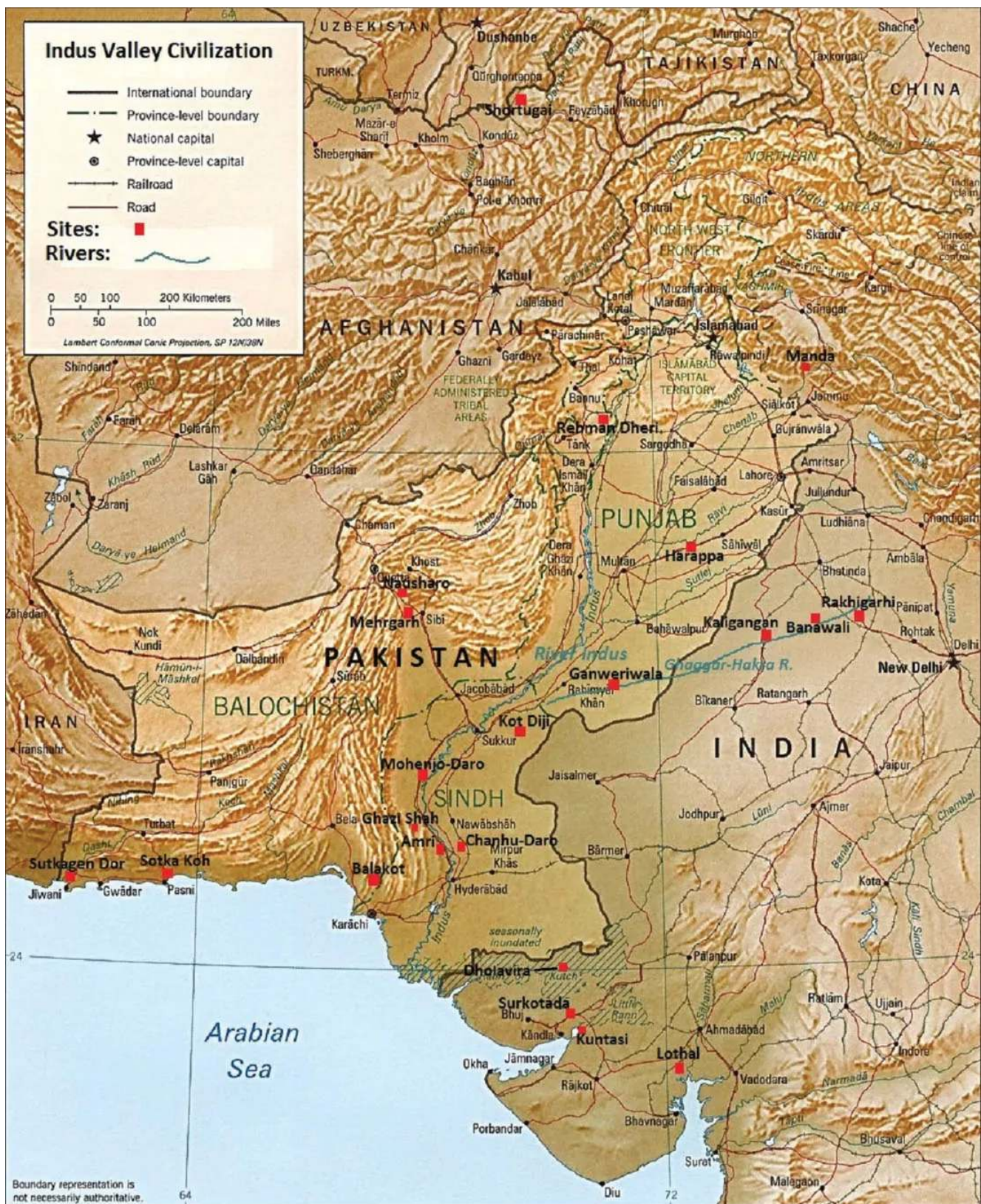


Figure 5.20 The Indian Subcontinent. This map outlines the major features of the Indian subcontinent, where the Himalayas stand as a northern border with the rest of Asia. (credit: “The major sites of the [Indus Valley Civilization](#) fl 2600–1900 BCE in [Pakistan](#), [India](#) and [Afghanistan](#)” by US Federal Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Early humans traveled into Asia in waves around sixty thousand to eighty thousand years ago, moving from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula into India and beyond, on routes that hugged the coast. Some of the earliest evidence of this migration was found at Jwalapuram, India. Here, hundreds of stone tools dating to 74,000 BCE were discovered that resemble those of roughly the same age found in Africa, Laos, and Australia. But the roots of India’s ancient civilizations lie in the north, amid the archaeological remains of two ancient cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro

Unlike ancient cultures in Mesopotamia (3500–3000 BCE), Egypt (3500–3000 BCE), and China (2200–2000 BCE), the Indus valley civilization shows little evidence of political power concentrated in the hands of hereditary monarchs. Yet its culture and technology spread, in an area running from parts of present-day Afghanistan into Pakistan and western India. There, early human communities capable of agriculture flourished near the fertile plains around the Indus River and other waters fed annually by the region’s monsoons.

Farmers harvested domesticated crops of peas, dates, and cotton, harnessing the power of draft animals such as the water buffalo. The archaeological record shows few traces of any kind of elaborate monumental architecture, burial mounds, or domination by warriors and kings. Instead, a common culture grew that was defined by urban planning, complete with advanced drainage systems, orderly streets, and distinctive bricks made in ovens. Equipped with those tools, the Indus River valley produced two of the ancient

world's most technologically advanced cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Within them, residents developed a highly urban society and rich spiritual life, with altars featuring fire and incense, practices such as ceremonial bathing, and a symbolic vocabulary using elephants and bulls as revered animals. Dedicated artisans made jewelry and fabrics. All these aspects of the Indus valley culture left an imprint on later Indian civilizations.

How did a civilization with a high degree of labor specialization and the coordination necessary for irrigated agriculture and large urban centers manage such complexity without a powerful centralized state? There is no consensus answer, though the Indus valley civilization may have developed as a series of small republic-like states, dominated by religious specialists such as priests presiding over an intensely hierarchical class system. It does seem likely, however, that the environmental toll the civilization inflicted upon the surrounding areas led to its decline. Over time, irrigation replaced fertile soil with soil having greater quantities of salt, lowering crop yields. The use of wood as a fuel source, such as for making the oven-fired bricks, led to rapid deforestation and even greater soil erosion. It appears that most communities in and around Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro abandoned the sites around 1700 BCE, when they became unable to feed and supply themselves. Before their decline, however, the two cities housed perhaps as many as forty thousand residents each, most of whom lived in comparatively luxurious homes of more than one story that featured indoor plumbing and were laid out in an orderly pattern along grid-like streets. Public buildings such as bathhouses were quite large, as were the protective city walls and citadels.

The development of a written script, found on clay seals and pottery at the sites, likely made such feats possible. The written language of the Indus valley civilization featured more than four hundred symbols that functioned as pictures of ideas, words, and numbers. While many of the symbols have yet to be deciphered, one of the primary functions of writing appears to have been commerce because many finished goods were stamped with written seals. Writing used as a means of communication and recordkeeping probably also helped the Indus valley civilization profit from long-distance trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Merchants from Sumer traveled to the Indus River valley to establish trade in luxury items such as lapis lazuli. In return, it appears that traders and merchants from cities such as Harappa took up residence in cities in Mesopotamia to facilitate exchange. In this way, Mesopotamia exerted a recognizable influence on India's art and culture. Scholars have identified aspects of Greek naturalist art in sculptures found in Harappa, combined with local preferences for representing human bodies in motion rather than adopting the Greek emphasis on anatomical correctness. Art from these early cities helped usher in artistic styles and motifs that created a continuous tradition ingrained within Indian culture. Stone seals with fantastic beasts and anthropomorphic deities were later associated with Indian traditions such as yoga and Hindu deities.

Significant archaeological evidence suggests that urban women in the Indus valley were influential figures who functioned as specialists in rituals. More figurines were found depicting female than male deities, and women were typically buried with female relatives—their mothers and grandmothers—and not with their husbands. This is not to suggest that all women were equals. The prevalence of contrasting hairstyles and clothing on many surviving figurines indicates that women were differentiated by a great number of class and ethnic markers.

Among the more intriguing clues to the way women fared in the Indus valley is a tiny artifact from Mohenjo-Daro called *Dancing Girl*, a bronze and copper figurine about 4.5 inches tall and dating from around 2500 BCE (Figure 5.21). Created by a method of casting bronze known as the “lost wax” method, the nude figure appears in a confident and relaxed pose, with her hair gathered in a bun. She may have represented a royal woman, a sacred priestess of a temple, or perhaps a lower-born tribal girl. That scholars can draw such a wide array of plausible conclusions speaks to the fact that the Indus valley likely had a very fluid class structure and a highly complex society.



Figure 5.21 Dancing Girl. A bronze and copper figurine from India, the tiny *Dancing Girl* found at Mohenjo-Daro stands as one of the most enigmatic artifacts from ancient Asia. (credit: modification of work “Bronze ‘Dancing Girl,’ Mohenjo-daro, c. 2500 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

The Aryans and Brahmanism

The Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent as conquerors beginning in 1800 BCE. With them came a new religion, Vedic, named for their hymns called Vedas. Vedas were sung in rituals to celebrate a pantheon of gods representing various aspects of nature and human life and were a useful way of teaching, given that the Aryans were illiterate. Gods such as Varuna ruled the sky, while Indra was the god of war. The Aryans offered ritualistic sacrifices to their gods and built enormous altars of fire, imposing a hierarchy on the people they conquered that emphasized strict observance of the law. The Vedas, along with poems and prayers, were first transmitted orally from one generation to the next; later they were recorded in the written language of Sanskrit. Over time, the Indian peoples added new dimensions to the Vedic religion, changing the nature of Aryan society as well. New gods such as Soma,

associated with magical elixirs, storehouses for grain, and the moon, grew in importance as the practice of ritual became ever more meaningful.

A later series of treatises known as the *Upanishads*, written by a priestly class called Brahmins, developed new expressions of the Vedic religion, gradually transforming it into what many scholars refer to as Brahmanism. These new expressions include samsara and karma. Samsara was a view of humanity and the universe in which the soul left the body after death to be reborn. Karma represented the idea that all human actions, moral and immoral, were counted and weighed, ultimately governing whether a person was reborn higher on the spiritual ladder in the next life, perhaps as a king or priest, or—if ruined by immoral acts—as a lower life form, perhaps a detested reptile, to try again. The ultimate goal of a person's earthly life was to achieve union with Brahman, the ultimate and universal reality. Even gods needed to perform good acts such as penance or meditation to transcend to a higher plane of existence. Belief in reincarnation supported the idea that a person's status in the present life came about not by chance, but rather as a consequence of past lives. Thus the authority of elites such as the Brahmins was sanctified as reflecting the divine will of the cosmos.

In this way, the Vedic religion of the Aryans produced the *varna*, a strictly hierarchical society based on inherited status. At the highest level were the Brahmins, who exerted authority by virtue of their knowledge of the sacrificial rituals and their role as guardians of the poems, hymns, and later texts that carried on the Vedic traditions. Below them were aristocratic warriors, Kshatriya, members of noble families who fought in small but effective armies to protect their kingdoms and carry conquest into new areas. Members of the third class living in the upper half of society were merchants and Aryan commoners, Vaishya, who along with the other two enjoyed privileges based on the idea that in their late childhood they underwent a rebirth.

The fourth major group were the Shudras, non-Aryan servants and peasants who were denied the opportunity to read or listen to Vedic hymns and accounted for more than half the population. At the bottom of society were the Dalits, a class of “untouchables,” who were likely the descendants of the populations that lived in parts of south India before the arrival of the Aryans. They were effectively outside and hierarchically below the four-tiered caste system. Prohibitions against marrying Indians from another caste were just one element of a constellation of provisions designed to keep everyone locked in their inherited class from birth to death. Taxes on the lower classes ensured that wealth remained at the top. In truth, the Indian subcaste system was quite complex. Distinctions between groups within each caste mattered a great deal as well, creating sub-castes that came with separate privileges, obligations, and social circles that fixed where people lived and who they could marry.

The caste system reflected Hindu religious beliefs by ensuring that people performed their proper role in this life based on their actions in the past. The laws preventing upward mobility and protecting the privilege of elites were seen as guaranteeing order. They kept the low-born from escaping the divine plan and the cosmic justice that allowed for a slow, steady advancement up the spiritual scale over a series of lives. The ultimate goal was release from the wheel of life, the never-ending transmission of the soul to ultimate peace. Thus the arrival of Aryans and the gradual emergence of Brahmanism created a new social blueprint for India.

Buddhism

Indian culture, religion, and art were forever transformed with the life of Buddha Sakyamuni around 563 BCE. The son of a royal family living near India's eastern border with Nepal and sometimes known as Siddhartha or Gautama, Sakyamuni abandoned a life of luxury in his family's palace after experiencing an awakening, upon which he embarked on a spiritual journey that lasted the rest of his life. He came to be called the Buddha, meaning “enlightened,” because his teachings offered an alternative to the then-dominant Brahmanist values.

Buddhism explores the depths of human suffering, desire, envy, decadence, and death, offering adherents a way out of an eternal cycle of misery if they adopt the Four Noble Truths leading to the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths acknowledge that pain and disappointment are an unavoidable part of life and that by focusing on spiritual matters via the Eightfold Path, pain and suffering can be overcome. By adopting Buddha's teachings about how to think, speak, and act with respect for all life, and many other practices, followers eventually arrive at an enlightened salvation called *nirvana*. Nirvana is a state of ultimate peace found in the extinction of all desire and transcendence of the person's very being. Without nirvana, upon death the soul is reincarnated into a new life that will again run the gamut of suffering, misery, and the search for enlightenment.

The teachings of Buddha and his followers issued a direct challenge to the status quo in ancient India. In his time, Buddha relished criticizing the Brahmins, questioning their authority and their dependence on ritualism. Continued generations of teachers, missionaries, and lay Buddhists used his teachings to assail the Brahmanist-based caste system. Female Buddhists were attracted by ideas promoting the opportunity for women to achieve enlightenment on an equal basis with men.

Before Buddhism, Brahmanist teachings had supported a system of gender that in the first centuries of the common era pronounced women's genitalia foul, leading women to be excluded from public rituals and worship. Buddhism protected women from being seen as spiritually unclean, promising them an elevated status and greater participation in the community's spiritual life. The same was true for members of the lower castes despite their inherited class. Both women and lower castes were drawn to Buddhism by the greater independence and freedom they found in it. But women adopting Buddhism often found the religion just as patriarchal: Buddhist monasteries were segregated into spheres for male monks and female nuns, and women were given lower positions and fewer privileges.

Buddhism never supplanted Brahmanism as the dominant religion in India. In later centuries, Buddhist thought and institutions were influenced by Brahmanism, incorporating deities such as Shiva and concepts such as karma. Boundaries between the two religions became blurred, a development that helped followers of Brahmanism and Buddhists find a means for coexistence and even cooperation. Buddhism arose in a historical context dominated by a Brahmanist society, and many Buddhist teachings and practices such as meditation reflect the influence of Brahmanism. Likewise, Brahmanism was greatly influenced by Buddhism and its popularity with certain classes in India. As a result, over several centuries between around 400 BCE and 200 CE, Brahmanism evolved into more of a devotional religion, allowing individual practitioners to communicate directly with the gods, not just through the Brahman priests. Worship became more personalized and private, centered on prayer and songs within the home. In this way, Brahmanism emerged as Hinduism, which retained the caste system and belief in the Vedas while also offering a prescription for common followers seeking to live a moral and fulfilling life. What emerged as the central text of Hinduism was called the *Bhagavad Gita*. Finished around 300 CE, it taught that commoners, not just Brahmins, could lead exemplary moral lives by abandoning bodily desires and seeking inner peace.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism were and remained diverse, branching into hundreds of schools of thought and sects that were each quite adaptable to local contexts. As it became institutionalized, however, Buddhism lost some of its early character as a means for liberation of the lowly of India. Instead it attracted the patronage of elites, who elevated it into Asia's most influential source of inspiration for monumental architecture and high art. Buddhism made inroads across all of Asia, coming to be adopted by millions in China, Korea, Thailand, Japan, and many other communities in Southeast Asia.

Dueling Voices

Hinduism and Buddhism in Ancient India

The first excerpt, concerning the Hindu tradition, is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, titled "Perform Action, Free from Attachment." The second, "Basic Teachings of the Buddha," includes a version of Buddhism's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Notice how each spiritual system conceived of immorality, the proper way to demonstrate right conduct and living, and the purpose of life.

8. *Perform thou action that is (religiously) required;
For action is better than inaction.
And even the maintenance of the body for thee
Can not succeed without action.*

9. *Except action for the purpose of worship,
This world is bound by actions;
Action for that purpose, son of Kunti,
Perform thou, free from attachment (to its fruits)*

10. *Therefore unattached ever
Perform action that must be done;
For performing action without attachment
Man attains the highest. . . .*

21. *Whatsoever the noblest does,
Just that in every case other folk (do);
What he makes his standard,
That the world follows.*

35. *Better one's own duty, (tho) imperfect,
Than another's duty well performed;
Better death in (doing) one's own duty;
Another's duty brings danger.*

—Bhagavad Gita, translated by Franklin Edgerton

What, now, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; Decay is suffering; Death is suffering; Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief, and Despair, are suffering; not to get what one desires, is suffering. . . .

What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to fresh rebirth, and, bound up with pleasure and lust, now here, now there, finds ever fresh delight.

What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this desire, its forsaking and giving up, the liberation and detachment from it. . . .

It is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way that leads to the extinction of suffering, namely: 1. Right Understanding, 2. Right Mindedness, which together are Wisdom. 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Living, which together are Morality. 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Attentiveness, 8. Right Concentration, which together are Concentration. This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One has found out, which makes one both to see and to know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. . . .

—Buddha, the Word, edited by Nyanatiloka

- Based on these excerpts, what does it mean for one to lead a moral life in each of these distinct traditions?
- How is the Eightfold Path in the Buddhist excerpt similar to or different from the call for action in the Hindu excerpt?

The Mauryan Empire

The initial spur to Buddhism's migration across Asia occurred with the rise of the Mauryan Empire (326–184 BCE). This entity grew out of the smaller Indian kingdom of Magadha once its ruler, Chandragupta Maurya, managed to unify much of north India from a capital near the city of Patna and pass it on to his descendants, founding the Maurya dynasty. A Greek historian named Megasthenes visited the seat of Chandragupta's power around the end of the fourth century BCE, marveling at its palaces replete with grottoes, bathing pools, and gardens filled with jasmine, hibiscus, and lotus.

Ruling over a population nearing fifty million, Chandragupta's successors conquered all but the southern tip of the subcontinent in a series of military campaigns. The Mauryan Empire's political structure employed a large and well-run army, administered by a war office with branches for a navy and for raising horses and elephants for cavalry warfare. A civilian bureaucracy ran the ministries overseeing industries such as weaving, mining, and shipbuilding as well as organizing irrigation, road construction, and tax collection. The Mauryan rulers lived in constant fear of assassination and intrigue against their rule, however, which forced them to rely on an elaborate network of spies to monitor officials throughout the empire.

The high point of Mauryan greatness came with the ascension of Emperor Ashoka in approximately 268 BCE, opening a period of monumental architecture that left its mark on the ancient world. Ashoka's personal grandeur came from the story of his transformation from a ruthless warrior general to a devout man of peace with a universal mission (Figure 5.22). As the head of the Mauryan army laying siege to the kingdom of Kalinga, he won a great battle that caused an estimated 100,000 deaths. The carnage brought an awakening that led Ashoka to Buddhism and to reforms intended to promote harmony and compassionate rule throughout India. To that end, he supported missionary efforts to spread Buddhism to Burma and Sri Lanka. His new law code gave protections to the vulnerable—the ill and diseased, the poor and powerless, and travelers making their way across the empire. His

ministers put their sovereign's will into action by building hospitals, digging wells, setting up rest-houses along India's roads, and sending out traveling magistrates to resolve disputes and bring justice to remote areas.



Figure 5.22 Ashoka in Splendor. This stone representation of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka visiting a Buddhist pilgrimage site with his entourage is from a large commemorative monument begun in his lifetime to house relics of Buddha. It illustrates the many strategies he adopted to magnify his rule. (credit: modification of work "King Asoka visits Ramagrama" by Anandajoti Bhikkhu/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Ashoka also had a lasting influence on the world of art. He decreed that his sayings and teachings on morality be inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout India (Figure 5.23). The Pillars of Ashoka demonstrate the Indian empire's character as a spiritual and political system. Through Buddhism, patronage of the arts, and monumental architecture, the Mauryans wished to demonstrate morality and benevolence to their subjects and exercise less direct rule. Leaders such as Ashoka hoped the people's loyalty and duty in turn would be motivated by admiration of their achievements, if not by the money and other gifts given to reward the virtuous and charm supporters. The Pillars of Ashoka also demonstrate the flexibility of the Mauryan system of rule. Those closest to the capital were inscribed with detailed summaries of the Mauryan codes for behavior and an orderly society. Farther away, in newly won territories, the pillars promoted very simple teachings, a mark of the ruler's intent to allow room for local autonomy and customs to prevail as long as his subjects met certain universal norms and tax obligations.



Figure 5.23 The Pillars of Ashoka. The incised stoned pillars with Ashoka's decrees about morality were erected throughout the Mauryan Empire and demonstrate how his message and role as sovereign were conditioned by local customs. (credit: "Asoka's Pillar, Monolith in Fort, Allahabad" by Thomas A. Rust/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the end of Ashoka's reign, the Mauryans left a legacy for future generations of Indian rulers to try to emulate so as to rule a diverse society. When the Mauryan Empire finally collapsed in 185 BCE, India entered another period of fragmentation and rule by small competing states and autonomous cities and villages. By the early centuries of the common era, it was a multitude of smaller regional kingdoms that shared with each other a common culture linked by Hinduism, Buddhism, a canon of Sanskrit texts, and the caste system.

The Gupta Dynasty

From the fourth to the seventh centuries, an empire founded by the Gupta dynasty (320–600 CE) ruled over northern India. As revealed by the name he took, Chandragupta, the founder, emulated the Mauryans and its famous founder, Chandragupta Maurya. He hired scribes working in Sanskrit to promote learning and the arts, and during this age, Sanskrit became the basis for a classical literature that influenced generations of Indians and the world. Texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* glorified ideas about duty, valor, and performing a proper role in society (Figure 5.24). The first was a collection of thrilling poems featuring feuding rulers and powerful families, the other an epic tale of a warrior prince's journey to recover his honor.



Figure 5.24 The Humiliation of Draupadi. The *Mahabharata* is possibly the longest poem ever written, with over 200,000 verse lines describing the lives and conflicts of several noble families. One of the main women featured in the stories is Draupadi, known for her beauty and morality. This eighteenth-century watercolor painting depicts a story in the epic when Draupadi's enemies attempt to humiliate her by stripping her naked. However, she's saved by the Hindu god Krishna who miraculously clothes her anew each time her dress is removed. (credit: "The disrobing of Draupadi" by Howard Hodgkin Collection, Purchase, Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, by exchange, 2022/Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In *Ramayana*, Rama, an avatar for the Hindu deity Vishnu, triumphs over the demon Ravana on the island of Sri Lanka and rescues his wife Sita before going on to found a perfect Indian society from his capital of Ayudha. His noble virtues and ideal society became models for Hindus to aspire to as rulers and aristocrats, while his exploits were retold for centuries in countless paintings, sculptures, carnivals, plays, and shadow theatres.

The Sanskrit classics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* soon spread far and wide in Southeast Asia, where they became part of the cultural fabric for a multitude of non-Indians as well. Other intellectuals of the Gupta era proved themselves in the field of mathematics by using decimals and a mark to denote the concept of zero for precise measurements and recordkeeping. Among the more notable was the astronomer Brahmagupta, who in the seventh century CE pioneered the use of multiplication and division and the idea of negative numbers.

Link to Learning

You can read a [brief synopsis of the *Ramayana* and a description of the epic's major characters](#) at the British Library website.

An [animated English-language version of the epic](#) is also available.

In politics the Guptas were innovators as well. In return for their loyalty, rulers granted tracts of land as gifts to powerful families, Brahmins, and temple complexes, guaranteeing these followers a share of the harvest and consolidating their own control. In return, the Brahmins elevated the Gupta rulers to new heights in rituals honoring Vishnu and Shiva. Yet as these deities became more important, worship among the commoners turned more personal and private; singing as a form of prayer and ritualism inside the home became essential to daily lives. Many Indians began to believe in the sanctity of *bhakti*, a direct personal relationship between a follower and the deity. This idea bypassed the role of Brahmins as intermediaries, displeasing the Brahmins but gaining popularity in southern India, where poems written in the Tamil language became foundational to the new practice of personalized worship among Hindus.

The Gupta's dynasty marked a flourishing of art and religion and the heyday of Buddhism in India. Painted caves with beautiful sculptures found in the Ajanta caves illustrate the sophistication of the artists patronized by the dynasty. While Hinduism remained the official religion of the state and the Guptas, Buddhist universities such as Nalanda were among the first of their kind in the ancient world and attracted throngs of students and pilgrims from China. India's educated classes ranked among the most learned and knowledgeable of the ancient world, and at times they turned their attention from math and morality to explore the depths of passion, love, and eroticism. During this period, the *Kama Sutra*, a treatise on courtship and sexuality, became a seminal piece of Indian literature, inspiring and titillating generations worldwide ever since.

The opulence and stability provided by the Guptas dissipated under the threat of invaders from the north known as the Huns. While northern India fractured into smaller states after this point, southern India's ties and trade with South Asia deepened and matured. By the eleventh century, the region's profitable exports of goods such as ivory, pepper, spices, Roman coins, and even animals like the peacock had led to the formation of notable southern kingdoms, such as the Tamil Chola dynasty. But the most influential exports from India to the rest of South Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and the art and learning each inspired—long outlived these states.

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2.11: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe how civilizations in the Americas adapted to their environments
- Discuss the contributions of the Olmec civilization to culture and religion in Mesoamerica
- Identify the key components of early cultures in North and South America

At the start of the third century BCE, after thousands of years of hunter-gatherer existence, the peoples living in the Americas began to form complex agricultural-based societies. Over the next few thousand years, the early settled communities gave way to large and architecturally impressive settlements from the Andean region to the Eastern Woodlands of North America. These led to local similarities in art, architecture, religion, and pottery design.

Complex Civilizations in Mesoamerica

By the year 1200 BCE, farming had become well established across southern Mexico, especially in the gulf lowland areas where there was sufficient water for irrigation. The many societies there were not exclusively agricultural; they continued to rely on hunting and gathering to supplement their diets. One of them, the Olmec culture, emerged around this time as Mesoamerica's first complex civilization with its own monumental architecture.

Olmec Culture

The start of the Olmec civilization, at a site known as San Lorenzo in the modern Mexican state of Veracruz, stretches back to about 1350 BCE and the construction of a large earthen platform rising some 164 feet above the flat landscape. Upon this platform, the Olmec built ceremonial and other structures, water reservoirs, a system of drains, numerous stone works of art, and a number of massive sculpted stone heads. One of the structures has become known as "the red palace" because of the red ochre pigment on the floor and walls. It was likely a residence for the elite and included large stone columns and aqueducts. The massive stone heads and other sculptures, some weighing as much as fifty tons, were carved from volcanic basalt that came from as far as ninety miles away and was likely brought by raft for part of the way and on rollers over land.

Because little of the San Lorenzo site remains, we can only speculate about the organization of the Olmec civilization, but it is clear that their civilization shaped those that followed. For example, the great earthen platform and monumental sculptures shaped like step pyramids attest to a highly sophisticated culture, with a clearly defined elite that could control large labor forces. Relying on pottery fragments and population density estimates, scholars have concluded that most workers were probably free laborers working to accomplish larger goals. They likely lived well beyond the elevated center reserved for the elite, in villages surrounded by gardens and other agricultural zones where the Olmec grew maize, avocados, palm nuts, squash, tomatoes, beans, tropical fruits, and cacao for chocolate.

The stone heads themselves are remarkable (Figure 8.12). Seventeen have been found across all the Olmec sites; some stand eleven feet tall. All are generally similar in form and style, depicting men's faces with large lips and noses with flared nostrils, but they were likely intended to be realistic portraits of rulers of the sites where they were discovered. Upon their heads are helmets of various styles, some with coverings for the ears. Given the effort required to transport the stone and carve the heads, these works were likely intended to emphasize the power of the rulers, both to the Olmec people and to outsiders.



Figure 8.12 An Olmec Head. Some of the enormous Olmec carvings of heads discovered in Mexico are as tall as eleven feet and weigh as much as fifty tons. (credit: “An Olmec colossal head at the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology, in Veracruz, Mexico” by “Maunus”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Evidence of possible vandalism on some of the heads has led some scholars to suspect an invasion occurred in the tenth century BCE, with desecration of the images as a result. Others, however, believe this is evidence of reworking that was never completed. We may never know for sure, but we do know that during the tenth century BCE, San Lorenzo declined in importance. At the same time, another Olmec site rose in significance, some fifty miles to the northeast at La Venta.

La Venta was built around 1200 BCE on a high ridge above the Palma River less than ten miles from the Gulf of Mexico. By 900 BCE, it had become the dominant Olmec city in the region. At its height, La Venta covered almost five hundred acres and may have supported as many as eighteen thousand people. Its central monuments included several large earthen mounds, plazas, a possible sports arena, several tombs, and numerous stone heads and other sculptures. The complexity of this urban complex reflects a major development in Mesoamerican civilizational and architectural design. It was likely built as a sacred site, with its temples

and other complexes organized on a north–south axis believed to enhance the rulers’ authority by connecting them to supernatural environments. This style of urban design was later adopted by other Mesoamerican civilizations like the Maya.

Olmec art depicts numerous deities, such as a dragon god, a bird god, a fish god, and many fertility deities like a maize god and water gods. The Olmec also clearly recognized many types of supernatural mixed beings, like a feathered serpent and the were-jaguar, a cross between a jaguar and a human. These artistic images imply that the Olmec had a sophisticated pantheon of gods who controlled the universe and expected certain rituals be performed, perhaps by Olmec leaders themselves, who may have functioned as shamans empowered to communicate with the spirit world. The rituals were performed in the temples and plazas of the sacred cities like La Venta and San Lorenzo, as well as in sacred natural sites like caves and mountaintops.

Other rituals were connected to a type of ball game played in a special court with balls made from the abundant natural rubber of the region. Sports contests often existed to bring communities together, to allow men to show prowess and strength in times of peace, and to entertain. It is also likely that in times of heightened spiritual need, such contests could take on greater meaning and might have been choreographed to play out supernatural narratives and perhaps connect people to the gods. Like some later civilizations, the Olmec also saw bloodletting as a link to the spirit world. Blood sports may have been used to create pathways to understanding the will of their gods.

Link to Learning

The ritual ball game of the Olmec became a cultural feature of Mesoamerica over the centuries, and various forms of it were played by the Maya, the Aztec, and many others. Read more about the history of the [Mesoamerican ball game](#) and see pictures of related artifacts from different Mesoamerican cultures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art website.

The Olmec were clearly in contact with other groups around southern Mexico and Central America. There is evidence of a robust trade in pottery and valued materials like obsidian, magnetite, and shells, likely carried out by merchants traveling across the larger region. Over time, this trade exposed other Mesoamerican cultures to Olmec ideas about religion, art, architecture, and governance. Some scholars thus conclude that Olmec civilization was a “mother culture” for later large and sophisticated Mesoamerican states. Cultural similarities exist among these, such as ritual ball games, deities, and calendar systems. Olmec-style artifacts have also been found at sites as far away as what are now western Mexico and El Salvador. Like much related to the Olmec, however, the extent of their influence is a question we may never answer with certainty. By the time this civilization disappeared around 400 BCE, a number of other Mesoamerican cultures were emerging.

The Zapotec civilization appeared in the valleys of Oaxaca in western Mexico beginning around 500 BCE, with the construction of the regional capital known today as Monte Albán (Figure 8.13). Set on a flattened mountaintop overlooking the larger region, Monte Albán likely had a population of about five thousand by around 400 BCE and as many as twenty-five thousand by around 700 CE. As it grew over the centuries, so too did its stone temples and other complexes. The city exerted influence on the hundreds of much smaller communities scattered across the Oaxaca Valley. The region was highly suitable to maize cultivation, thus allowing for larger populations and monumental architecture. From the defensive walls created around their settlements, it seems the Zapotec lived in a world where warfare was especially common. Monte Albán itself was likely selected for defensive reasons.



Figure 8.13 Monte Albán. Perched on a flattened mountaintop and serving as the Zapotec capital between 500 BCE and 800 CE, Monte Albán in today's Oaxaca, Mexico, was an easily defensible city. (credit: "Roman architecture ruins" by Andrew McMillan/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The structures built at Monte Albán after 300 CE reflect the influence of another major Mesoamerican civilization about thirty miles northeast of Mexico City. The massive city of Teotihuacán dominated trade in obsidian, salt, cotton, cacao, and marine shells across southern Mexico and greatly influenced cultures like that of the Zapotec. The origins of the Teotihuacán settlement date to about 400 BCE, but major building at the site did not begin until centuries later. By 300, the growing city had a population of about

100,000, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time (Figure 8.14). It exercised enormous cultural and military influence across large portions of Mesoamerica until it declined in the sixth and seventh centuries CE.



Figure 8.14 Teotihuacán. The enormous size of the ruins of Teotihuacán, northeast of Mexico City, is enduring evidence of the power of this city in ancient times. This photograph was taken from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon (c. 250 CE) looking down the Avenue of the Dead and toward the Pyramid of the Sun (c. 100 CE) on the far left side. (credit: “View of the Avenue of the Dead and the Pyramid of the Sun, from Pyramid of the Moon (Pyramide de la Luna)” by Jackhynes/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Teotihuacanos built numerous stone temples and other structures organized around a north–south passageway known as the Avenue of the Dead. The largest temples are known as the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. Both are multitiered stone structures, 197 and 141 feet tall, respectively. The site also includes a large royal residence known as the Citadel, which includes the elaborate Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. Elite military leaders and others lived in large apartment compounds decorated with colorful artwork depicting priests, gods, or warriors. The remaining population was spread across the roughly ten thousand square miles that surrounded the city and produced trade goods as well as agricultural products.

The size of Teotihuacán denotes its wealth and regional influence at its height. This wealth came from trading in crafts, agricultural products, obsidian tools, cloth, ceramics, and artwork. The many preserved frescos and murals show the city’s rulers dressed in elaborate clothing, including iridescent quetzal bird feathers from as far away as Guatemala, testifying to Teotihuacán’s long reach. To influence areas so far away, the city wielded power through its control of trade and use of military force and diplomacy. Sculptures at Monte Albán show Teotihuacano diplomats meeting with the Zapotec elite, reflecting mostly peaceful contact between the two civilizations. Evidence from Maya sites also demonstrates that the Teotihuacanos commonly intervened in Maya affairs deep in Central America, sometimes militarily. They may even have orchestrated a coup in the powerful Maya city of Tikal in 378.

Maya Culture

While Maya civilization was clearly influenced by the Teotihuacanos beginning in the fourth century CE, evidence of urban development and rapid population growth in the Maya heartland of Central America dates to before 600 BCE. Village life may go

back much further, but in any case, by 600 BCE, the lowlands of Central America were full of small villages, each showing evidence of sophisticated pottery, architecture, irrigation techniques, and religious traditions. By 250 BCE, a handful of powerful Maya city-states had emerged. The major cities of this Early Classic period (250–600 CE) include Tikal, Calakmul, El Mirador, and a few others.

El Mirador was a dominant city before 150 CE, with a population of about 100,000 at its height. But Tikal and Calakmul were equally impressive. All had numerous large pyramid-like structures creating an impressive skyline across the spaces cleared of jungle. Most of the major cities were built next to large, shallow lakes, since access to water for drinking and irrigation was important in the lowlands, where rainfall was often insufficient. The tropical soil in the area is also insufficiently fertile, and the Maya developed a style of slash-and-burn agriculture to raise maize, squash, beans, and cacao for the growing urban populations in these cities.

Link to Learning

Tour the [ruins of Tikal](#) by exploring this immersive video.

The Maya were certainly influenced by Olmec civilization, though likely not directly. For example, some examples of Maya art include Olmec-derived features like the were-jaguar. The Maya also played a ritual ball game based on the earlier Olmec variety. Another possible Olmec influence was the Maya calendar. This consisted of two different parts—the 260-day Sacred Round calendar and the 365-day Vague Year calendar—that functioned together to create a 52-year cycle for measuring time and tying the dates for ceremonies to important mythological events performed by the gods.

The Past Meets the Present

Did the Maya Predict the End of the World?

The premise of a 2009 science fiction movie was that the Maya calendar predicted the end of the world would occur in the year 2012. While the film (called *2012*) was a commercial success, the idea that the Maya predicted when the world would end has been largely discredited.

The Maya had a sophisticated calendar system evolved from earlier Mesoamerican versions, possibly the Olmec. Because it used two different calendar rounds working together, it revealed important ritual days and cycles over long periods of time (Figure 8.15). For example, one full cycle covered a space of fifty-two solar years, often called a *bundle*. But to explore longer chunks of time, the Maya relied on what scholars call the Long Count Calendar. This had cycles that included the *winal* (20 days), the *tun* (360 days), the *k'atun* (7,200 days), and the *bak'tun* (144,000 days). The Great Cycle occurred every thirteen *bak'tun*, or about every 5,125 years. And this is where the idea of the significance of 2012 comes from.

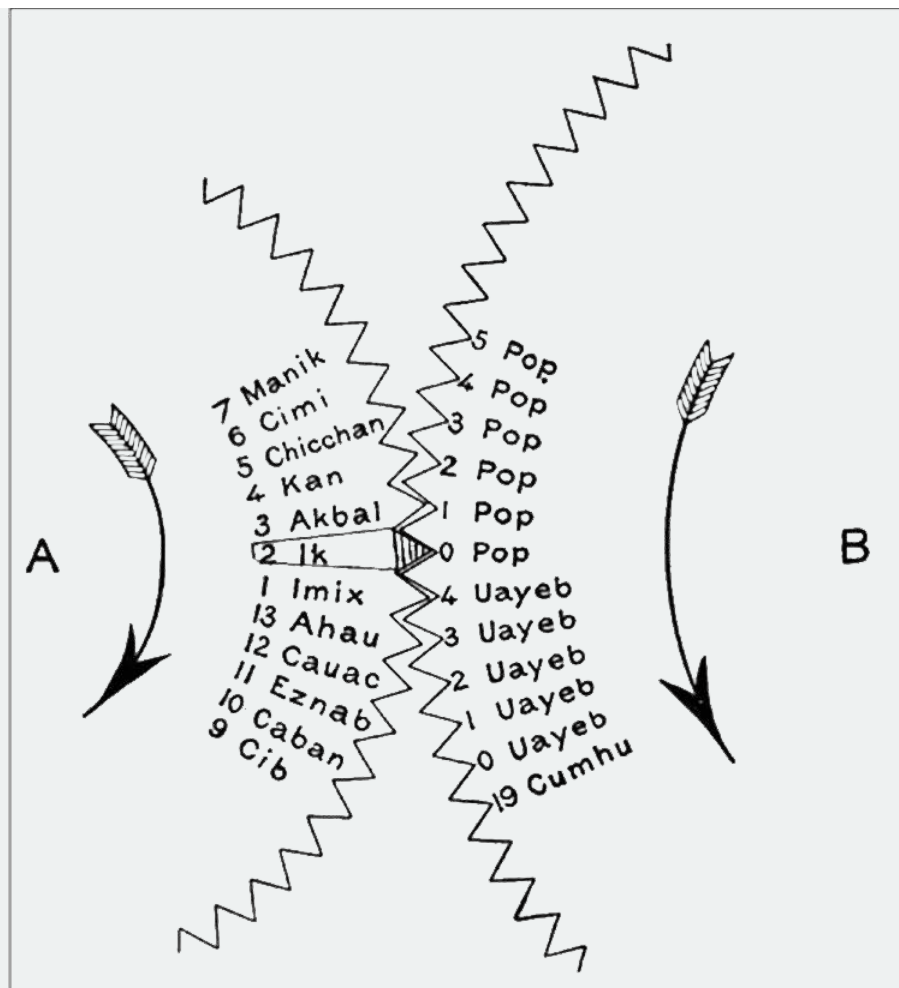


Figure 8.15 The Maya Calendar. The two Maya calendar rounds were intended to function together in order to reveal important dates years in advance. (credit: modification of work “Diagram showing engagement of tonalamatl wheel of 260 days and haab wheel of 365 positions by An Introduction to the Study of the Maya Hieroglyphs” by Sylvanus Griswold Morley/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

According to scholars’ calculations, the Maya Great Cycle would have begun in 2012 CE. But did that really mean the Maya thought this was the end of the world? Most historians and archaeologists say the answer is a resounding “no.” Rather, that

year would simply have started a new cycle, though the Maya would have seen great importance in the event and celebrated it with major festivities. It appears that only Hollywood and some imaginative modern writers have read an Earth-ending catastrophe into this date.

- What does the cyclical nature of the Maya calendar system suggest about their rituals and cosmology?
- Why do you think the concept of an apocalypse occurring in 2012 was so attractive to modern people?

The era of Maya greatness begins with the Classic period, starting around 250 CE and lasting until about 900. During this time, urbanization in the Maya world expanded greatly, with approximately forty different city-states emerging in different areas. Some of the most powerful were older sites like Tikal and Calakmul, along with newer locations like Palenque, Copan, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras (Figure 8.16). Each had its own rulers, referred to as “divine lords.” These powerful chieftains exercised their authority over the city-state through their control over religious rituals and ceremonies, the construction of temples, and especially wars they waged with other Maya city-states. Such wars were common for weakening rivals and keeping neighbors in line, and they may even have served important ritual purposes. They also allowed for the exacting of tribute from subdued enemies in the form of animal products, salt, textiles, artwork, and agricultural goods like cacao and maize. Tribute could be paid through labor as well, when defeated enemies supplied workers for the victorious city-state. Only rarely did rulers seek to control conquered city-states, however. These generally remained independent, though they all shared many cultural attributes.



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.16 The Maya World. (a) At its height, the Maya civilization included as many as forty city-states. (b) Today the ruins of Palenque and other Maya sites appear ghost-white. But during their heyday in the seventh century, their temples were painted in bright colors. (attribution a: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license; credit b: modification of work “Palenque Palace” by “Candiderm”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the heart of Maya religious practices was the veneration of family ancestors, who were considered bridges between heaven and earth. Homes had shrines for performing ritual bloodletting and prayers directed to the ancestors, and deceased family members were typically interred beneath the floor. Indeed, the large stone temples themselves were in some ways grander versions of these family shrines, usually with large tombs within them, and deceased kings were effectively ancestors for the entire city-state. Ritual practices were tied to the complicated Maya calendar, and gods could act in certain ways depending on the time of year and the location of certain heavenly bodies. Shamans and priests guided rituals like bloodletting, which allowed for communication with the ancestors by releasing a sacred essence in the blood called *chu'ulel*. The same principle applied to the human sacrifice of war captives and especially captured rival leaders.

While we can only speculate about how the Olmec played their ritual ball game, we know more about the Maya and later versions (Figure 8.17). The intention was to reenact aspects of Maya mythology, and the game held a significant place in religious practice. Two teams of four wore ritual protective padding and passed the ball to each other without using hands or feet on long I-shaped courts flanked by sloping walls. The object appeared to be to move the ball through a stone ring without letting it hit the ground. As the use of padding indicates, the game could be quite dangerous; the ball was solid rubber and could weigh more than seven pounds. But the true danger came at the end, when losing team leaders or sometimes the entire losing team could expect to be sacrificed to fulfill the game's ritual purpose.



Figure 8.17 A Maya Ball Court. Maya ball court designs varied from city to city, but like this one in front of a pyramid in Peten, Guatemala, all had the same I-shaped layout. (credit: "Tikal Ballcourt" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

One of the reasons we know so much about the Maya is that, unlike some other Mesoamerican civilizations, they created a writing system that scholars have been able to decode and read (Figure 8.18). This system was phonetically based, with complex characters, and was far more developed than any other writing system discovered in Mesoamerica. It allowed the Maya to record their own history in stone monuments, including invaluable political histories, descriptions of rituals, propagandistic records of battles, and genealogies.



Figure 8.18 The Maya Writing System. The phonetically based Maya script baffled researchers for years and was decoded only after decades of careful work. These stucco characters are from Palenque and were likely created between the fifth and eighth centuries BCE. (credit: “Maya stucco glyphs displayed in the museum at Palenque, Mexico” by “Kwamikagami”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Classical Maya civilization entered a period of decline in the ninth century CE and then deteriorated rapidly. Over a period of about a century, alliances broke down, conflicts became more common, the production of luxury goods slowed to a stop, and cities went from thriving urban centers to depopulated shells. The reason for this collapse has been a topic of debate among historians and archaeologists for many years, and much remains uncertain. Among the proposed causes are epidemic diseases, invasions, natural

disasters, internal revolutions, and environmental degradation. Several of these may have been influential; it is unlikely there was a single cause.

For example, studies over the last few decades have pointed to the environmental problems created by demographic growth. This growth led to large-scale deforestation, which in turn produced soil erosion. Large populations that required high agricultural yields made Mayan civilization more vulnerable to variations in climate or a string of bad harvests caused by crop disease. Such problems would have put enormous pressure on elites and commoners alike and contributed to disorder, war, and perhaps internal revolts. However it happened, by 900 CE the Classic period of Maya civilization had come to an end. But this was not the end of the Maya. In the Yucatán Peninsula, well north of the old centers of power, Maya civilization would experience a rebirth that extended into the sixteenth century and the arrival of the Spanish.

Early Cultures and Civilizations in South America

South of Mesoamerica and north of the Andes lies a dense tropical jungle that long prevented any regular communication or cultural transmission between the two areas. As a result, the early cultures and civilizations in South America developed in different ways and responded to different environmental factors. Neolithic settlements like Norte Chico in today's Peru had already emerged by 3000 BCE. However, in the centuries following this, others proliferated in the Northern Highlands as well. These include sites known today as Huaricoto, Galgada, and Kotosh, which were likely religious centers for offering sacrifices. There was also Sechin Alto, built along the desert coast after 2000 BCE. Then, around 1400 BCE, groups in the Southern Highlands area around Lake Titicaca (on the border between Peru and Bolivia) began growing in size after adopting agricultural practices. The construction of a large sunken court in this area around 1000 BCE indicates they had their own sophisticated ceremonial rituals.

Around 900 BCE, the Andes region experienced a transformation when a single society, often called the Chavín culture, expanded across the entire area, opening what archaeologists call the Early Horizon, or Formative, period. The Chavín culture is known for its distinctive pottery style, which spread throughout the entire region and depicted numerous people, deities, and animals in a flowing and balanced manner (Figure 8.19).



Figure 8.19 Chavín Pottery. The Chavín culture produced a distinctive pottery style. This ceramic piece (c. 1000–800 BCE) shows a stylized caiman, an alligator-like reptile species that inhabits parts of Mexico and South America. (credit: “Bottle with caiman” by The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Read or listen to a short expert description of the [Chavín bottle with caiman](#) presented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which holds this item in its collection.

In addition, you can explore a number of [other artifacts](#) from the period at the Met website.

The name Chavín comes from Chavín de Huántar, possibly the culture’s most important religious center. This site is more than ten thousand feet high in the Andes Mountains, to the east of the older Norte Chico settlements. Its dominant architectural feature was its large temple complex, which faced the rising sun and included a maze of tunnels snaking through. Deep within the tunnels was a large sculpture of possibly this culture’s chief deity, called *El Lanzón* (“great lance”) because of its long lance-like shape. The image of *El Lanzón* mixes both human and animal features, with flared wide nostrils, bared teeth, long fangs on either side of the mouth, and claws protruding from fingertips and toes. The temple was also decorated with many other sculptures of animals, human heads, and deities bearing the features of both, all probably intended to awe residents and visitors alike.

The inhabitants of Chavín de Huántar numbered about twenty-five hundred by 200 BCE as it slipped into decline. The site’s importance lay in its role as a religious or ceremonial site, not as a population center. But by around 400 BCE, the Chavín religion and culture had spread far and wide across the Andes region. Whether these influences were transmitted by trade or warfare is unclear. Eventually, however, they replaced other architectural and artistic styles and burial practices. Innovations in textile production and metalworking in gold, silver, and copper also proliferated around the region. Craftspeople in towns and villages produced textiles and metal objects, and traders moved them from place to place along improved routes and with the aid of llamas as pack animals (Figure 8.20).



Figure 8.20 Chavín Culture and Its Influence. Between about 900 and 200 BCE, the Chavín culture exerted a strong influence over much of what is today coastal and Andean Peru. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Beginning around 200 BCE, the influence of Chavín cultural styles and religious symbols began to wane. This came at a time of increased regional warfare among many groups, evidenced by the increasing use of defensive features like walls around settlements. The broader Chavín-influenced region then fragmented into a number of regional cultures that grew to full-fledged civilizations like the Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku (Figure 8.21).



Figure 8.21 Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku Cultures. The Moche and Nazca civilizations both emerged around 200 BCE in different parts of what had formerly been Chavín areas of influence. The Tiwanaku civilization also traces its roots back to about 200 BCE, but its major building period started around 100 CE. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Moche civilization emerged in northern Peru and made major settlements with large pyramid-style architecture at Sipán, Moche, and Cerro Blanco. Its people were agriculturalists with a keen knowledge of irrigation technology, which they used to grow squash, beans, maize, and peppers. They were also a highly militaristic society; their art depicts warriors in hand-to-hand combat, scenes of torture, and other forms of physical violence (Figure 8.22). The Moche formed a politically organized state with a sophisticated administration system. Their cities and burial practices reflect a hierarchical organization, with powerful divine kings and families of nobles ruling from atop large pyramids. Below these two tiers was a class of many bureaucrats who helped manage the state. Near the bottom of the social order were the large numbers of workers, agricultural and otherwise, who lived in the many agricultural villages controlled by the elite.



Figure 8.22 The Moche at War. The Moche commanded a highly militaristic state that used war as well as ceremonial violence to subjugate surrounding populations. This colorful reproduction of a scene originally painted on a piece of Moche pottery (300–700 CE) shows a ceremony in which a Moche lord hands a cup to a high priest (top) as bound prisoners endure bloodletting at the hands of their captors (bottom). (credit: “Mural de la cultura Moche” by SCALA/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Far to the south of the Moche, along the dry coast of southern Peru, were the Nazca, whose culture also emerged around 200 BCE. While the terrain there is parched, with rainfall virtually unknown in some areas, the rivers that carry water from the mountains provided the Nazca with sufficient water for irrigation. Unlike the Moche in their large cities, the Nazca people lived mostly in small villages. However, they maintained important ceremonial sites like Cahuachi, where villagers made pilgrimages and witnessed elaborate fertility and other rituals.

Politically, the Nazca may have adopted a type of confederation made up of a number of important families. Apart from many human-altered hills, called *huacas*, they also left behind hundreds of geoglyphs, large artistic representations imprinted in the dry desert ground. These are sometimes referred to as the Nazca Lines, and they can be either geometric patterns or images of animals like birds, fish, lizards, and cats (Figure 8.23). Some are as large as twelve hundred feet long and were created by clearing stones away from the desert floor to reveal the different-colored ground beneath.



Figure 8.23 Nazca Lines. Between 200 BCE and 600 CE, the Nazca in modern southern Peru created massive images of animals and other shapes like this bird by moving rocks to reveal the different-colored desert floor beneath. (credit: “The Condor” by Roger Canals/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Link to Learning

The Nazca Lines in Peru have baffled scholars for many years. Watch this video about the [Nazca Lines](#) to learn more about how some are trying to understand these giant geoglyphs today.

Whereas the Nazca lived in the arid coastal desert, the Tiwanaku civilization thrived high in the mountains near Lake Titicaca. Like the Moche and Nazca societies, this culture emerged in the wake of the collapse of Chavín culture around 200 BCE. Beginning

around 100 CE, it entered a period of sustained building at its key city of Tiwanaku. There, residents built two large stone structures topped by additional buildings and carved stone artwork. A signature feature of the structures at Tiwanaku is the many “trophy heads” that poke out from among the stone blocks (Figure 8.24). Noting the different facial features on each head, some scholars have concluded that they represent important ancestors of the Tiwanaku elite or possibly the gods of various conquered groups.



Figure 8.24 Tiwanaku “Trophy Heads.” So-called trophy heads decorate the face of this wall built between the third and sixth centuries CE at Tiwanaku, near Lake Titicaca between Bolivia and Peru. (credit: modification of work “Tiwanaku23” by Alexson Scheppa Peisino (AlexSP)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At its height, the city supported perhaps as many as forty thousand people and oversaw at least four smaller cities in the surrounding area. It may even have been the center of a type of imperial system, with colonies on both the Pacific coast and the eastern side of the Andes. To support Tiwanaku and the other related cities, the people irrigated massive fields with a network of canals to grow potatoes. They also raised domesticated llamas and used them as pack animals for long-distance trade.

Tiwanaku survived until about 1000 CE and may have declined as the water level in Lake Titicaca rose to flood its farmland. The other civilizations of this period—the Moche and the Nazca—had disappeared long before, between 500 and 600 CE, for reasons that likely included environmental transformations. Other Andean civilizations emerged in their wake, including the Wari of the highlands of southeastern Peru and the Chimor of coastal Peru. These later groups built upon the earlier cultures’ innovations in agriculture, art, manufacturing, and trade. While Wari declined around 800 CE, Chimor survived into the fifteenth century. It was only in the 1400s that Chimor was conquered by a new and expanding imperial system, the Inca.

North America in the Formative Period

The earliest complex societies in North America began to emerge in the Ohio River valley around 1000 BCE, at the start of the Formative period, when mound-building cultures with large populations in the Eastern Woodlands became more common.

Mound-Building Cultures in the Eastern Woodlands

The mound-building culture of the Ohio River valley area is often referred to as the Adena, after a mound excavated in 1901 in Ross County, Ohio. This and the hundreds of others discovered in the area were burial sites. They started small, with the burial of one or two important people, but grew over time as more were buried and more earth was used to cover them. Some of the mounds had a large circular ditch surrounding them and logs lining the interior. Evidence of postholes indicates that structures once stood there as well, suggesting the locations may have been meeting or ceremonial spots. The bodies of the dead themselves were often decorated with red ochre and other pigments. Grave objects included jewelry, weapons, stone tools, marine shells, and pipes for smoking kinnikinnick (a mixture of leaves and bark) and perhaps tobacco (Figure 8.25).



Figure 8.25 Owl Pipe of the Adena Culture. Carefully carved pipes like this one dating from 900–1300 CE could be buried with their owners in the mounds built by the ancient Adena culture in the Ohio River valley. (credit: “Owl effigy pipe” by “Wmpearl”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Communities of mound builders in the valley remained small at first, sometimes erecting no more than a couple of structures. The mounds themselves were also relatively small when compared with those of later cultures like the Hopewell tradition, a civilization that emerged around 200 BCE and eventually spread across the Eastern Woodlands through a common network of trade routes. Named for a large earthwork complex occupying 130 acres in today’s Ohio, the Hopewell tradition emerged around 200 BCE and is one of the most impressive of many of this period in the Woodlands. The site encloses thirty-eight different mounds within a large earthen D-shaped rectangle. The largest are three conjoined mounds; before centuries of erosion occurred, together they measured about five hundred feet wide and thirty feet high. Large platforms once supported wooden structures and were likely used for ritual purposes.

Another Hopewell site located near Newark, Ohio, is equally impressive, with earthen enclosures, mounds, and an observation circle all organized to align with the movement of the moon and likely used to predict lunar eclipses and other seasonal events. Building such mounds with the available technology would have been a labor-intensive task and indicates the culture responsible was highly organized.

The mound complexes were used for ceremonial purposes and do not appear to have been the site of urban settlements. Instead, most people of the Hopewell culture lived in small dispersed communities consisting of only a few extended families. They

employed both hunter-gatherer strategies and the cultivation of domesticated plants like sunflowers and bottle gourds. Neighboring groups likely came together to participate in hunting, gathering, and religious events at their ceremonial sites. Religious traditions included the veneration of ancestors, such as those buried in the mounds.

Different communities from the wider area buried their dead leaders in the same mounds, likely as a way to establish symbolic connections across kin groups. Evidence from sites like the one at Newark suggests that ceremonies for burial and veneration were probably connected to seasonal changes and important astronomical observations. The items deposited in the mounds included a number of artistic depictions of animals like beavers, bears, dogs, cats, and even supernatural mixtures of these. These likely had symbolic importance for the individual kin groups and were connected to both their religious practices and specific ancestral ceremonies.

Politically, the settlements of the Hopewell tradition were decentralized and mostly egalitarian. The leadership structure of individual kin groups may have revolved around shamans or shamanistic practices, but there were no powerful rulers. There were, however, some divisions of labor based on specialization, including healers, clan leaders, and those who possessed certain spiritual qualities necessary for interpreting astronomical signs, preparing burials, and preserving important religious traditions. Ceremonial objects made of copper, bone, stone, and wood and shaped into bird claws and totem animals aided shamanistic figures in their duties and were often buried with them. Items within the mounds also provide evidence of extensive long-distance trading. Those discovered in the Ohio River valley include copper from Lake Superior, quartz from Arkansas, mica from the Appalachian region, marine shells from the Gulf coast, and obsidian from as far away as the Rocky Mountains. Trade in these objects was carried out by individuals moving along rivers or the networks of village paths.

Beyond the Book

Turtle Island

The earthen mounds of the Eastern Woodlands region had a number of symbolic meanings and purposes. They served as burial sites, provided connections to ancestors, and were settings for religious rituals. But what do ancient stories suggest about these mounds? Because the Native Americans who built them did not leave behind written records, their legends are one tool modern scholars can use to understand their symbolic importance.

Consider one of the ancient origin stories common to many Indigenous groups of the Eastern Woodlands. Preserved orally in numerous versions, it tells of the construction of the world by the accumulation of earth upon the shell of a large turtle, which grew over time and supported life. Some versions of the story begin with a great flood, after which animals work diligently to bring up earth from below the water to place on the turtle's back. Other versions refer to a woman with supernatural powers who falls or travels from the heavens and creates the world on a turtle's back (Figure 8.26). Across all the versions, the symbolic importance of the turtle, representing life, is paramount.

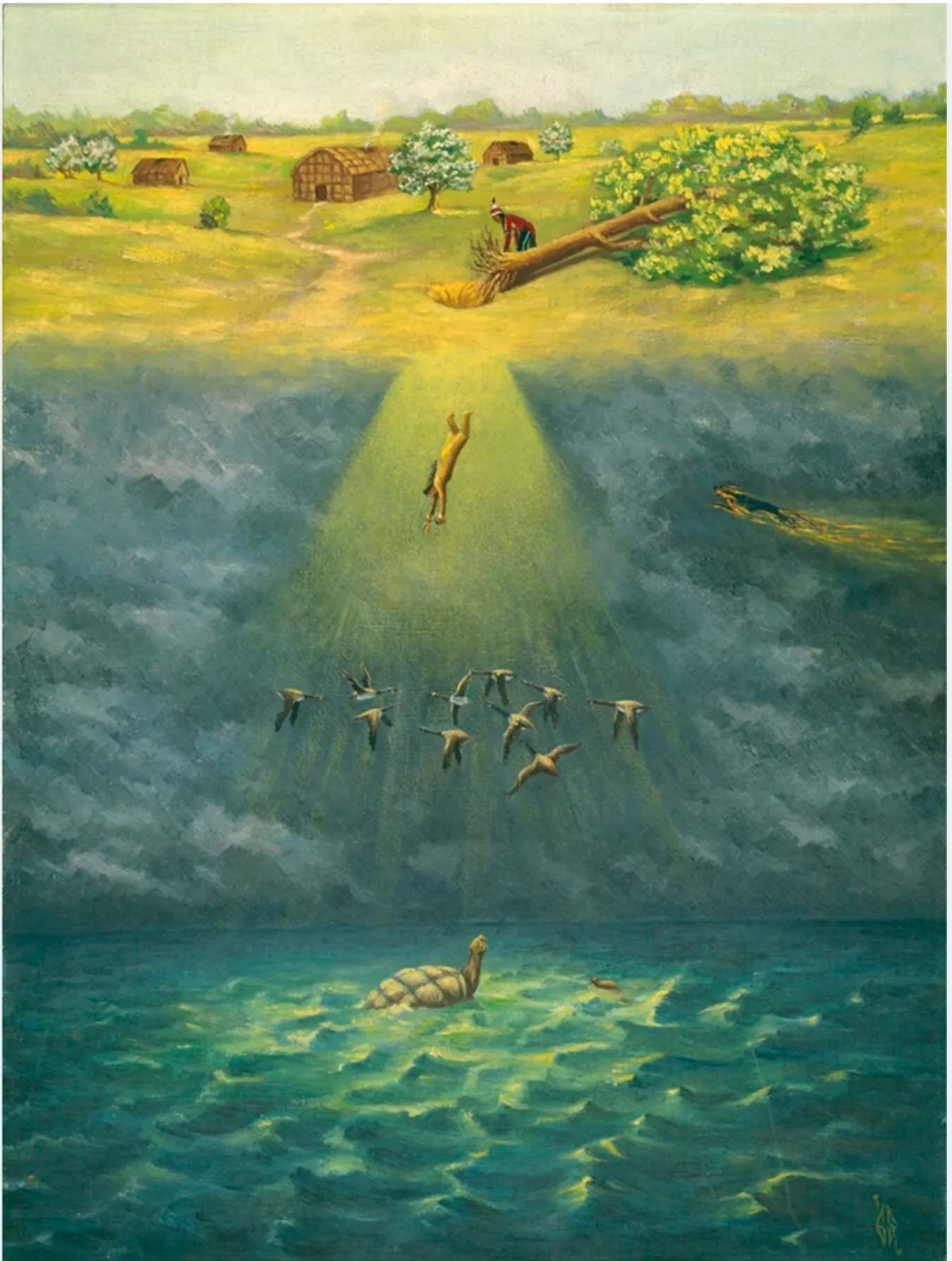


Figure 8.26 *Sky Woman* . In some versions of the Turtle Island story, a woman descends from the heavens to create the world on the back of a turtle. This 1936 oil painting called *Sky Woman* by the twentieth-century Seneca artist Ernest Smith illustrates such a moment. (credit: “Sky Woman”, by Ernest Smith. 1936” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While we cannot know for sure, the Woodlands mounds may have been connected to this ancient origin story. They certainly would have provided safety from river flooding in low-lying areas. During such times, the connection between the mound and the turtle floating in the water would have been difficult to miss.

- What purpose do you think origin stories like these served for the ancient people of the Eastern Woodlands?
- Do you think using preserved origin stories is a good way to understand ancient peoples and customs? Why or why not?

The Hopewell tradition settlements began to decline in the fourth century CE, evidenced by a waning of mound building and trade. The precise reason is not clear, but larger kin group alliances may have broken down as a result of underlying religious issues. Beginning around 600, groups in the Midwest built a number of so-called effigy mounds. These are earthen mounds formed in the image of animals like wolves, bears, snakes, and birds. Like many earlier mounds, the effigy mounds were also burial sites, but they usually contained only a few individuals. In comparison to the earlier Hopewell mounds, they were generally constructed with less labor and in a shorter amount of time, possibly by just a few dozen people working for a few days.

Early Cultures of the American Southwest

Far to the west of the mound-building cultures, a very different cultural tradition formed in the arid landscape of the Southwest. Here, people began experimenting with maize varieties as early as the third millennium BCE. By that time, some groups in the region had begun planting maize in small plots along riverbanks and using it to supplement their hunter-gatherer existence. Exactly how maize reached the American Southwest from southern Mexico is not clear, but there must have been some sporadic contact between cultivators in the south and hunter-gatherer adopters farther north. However, for many centuries after maize was introduced into the Southwest, its cultivation remained limited to one small part of a lifestyle firmly rooted in hunting and gathering. It is possible that the arid conditions of the region necessitated greater mobility and thus made the advantages of maize cultivation less obvious.

Some of the earliest evidence of maize cultivation in the area dates from about 2250 BCE and comes from what is now northwestern New Mexico. By around 1200 BCE, groups in the Las Capas area, by the Santa Cruz River near modern Tucson, Arizona, had developed a sophisticated irrigation system for cultivating maize. The people at Las Capas built a network of canals that directed water from the river into their fields. Around this agricultural base, they constructed oval-shaped homes and pits for roasting the maize they grew. Over time, the homes became more elaborate and were organized in rings around courtyards. But even here the cultivation of maize remained only a small part of a largely hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which included gathering goosefoot and piñons as well as hunting rabbits, bison, and deer.

By around 500 BCE, the cultivation of beans was adding to the growing diversity of foods consumed in the Southwest. This change helped to encourage more dependence on maize since, nutritionally speaking, these two foods are complementary—beans are a

source of lysine, a necessary amino acid that maize lacks. Growing beans with maize also increases the nitrogen in the soil and preserves its fertility for longer periods. However, even after the introduction of beans, settled and solidly agricultural communities in the Southwest did not begin to emerge until around 200 CE. Once they did, the region entered a transformational period that resulted in the development of the Anasazi or Ancestral Pueblo societies.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: The Ancient Greek World and Roman Empire

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3.1: Early Mediterranean Peoples

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the regional peoples of the Mediterranean before 500 BCE
- Discuss the technological achievements of the early Mediterranean peoples
- Describe the interconnectedness of the early Mediterranean peoples

During the Bronze Age (c. 3300–1200 BCE), trade connected the peoples and cultures of Greece and the Aegean islands such as Crete. By the third millennium BCE, the inhabitants of these lands were already producing wine and olive oil, products in high demand in ancient Egypt and the Near East. The Aegean Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1100 BCE) thus shared in the economic prosperity and cultural interaction that linked the eastern Mediterranean with the ancient cultures of western Asia.

The eventual collapse of the Late Bronze Age world coincided with the development of new technology that allowed people to devise iron tools and weapons. During the new Iron Age, the Phoenicians not only preserved Bronze Age cultural traditions but they also developed a revolutionary new communication tool, the alphabet, that vastly expanded literacy. They established trading posts across the Mediterranean as far as Spain, often in search of new sources of iron ore and other metals such as tin. The arrival of the Phoenicians and Greek traders in the western Mediterranean brought them into contact with the Etruscans in the Italian peninsula. Thus, the period from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age witnessed the development of numerous cultures across the Mediterranean.

The Late Bronze Age World

Egypt was the dominant economic and military power of the Late Bronze Age, for the most part a time of economic prosperity and political stability. Other powerful kingdoms included Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, the Hittites of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the Mitanni and Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia, and the Kassites and Elamites in southern Mesopotamia and western Iran (Figure 6.4). While each maintained its own unique culture, their interactions created a shared Late Bronze Age culture.



Figure 6.4 The Bronze Age World. While Egypt was the dominant power in the relatively peaceful Late Bronze Age, many other cultures thrived during this time. (credit: modification of work “Near East and Mediterranean in 2000 BCE” by “Briangotts”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

For instance, they all used a redistributive economic system in which agricultural goods were collected from local farmers as taxes, stored in the palace or temple, and redistributed to urban artisans, merchants, and officials who could not grow food. They all possessed military forces of elite warriors trained to fight from horse-drawn chariots. They interacted using a common set of diplomatic practices: Official correspondence was often written in Akkadian cuneiform, military alliances were sealed by arranged marriages between the royal families of allied states, and vassal states paid tribute to dominant states to avoid military assault.

These civilizations also exchanged prized goods, such as wine and oil from Greece, cedar logs from the Levant (modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria), and copper from the island of Cyprus. Great cultural achievements resulted from their interaction. For example, in the small maritime kingdom of Ugarit (now Syria), scribes modified Egyptian hieroglyphics to suit their local Semitic Canaanite language, creating an ancestor of our alphabet. They used this script to record traditional epic poetry featuring myths of their main deity, the storm god Baal.

Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece

By 2000 BCE, a unique culture had developed on the Aegean island of Crete, reaching the height of its power at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age around 1600 BCE. The later Classical Greeks told the myth of King Minos of Crete, who built a giant maze known as the Labyrinth and imprisoned there a half-man, half-bull called the Minotaur (the “Bull of Minos”). To avenge his own son’s death, Minos forced young men and women from Athens in Greece to enter the Labyrinth and be eaten by the monster. Historians see in the myth a distant memory of the earlier civilization on Crete and use the term Minoan, derived from Minos, to describe it.

The Minoans built spacious palaces on Crete, the largest at Knossos. Since these were usually unfortified, historians believe Crete was generally peaceful and united under a single government with Knossos as the capital. The Minoans also established settlements and trading posts on other Aegean islands such as Thera and along the Anatolian coast. Their palaces were huge complexes that served as economic and administrative centers. To keep records for these centers the Minoans developed their own script, written on clay tablets and known to scholars as Linear A. It has not yet been deciphered.

A common weapon and symbol in these palaces was the *labrys*, or double ax, from which the word “labyrinth” arose. In the courtyards, young men and women participated in bullfights that may be the basis for the myth of the Minotaur. Frescoes on the palace walls depict these fights as well as sea creatures and scenes from nature (Figure 6.5). The Minoan religion revered bulls and a goddess associated with snakes, nature, and fertility. The abundance of figurines of this snake-wielding female deity and other artistic depictions of women may mean that at least some women enjoyed high social status in Minoan society. Religious rituals were practiced in small shrines as well as on mountain tops and in caves and sacred forests.



Figure 6.5 A Leaping Bull. This small Minoan fresco (c. 1600–1450 BCE) shows a leaping bull with one acrobat on its back and two others alongside. It is one of five discovered in the Knossos palace on Crete. (credit: “Toreador Fresco (Bull-Leaping Fresco)” by “Jebulon”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Link to Learning

For a thorough examination of the art and archaeology of the Aegean Bronze Age, visit [Dartmouth University's Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology](#) website.

Sometime around 1500 BCE, the palaces on Crete were destroyed. Knossos was rebuilt, and scribes there began employing a new script scholars call Linear B, apparently derived from Linear A and found to be an early form of Greek. Linear B clay tablets discovered on the Greek mainland led historians to conclude that Greeks from the mainland conquered Crete and rebuilt Knossos.

The Bronze Age culture that produced Linear B is called Mycenaean since the largest Bronze Age city in Greece was at Mycenae. Bronze Age Greeks appear to have migrated from the Balkans into mainland Greece around 2000 BCE and adopted Minoan civilization around the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, in 1600 BCE. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaean Greeks were divided into a number of separate kingdoms. Immense palace complexes like those at Knossos have been found at Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos, and Sparta, sometimes surrounded by monumental fortifications. These locations correspond to the powerful kingdoms described in the later Greek epic poem the *Iliad*, attributed to the poet Homer. This poem tells the story of the Trojan War, in which the Greek kingdoms, led by King Agamemnon of Mycenae, waged war against the city of Troy. Archaeologists have also uncovered the Bronze Age city of Troy in western Turkey, which suggests the *Iliad* was loosely based on oral traditions that preserved the memory of these ancient Bronze Age kingdoms. The Linear B tablets indicate that the ruler of these palaces was known as the *Wanax* or “lord,” the same word used to describe the heroic kings of the *Iliad*.

The Collapse of the Bronze Age World

The last century of the Late Bronze Age, after 1200 BCE, was a period of wars and invasions that witnessed the collapse of many powerful states. The palaces of Mycenaean Greece were destroyed, perhaps following revolts by the lower class and natural disasters like climate change and earthquakes. In the centuries that followed, the population declined drastically, writing and literacy disappeared, and Greece entered a “Dark Age.”

Later ancient Greek historians reported that Greek-speaking tribes known as the Dorians migrated from northwest Greece to the south after the Trojan War. The instability in Greece and the Aegean resulted in much migration by people in search of new homes. For instance, ancient Egyptian inscriptions tell us that the “Sea Peoples” destroyed the Hittite Empire and numerous kingdoms in the Levant to the north of Egypt. One particular group known as the Philistines (Peleset), who attacked Egypt, eventually settled just north of Egypt along the coast of the southern Levant. But there were many others, including the Akawasha, Lukka, Shardana, Tursha, and more who washed across the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age Collapse (Figure 6.6).

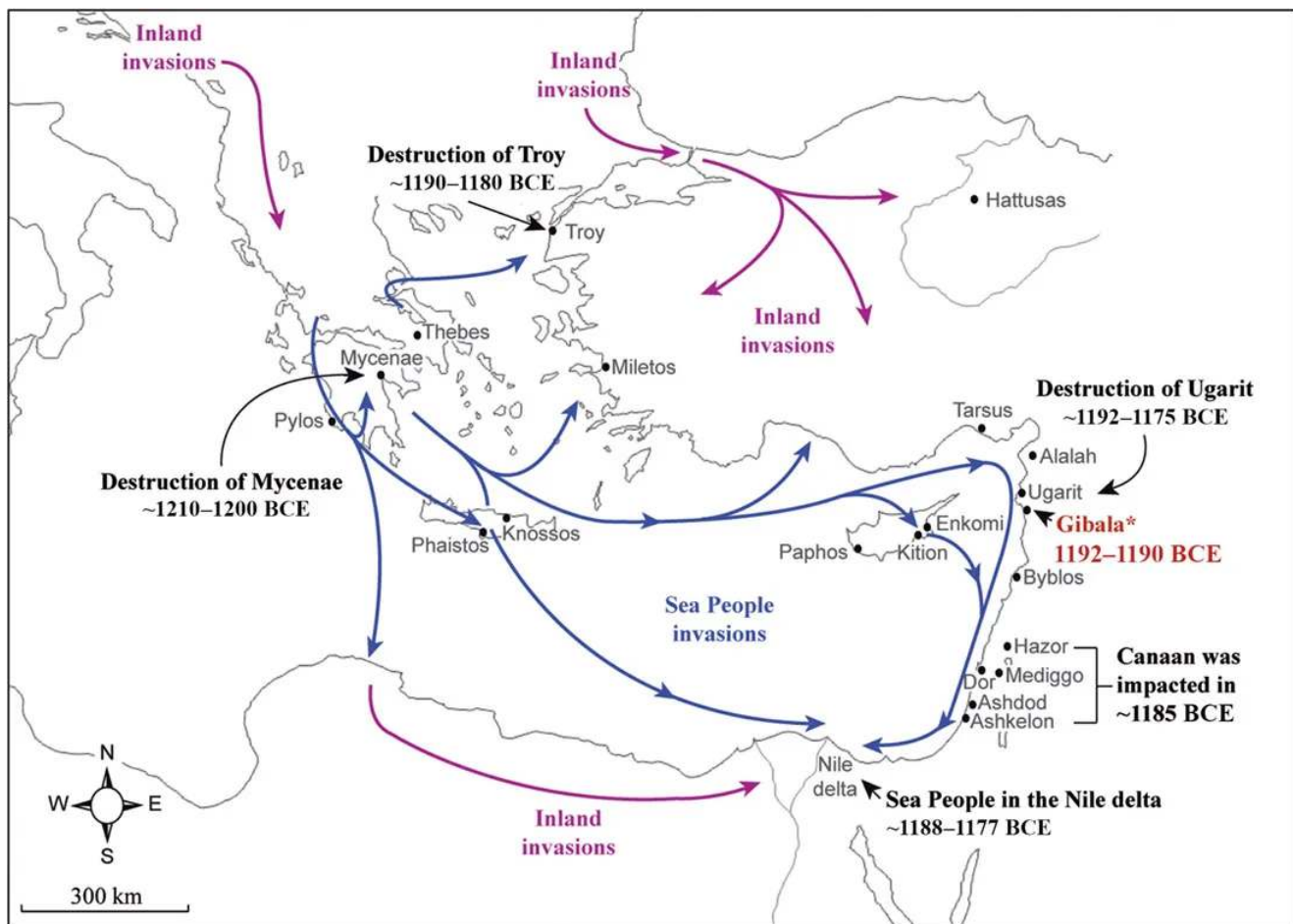


Figure 6.6 The Path of the Sea Peoples. The “Sea Peoples,” as they were called in Egyptian records, came largely from the Aegean region. By studying the remains of pottery and other archaeological traces, scholars have concluded that these groups moved through Greece and Crete and into North Africa, Cyprus, and the Levant (as shown by the blue arrows) at the close of the Late Bronze Age. (credit: modification of work “Map of the Sea People invasions in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age” by David Kaniewski, Elise Van Campo, Karel Van Lerberghe, Tom Boiy, Klaas Vansteenhuyse, Greta Jans, Karin Nys, Harvey Weiss/“The Sea Peoples, from Cuneiform Tablets to Carbon Dating”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Other groups were also on the move. Libyans, who inhabited the North African coastal region west of Egypt, invaded the northern Nile River valley and settled there. The attacks of the Sea Peoples and Libyans contributed to the later collapse of Egypt’s central governments after 1100 BCE, ending the New Kingdom period. Phrygians, who inhabited the Balkans in southeast Europe, migrated into Asia Minor (Turkey). The Aramaeans, nomadic tribes who spoke a Semitic language and inhabited the Arabian Desert, migrated into Syria and Mesopotamia.

These wars and invasions coincided with an important technological innovation, the birth of sophisticated iron-making technology. For thousands of years, bronze had been the metal of choice in the ancient world. But the disruptions caused by the Late Bronze Age Collapse made it difficult for metal workers to access tin, a crucial ingredient in bronze. Without a sufficient supply of tin, artisans experimented for centuries with iron ore. In the process, they developed the techniques of steeling (adding carbon to the iron to make it stronger), quenching (rapidly cooling hot iron with water), and tempering (heat treating) to produce a metal far superior in strength to bronze. By around 900 BCE, the Iron Age had begun in the eastern Mediterranean.

Phoenicians, Greeks, and Etruscans

The Phoenicians were descended from the Bronze Age Canaanites and lived in cities like Sidon and Tyre (in today’s Lebanon), each ruled by a king. They were great sailors, explorers, and traders who established trading posts in Cyprus, North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain. They sailed along the west coast of Africa and to the British Isles in search of new markets and goods such as tin (See Figure 6.7).

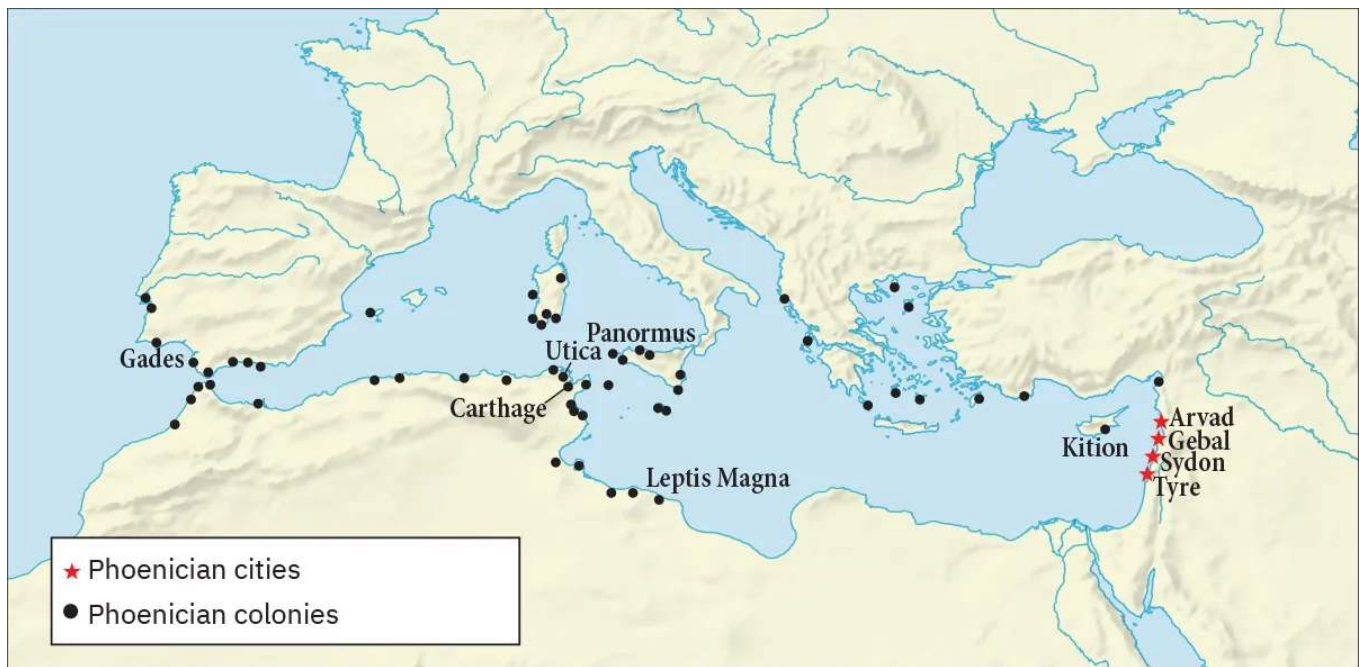


Figure 6.7 Phoenician Cities and Colonies. The Phoenicians were great mariners and explorers. This map shows the many cities and colonies they founded across the Mediterranean Sea. (credit: modification of work “Mediterranean at 218 BC” by “Megistias”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Around 1100 BCE, the Phoenicians also invented the world’s first known alphabet, using symbols that represented consonant sounds. Strung together, these consonants created words in which vowel sounds were interpreted by the order of the consonants. Because the Phoenician alphabet simplified the earlier script of the Canaanites, more people could now become literate, not just a small, specialized group of scribes. The Phoenicians’ commercial success was undoubtedly partly a result of their better, more efficient record-keeping system that a larger population could learn and employ. Other cultures like the Aramaean peoples and the Israelites quickly adapted the new script to their own languages. By the eighth century BCE, the Greeks had also adopted and later adapted the Phoenician alphabet to write their language.

Beginning with the Assyrian Empire’s expansion in the eighth century BCE, the Phoenician kingdoms became subjects of the successive Iron Age empires of western Asia: the Assyrians, the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonian), and the Persians. The Phoenicians continued to flourish, however. The Assyrians valued Phoenician artists, and finely crafted Phoenician wares such as jewelry and furniture became popular among the ruling elites. The Persians relied largely on Phoenician sailors and ships to serve as the naval forces, especially in their campaigns to conquer Greece in the early fifth century BCE. When Phoenician city-states such as Sidon and Tyre became subject to foreign rule, many Phoenicians immigrated to the city of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia), founded by Phoenician merchants around 700 BCE as a stopping place on the long but profitable voyage to Spain. Given this influx of immigrants, Carthage grew large and wealthy, and by the fifth century BCE the southern Italian peninsula was the dominant power in the western Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians were not the only people establishing colonial outposts around the wider Mediterranean world. Beginning in the eighth century, Greeks began founding colonies in North Africa, in coastal Spain and France, on the shores of the Black Sea, and on the Italian peninsula. Many of these colonies were built in resource-rich areas and commonly produced grain, tin, or timber for export back to Greece. Others served more mercantile interests, trading with major and minor powers across the Mediterranean. It was through these colonial ventures that Greeks and Phoenicians came into contact with the Etruscans of the northern Italian peninsula.

The Etruscans were organized into independent city-states such as Veii and Vulci, much like the Greeks were, and each city was ruled by its own king and council of elders. In their art and architecture, the Etruscans followed Greek models (Figure 6.8). They modified the alphabet the Greeks had acquired from the Phoenicians to write their language, which scholars have not yet fully deciphered. By 600 BCE, they had expanded beyond their base in modern Tuscany and colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city. They also founded new colonies in northern and southern Italy. The Etruscan states remained the dominant power in the Italian peninsula until 474 BCE. In that year, at the Battle of Cumae off the coast of southern Italy, the naval forces of the Greek

city-state of Syracuse won a decisive victory over the Etruscan fleet and emerged as the chief power in the region, along with Carthage.



Figure 6.8 Greek Influence in Etruria. This Etruscan antefix (roof tile) was created in the fourth century BCE and found in the Italian city of Cerveteri, northwest of Rome. The almost twenty-inch-tall piece of terracotta art depicts a maenad, a Greek mythological figure associated with the Greek god Dionysus. In its style and symbolism, it reflects the cultural exchange between the Etruscans and the Greeks. (credit: "Terracotta antefix (roof tile) with head of a maenad" by Purchase by subscription, 1896/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Since ancient Rome began as an Etruscan city-state, the Etruscans strongly influenced the development of Roman culture. For example, Roman priests divined the will of the gods by examining a sacrificed animal's entrails, a custom adopted from the Etruscans. The Etruscans honored their dead with elaborate tombs, and the Romans did the same, maintaining that the spirits of their ancestors watched over them. Gladiatorial contests in Rome had origins among the Etruscans, who at funerals forced prisoners of war to fight to the death as human sacrifices to their dead. The *fascēs*, a bundle of rods and an ax that symbolized the authority of Roman magistrates, originally denoted the authority of Etruscan kings. Finally, the Roman alphabet, still used in western and central Europe today, was based on Etruscan modifications to the Greek alphabet.

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3.2: Ancient Greece

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the historical factors that shaped the development of the Greek city-state
- Describe the evolution of the political, economic, and social systems of Athens and Sparta
- Discuss the alliances and hostilities among the Greek city-states during the Classical period
- Identify the major accomplishments of Ancient Greek philosophy, literature, and art

In the centuries following the collapse of the Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms around 1100 BCE, a dynamic new culture evolved in Iron Age Greece and the Aegean region. During this period, the Greek city-states developed innovative consensual governments. Free adult males participated in their own governance and voted to create laws and impose taxes. This system of government contrasted with the earlier monarchies of the ancient Near East, in which rulers claimed to govern their subjects through the will of the gods.

The degree of political participation in the Greek city-states varied from monarchy and oligarchy, or government by a small group of wealthy elites, to democracy, literally “rule by the people,” a broader-based participation that eventually included both rich and poor adult males. These systems influenced Ancient Roman and European political thought through the centuries. The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) witnessed constant warfare among rival city-states, yet it was marked by the creation of enduring works of literature and art that inspired centuries of European artists and writers. Greek philosophers also subjected the human condition and the natural world to rational analysis, rejecting traditional beliefs and sacred myths.

Archaic Greece

The Greek Dark Ages (1100–800 BCE) persisted after the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization but began to recede around 800 BCE. From this point and for the next few centuries, Greece experienced a revival in which a unique and vibrant culture emerged and evolved into what we recognize today as Classical Greek civilization. This era, from 800 to 500 BCE, is called Archaic Greece after *arche*, Greek for “beginning.”

The Greek renaissance was marked by rapid population growth and the organization of valleys and islands into independent city-states, each known as a polis (Greek for city-state). Towns arose around a hill fortress or *acropolis* to which inhabitants could flee in times of danger. Each polis had its own government and religious cults, and each built monumental temples for the gods, such as the temple of Hera, wife of Zeus and protector of marriage and the home, at the city-state of Argos. Though politically disunited, the Greeks, who began to refer to themselves as Hellenes after the mythical king Hellen, did share a common language and religion. The most famous of their sacred sites were Delphi, near Mount Parnassus in central Greece and seat of the oracle of Apollo, the god of prophecy, and Olympia in southern Greece, sacred to Zeus, who ruled the pantheon of gods at Mount Olympus (Figure 6.9). Beginning in 776 BCE, according to Aristotle, Greeks traveled to Olympia every four years to compete in athletic contests in Zeus’s honor, the origin of the Olympic Games.

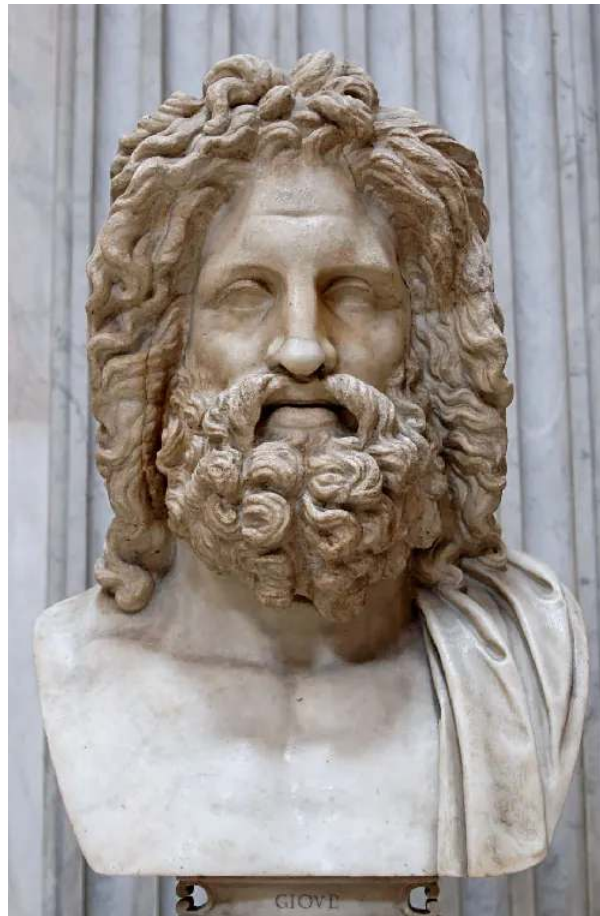


Figure 6.9 Zeus. This larger-than-life marble bust of the Greek god Zeus is believed to be a Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE Greek original. It was found in Otricoli, Italy, in 1775. (credit: “So-called “Zeus of Otricoli”. Marble, Roman copy after a Greek original from the 4th century” by “Jastrow”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Past Meets the Present

The Olympic Games

Postponed a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Games of the XXXII Olympiad in Japan included more than three hundred events in thirty-three sports, including new entries like skateboarding, rock climbing, and surfing. Modern games

have been held since 1896, when the new International Olympic Committee started the tradition, but as the name suggests, the inspiration came from Ancient Greece.

Athletic events in Ancient Greece were important displays of strength and endurance. There were contests at the sanctuaries at Delphi and Nemea (near Argos), but none was as renowned as the Olympic Games, held at the sanctuary in Olympia that was dedicated to Zeus. Contestants came from all over the Greek world, including Sicily and southern Italy.

Unlike the skateboarding and surfing of modern games, the ancient games focused on skills necessary for war: running, jumping, throwing, and wrestling. Over time, sports that included horses, like chariot racing, were also incorporated. Such events were referenced in Homer's *Iliad*, when the hero Achilles held athletic contests to honor his fallen comrade Patroclus and awarded prizes or *athla* (from which the word “athlete” is derived). The centerpiece of the ancient games was the two-hundred-yard sprint, or *stadion*, from which comes the modern word “stadium” (Figure 6.10).



Figure 6.10 The Original Olympic Track. These are the ruins of the original Olympic *stadion* at Olympia. The track was made of hard-packed clay for a race to be won by the fastest athlete in the Greek world. (credit: “Olympic Race Track in modern Olympia, Greece” by “Dwaipayanc”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Unlike the modern games, where attendees pay great sums to watch athletes compete, admission to the ancient games was free—for men. Women were forbidden from watching and, if they dared to attend, could pay with their lives. Competitors were likely locals with proven abilities, though over time professional athletes came to dominate the sport. They could earn a good living from prizes and other rewards gained through their talent and celebrity, and their statues adorned the sanctuary at Olympia. The poet Pindar in the early fifth century BCE was renowned for composing songs to honor them when they returned home as victors. The Olympic Games continued to be celebrated until 393 CE, when they were halted during the reign of the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius.

- Why might the organizers of the modern Olympic Games have named their contest after the ancient Greek version?

- How are the ancient games similar to the modern Olympic Games? How are they different?

The start of the Archaic period also witnessed the reemergence of specialization in Greek society. Greek artists became more sophisticated and skilled in their work. They often copied artistic styles from Egypt and Phoenicia, where Greek merchants were engaging in long-distance trade. At the site of Al-Mina, along the Mediterranean coast in Syria where historians believe the Phoenician alphabet was first transmitted to the Greeks, Greek and Phoenician merchants exchanged goods. Far to the west, on the island of Ischia off the west coast of Italy, Greeks were competing with Phoenician merchants for trade with local peoples, whose iron ore was in strong demand. Thanks to their contact and trade with the Phoenicians, Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet to their own language, making an important innovation by adding vowels (a, e, i, o, u). The eighth century BCE thus witnessed the return of literacy and the end of the Aegean world's relative isolation after the interlude of the Greek Dark Ages.

The eighth century BCE was also the period in which the epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed, traditionally attributed to the blind poet Homer. While historians debate whether Homer was a historical or a legendary figure, they agree the epics originated in the songs of oral poets in the Greek Dark Ages. In the eighth century BCE, using the Greek alphabet, scribes wrote these stories down for the first time.

As the population expanded during the Archaic period, a shortage of farmland brought dramatic changes. Many Greeks in search of land to farm left their homes and founded colonies along the shores of the Black Sea and the northern Aegean, in North Africa at Cyrene in Libya, and in southern Gaul (modern France) at Massalia (Marseille). The largest number were on the island of Sicily and in southern Italy, the region the Greeks referred to as Magna Graecia or "Greater Greece." When Greeks established a colony, it became an independent polis with its own laws. The free adult males of the community divided the colony's land into equal lots. Thus, a new idea developed in the colonies that citizenship in a community was associated with equality and participation in the governing of the state.

In the society of Archaic Greece, the elite landowners, or *aristoi*, traditionally controlled the government and the priesthoods in the city-states. But thanks to the new ideas from the colonies, the common people, or *kakoi*, began demanding land and a voice in the governing of the polis. They were able to gain leverage in these negotiations because city-states needed troops in their wars for control of farmland. The nobility relied on the wealthier commoners, who could afford to equip themselves with iron weapons and armor. In some city-states, the *aristoi* and the *kakoi* were not able to resolve their differences peaceably. In such cases, a man who had strong popular support in the city would seize power and rule over the city. The Greeks referred to such populist leaders as tyrants.

In the sixth century BCE, the difficulties caused by the land shortage were relieved by the invention of coinage. A century before, adopting a practice of the kings of Lydia in western Asia Minor (Turkey), Athens stamped silver pieces with the image of an owl, a symbol of wisdom often associated with the goddess Athena (See Figure 6.11). Instead of weighing precious metals to use as currency or arguing over the value of bartered goods to trade, merchants could use coins as a simple medium of exchange. The *agora*, or place of assembly in each city-state, thus became a marketplace to buy and sell goods. In the sixth century BCE, this rise of a market economy stimulated economic growth as farmers, artisans, and merchants discovered stronger incentives to produce and procure more goods for profit. For example, farmers learned how to produce more food with the land they already possessed rather than always seeking more land. The economic growth of this period is reflected in the many new temples the Greek city-states constructed then.



Figure 6.11 Athenian Money. This Athenian silver coin from the fifth century BCE depicts Athena on one side and an owl, Athena's symbol, on the other. (credit: "Athens owl coin" by "yuichi"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Sparta and Athens

In the Archaic period, Athens and Sparta emerged as two of the most important of the many Greek city-states. Not only did their governments and cultures dominate the Greek world in the subsequent Classical period; they also fired the imaginations of Western cultures for centuries to come. Athens was the birthplace of democracy, whereas Sparta was an oligarchy headed by two kings.

The Rise and Organization of Sparta

Sparta in the eighth century BCE was a collection of five villages in Laconia, a mountain valley in the Peloponnese in southern Greece. Due to the shortage of farmland, the citizens (adult males) of these villages, the *Spartiates*, all served in the military and waged war on neighboring towns, forcing them to pay tribute. The Spartiates also appropriated farmland for themselves and enslaved the inhabitants of these lands, most famously the Messenians, who became known as the *helots*. Just as Greek colonists at this time divided land among themselves into equal lots, the Spartiates likewise divided the conquered land equally and assigned to each landowner a certain number of helot families to work it. Helots, unlike enslaved people in other parts of Greece, could not be bought or sold but remained on the land as forced laborers from generation to generation. In the seventh century BCE, Sparta conquered the land of Messene to its west and divided its farmland equally among the Spartiates.

By the late sixth century BCE, the wealth from the rich agricultural land that Sparta then controlled had made it the most powerful state in the Peloponnese. Sparta also organized the city-states of this region and parts beyond into a system of alliances that

historians refer to as the Peloponnesian League. Its members still had self-government and paid no tribute to Sparta, but all were expected to have the same friends and enemies as Sparta, which maintained its dominance in the league. Sparta also used its army to overthrow tyrants in the Peloponnesian city-states and restore political power to the *aristoi*.

The Spartans were proud of their unique system of government, or constitution, which was a set of laws and traditional political practices rather than a single document. It was said to have been created by a great lawgiver named Lycurgus around 800 BCE, but modern historians view its development as an evolutionary process during the Archaic period rather than the work of a single person.

Sparta had two hereditary kings drawn from rival royal families. Their powers were very limited, though both sat as permanent members of the Council of Elders and were priests in the state religion. On occasion, the Spartan kings also led armies into battle. The Assembly of Spartiates passed all laws and approved all treaties with the advice of the Council of Elders. This Assembly also elected five judges every year who administered the affairs of state, as well as the members of the Council of Elders.

The unique element of Spartan culture was the *agoge*, its educational system. At the age of seven, boys were separated from their families and raised by the state. To teach them to live by their wits and courage, they were fed very little so they had to learn how to steal food to survive. At the age of twelve they began an even more severe regimen. They were not allowed clothes except a cloak in the wintertime, and they bathed just once a year (Figure 6.12). They also underwent ritual beatings intended to make them physically strong and hardened warriors. At the age of eighteen, young men began two years of intense military training. At the age of twenty, a young Spartan man's education was complete.



Figure 6.12 Spartan Youth. The design of this nineteenth-century painting by French impressionist Edgar Degas was based on a passage from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* and depicts Spartan girls encouraging and challenging Spartan boys. Here the boys prepare to compete in running and wrestling exercises. (credit: "Young Spartans exercising" by National Gallery, 1924; purchased from Courtauld Fund/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Women of the Spartiate class, before marrying in their mid-teens, also practiced a strict physical regimen, since they were expected to be as strong as their male relatives and husbands and even participate in defending the homeland. Spartan women enjoyed a reputation for independence, since they managed the farms while men were constantly training for or at war and often ran their family estates alone due to the early deaths of their soldier husbands. The state organized unmarried women into teams known as *chorai* (from which the term *chorus* is derived) that danced and sang at religious festivals.

When a Spartiate man reached the age of thirty, he could marry, vote in the Assembly, and serve as a judge. Each Spartiate remained in the army reserve until the age of sixty, when he could finally retire from military service and became eligible for

election to the Council of Elders. Spartan citizens were proud to devote their time to the service of the state in the military and government; they did not have to work the land or learn a trade since this work was done for them by commoners and helot subjects.

The Rise and Organization of Athens

Athens, like Sparta, developed its own system of government in the Archaic period. Uniquely large among Greek city-states, Athens had long enclosed all the land of Attica, which included several mountain valleys. It was able to eventually develop into a militarily powerful democratic state in which all adult male citizens could participate in government, though “citizenship” was a restricted concept, and because only males could participate, it was by nature a limited democracy.

The roots of Athenian democracy are long and deep, however, and its democratic institutions evolved over centuries before reaching their fullest expression in the fifth century BCE. It was likely the growing prosperity of Athenians in the eighth century that had set Athens on this path. As more families became prosperous, they demanded greater say in the functioning of the city-state. By the seventh century BCE, Athens had an assembly allowing citizens (free adult males) to gather and discuss the affairs of the state. However, as the rising prosperity of Athenians stalled and economic hardship loomed by the end of the century, the durability of the fledgling democracy seemed in doubt. Attempts to solve the economic problems by adjusting the legal code, most notably by the legislator Draco (from whose name we get the modern term “draconian”), had little effect, though codifying the law in written form brought more clarity to the legal system.

With the once-thriving middle class slipping into bankruptcy and sometimes slavery, civil war seemed inevitable. Disaster was avoided only with the appointment of Solon in 594 BCE to restore order. Solon came from a wealthy elite family, but he made it known that he would draft laws to benefit all Athenians, rich and poor. A poet, he used his songs to convey his ideas for these new laws (Figure 6.13).

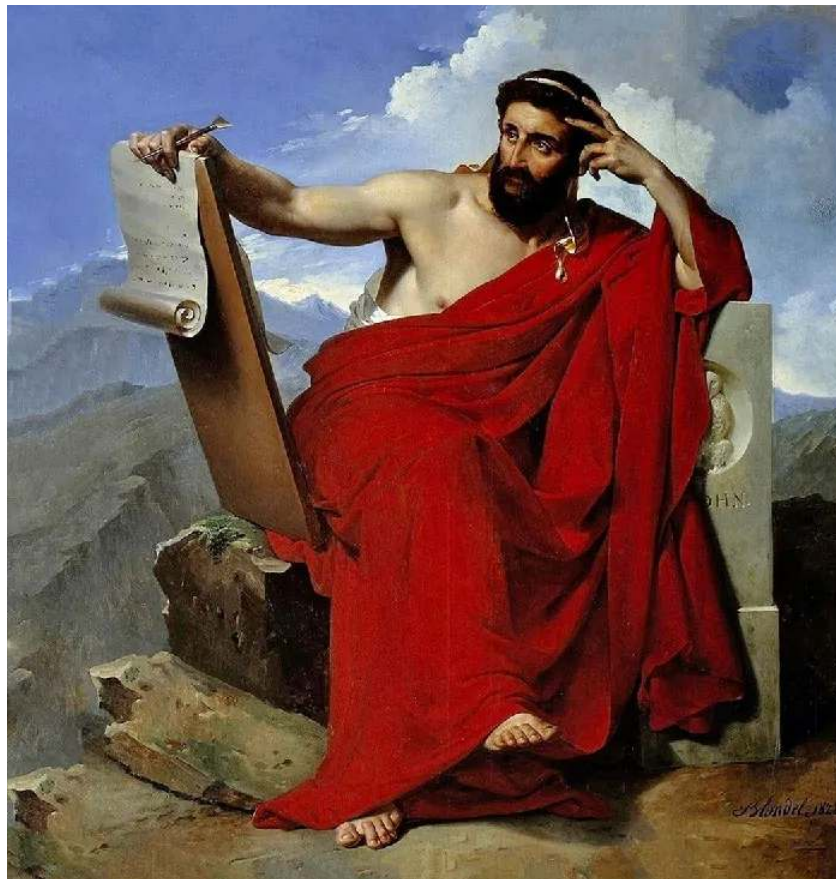


Figure 6.13 Solon. This idealized portrait in oils represents Solon, poet and legislator of Athens. It was made in the early nineteenth century by Merry-Joseph Blondel, a French painter of the Neoclassical school. (credit: “Portrait of Solon Legislator and Poet of Athenes” by Musee de Picardie/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

One of Solon's first measures was to declare that all debts Athenians owed one another were forgiven. Solon also made it law that no Athenian could be sold into slavery for failure to repay a loan. These decrees did much to provide relief to farmers struggling with debt who could now return to work the land. Under Solon's new laws, each of Athens's four traditional tribes chose one hundred of its members by lot, including commoners, to sit in the new Council of Four Hundred and run the government. There were still magistrates, but now Solon created the jury courts. All Athenians could appeal the ruling of a magistrate in court and have their cases heard by a jury of fellow citizens. Solon also set up a hierarchal system in which citizens were eligible for positions in government based on wealth instead of hereditary privilege. Wealth was measured by the amount of grain and olive oil a citizen's land could produce. Only the wealthiest could serve as a magistrate, sit on the Council, and attend the Assembly and jury courts. Citizens with less wealth could participate in all these activities but could not serve as magistrates. The poorest could only attend the Assembly and the jury courts.

Solon's reforms were not enough to end civil unrest, however. By 545 BCE, a relative of his named Pisistratus had seized power by force with his own private army and ruled as a tyrant with broad popular support. Pisistratus was reportedly a benevolent despot and very popular. He kept Solon's reforms largely in place, and Athenians became accustomed to serving in Solon's Council and in jury courts. They were actively engaged in self-government, thus setting the stage for the establishment of democracy. Pisistratus also encouraged the celebration of religious festivals and cults that united the people of Attica through a common religion. To further help the farmers Solon brought back, Pisistratus redistributed land so they could once again make a living.

After Pisistratus's death, his sons tried to carry on as tyrants, but they lacked their father's popularity. Around 509 BCE, an Athenian aristocrat named Cleisthenes persuaded the Spartans to intervene in Athens and overthrow these tyrants. The Spartans, however, set up a government of elites in Athens that did not include Cleisthenes. Consequently, he appealed to the common people living in the villages, or *demes*, to reject this pro-Spartan regime and establish a "*democracy*." His appeal was successful, and Cleisthenes implemented reforms to Solon's system of government. He replaced the Council of Four Hundred with one of five hundred and reorganized the Athenians into ten new tribes, including in each one villages from different parts of Attica. Every year, each tribe chose fifty members by lot to sit in the new Council. This reform served to unite the Athenians, since each tribe consisted of people from different parts of Attica who now had to work together politically. Each tribe's delegation of fifty also served as presidents for part of the year and ran the day-to-day operation of the government.

By the end of the Archaic period, Athens had developed a functioning direct democracy, which differs from modern republics in which citizens vote for representatives who sit in the legislature. All citizens could sit in the Athenian Assembly, which then was required to meet at least ten times a year. All laws had to be approved by the Assembly. Only the Assembly could declare war and approve treaties. Athens had a citizen body of thirty to forty thousand adult males in the Classical period, but only six thousand needed to convene for meetings of the Assembly. Citizens could also be chosen by lot to sit in the Council. Since they were permitted to serve for just two one-year terms over a lifetime, many Athenians had the opportunity to participate in the executive branch of government. All citizens also served on juries, which not only determined the guilt or innocence of the accused but also interpreted the way the law was applied. Women, enslaved people, and foreign residents could not participate. However, women of the citizen class were prominent in the public religious life of the city, serving as priestesses and in ceremonial roles in religious festivals.

Classical Greece

The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) was an era of great cultural achievement in which enduring art, literature, and schools of philosophy were created. It began with the Greek city-states uniting temporarily to face an invasion by the mighty Persian Empire, but it ended with them locked in recurring conflicts and ultimately losing their independence, first to Persia and later to Macedon.

The Persian Wars

The Persian Wars (492–449 BCE) were a struggle between the Greek city-states and the expanding Persian Empire. In the mid-sixth century BCE, during the reign of Cyrus the Great, Persian armies subdued the Greek city-states of Ionia, located across the Aegean from Greece in western Asia Minor (Turkey) (Figure 6.14). To govern the cities, the Persians installed tyrants recruited from the local Greek population. The resident Greeks were unhappy with the tyrants' rule, and in 499 BCE they rose in the Ionian Rebellion, joined by Athens and the Greek cities on the island of Cyprus. But by 494 BCE Persian forces had crushed the rebellions in both Ionia and Cyprus. For intervening in Persian affairs, the Persian king Darius decided that Athens must be punished.

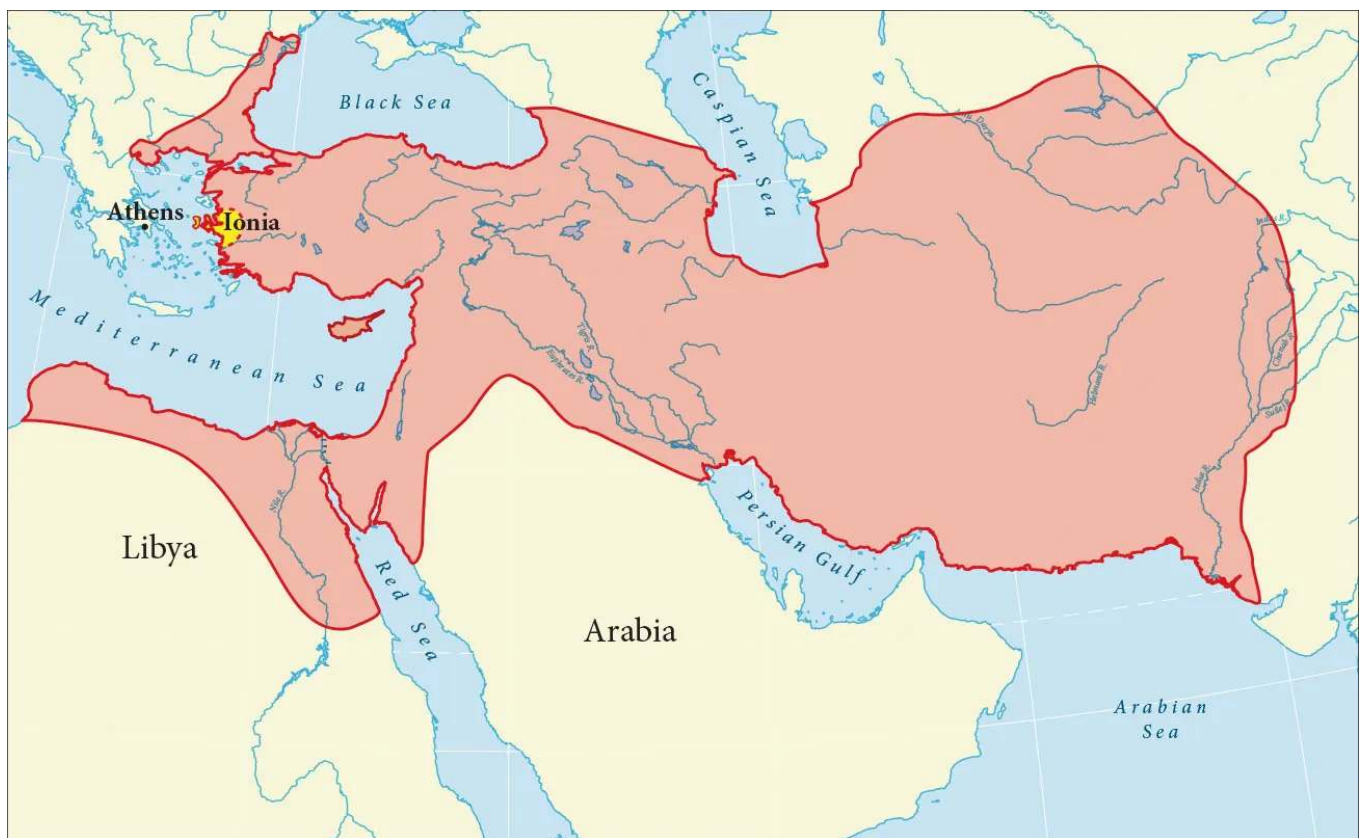


Figure 6.14 Persia and the Greeks in 499 BCE. The Greek world was on the edge of the massive Persian Empire at Persia's height around 500 BCE. Persian rulers likely thought little of the Greeks, but that changed in 499 BCE when Athens intervened in the rebellion in Ionia, a region located just across the Aegean Sea from Athens. (credit: modification of work "Persian Empire, 490 BC, showing route of Cyrus the Younger, Xenophon and the 10.000" by The Department of History - United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 490 BCE, Darius assembled a large fleet and army to cross the Aegean from Asia Minor, planning to subdue Athens and install one of Pisistratus's sons as tyrant there. These Persian forces landed at Marathon on the west coast of Attica. They vastly outnumbered the Athenians but were drafted subjects with little motivation to fight and die. The Athenian soldiers, in contrast, were highly motivated to defend their democracy. The Persians could not withstand the Athenians' spirited charge in the Battle of Marathon and were forced back onto their ships. Leaving the battle, the Persians then sailed around Attica to Athens. The soldiers at Marathon raced by land across the peninsula to guard the city. Seeing the city defended, the Persians returned to Asia Minor in defeat.

In 480 BCE, Xerxes, the son and successor of Darius, launched his own invasion of Greece intended to avenge this defeat and subdue all the Greek city-states. He assembled an even larger fleet as well as an army that would invade by land from the north. At this time of crisis, most of the Greek city-states decided to unite as allies and formed what is commonly called the Hellenic League. Sparta commanded the armies and Athens the fleet. A small band of the larger land forces, mostly Spartans, decided to make a stand at Thermopylae, a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea in northeastern Greece. Their goal was not to defeat the invading Persian army, which vastly outnumbered them, but to delay them so the rest of the forces could organize a defense. For days the small Spartan force, led by their king Leonidas, successfully drove back a vastly superior Persian army, until a Greek traitor informed the Persians of another mountain pass that enabled them to circle around and surround the Spartans. The Spartan force fought to the death, inspiring the Greeks to continue the fight and hold the Hellenic League together.

After the Battle of Thermopylae, the Persian forces advanced against Athens. The Athenians abandoned their city and withdrew to the nearby island of Salamis, where they put their faith in their fleet to protect them. At the naval Battle of Salamis, the allied Greek fleet led by Athens destroyed the Persian ships. Xerxes then decided to withdraw much of his force from Greece, since he no longer had a fleet to keep it supplied.

In 479 BCE, the reduced Persian force had retreated from Athens to the plains of Boeotia, just north of Attica. The Greek allied forces under the command of Sparta advanced into Boeotia and met the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea. The Persian forces, mostly unwilling draftees, were no match for the Spartan troops, and the battle ended in the death or capture of most of the Persian army.

The Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian War

After the Persian Wars, the Athenians took the lead in continuing the fight against Persia and liberating all Greek city-states. In 477 BCE, they organized an alliance of Greek city-states known today as the Delian League, headquartered on the Aegean island of Delos. Members could provide ships and troops for the league or simply pay Athens to equip the fleet, which most chose to do. Over the next several decades, allied forces of the Delian League liberated the Greek city-states of Ionia from Persian rule and supported rebellions against Persia in Cyprus and Egypt. Around 449 BCE, Athens and Persia reached a peace settlement in which the Persians recognized the independence of Ionia and the Athenians agreed to stop aiding rebels in the Persian Empire.

Over the course of this war, the money from the Delian League enriched many lower-class Athenians, who found employment as rowers in the fleet. Athens even began paying jurors in jury courts and people who attended meetings of the Assembly. Over time it became clear to the other Greeks that the Delian League was no longer an alliance but an empire in which the subject city-states paid a steady flow of tribute. In 465 BCE, the city-state of Thasos withdrew from the league but was compelled by Athenian forces to rejoin. Around 437 BCE, the Athenians began using tribute to rebuild the temples on the Acropolis that the Persians had destroyed. Including the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena Parthenos, these were some of the most beautiful temples ever built and the pride of Athens, but to the subject city-states they came to symbolize Athenians' despotism and arrogance (See Figure 6.15).



Figure 6.15 The Parthenon. The large and sumptuous Parthenon, seen here as it is today, was built on the Athenian Acropolis in the fifth century BCE in honor of Athena. Following the temple's destruction in the Persian War, Athens set out to rebuild it using tribute money, which angered some of the other Greek city-states. (credit: "The Parthenon Athens" by Steve Swayne/Flickr, Public Domain)

The wealth and power of Athens greatly concerned the Spartans, who saw themselves as the greatest and noblest of the Greeks. The rivalry between the two city-states eventually led them into open conflict. In 433 BCE, the Athenians assisted the city-state of Corcyra in its war against Corinth. Corinth was a member of the Peloponnesian League and requested that Sparta, the leader of this league, take action against Athenian aggression. Thus, in 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War began with the invasion of Attica by Sparta and its allies (See Figure 6.16).

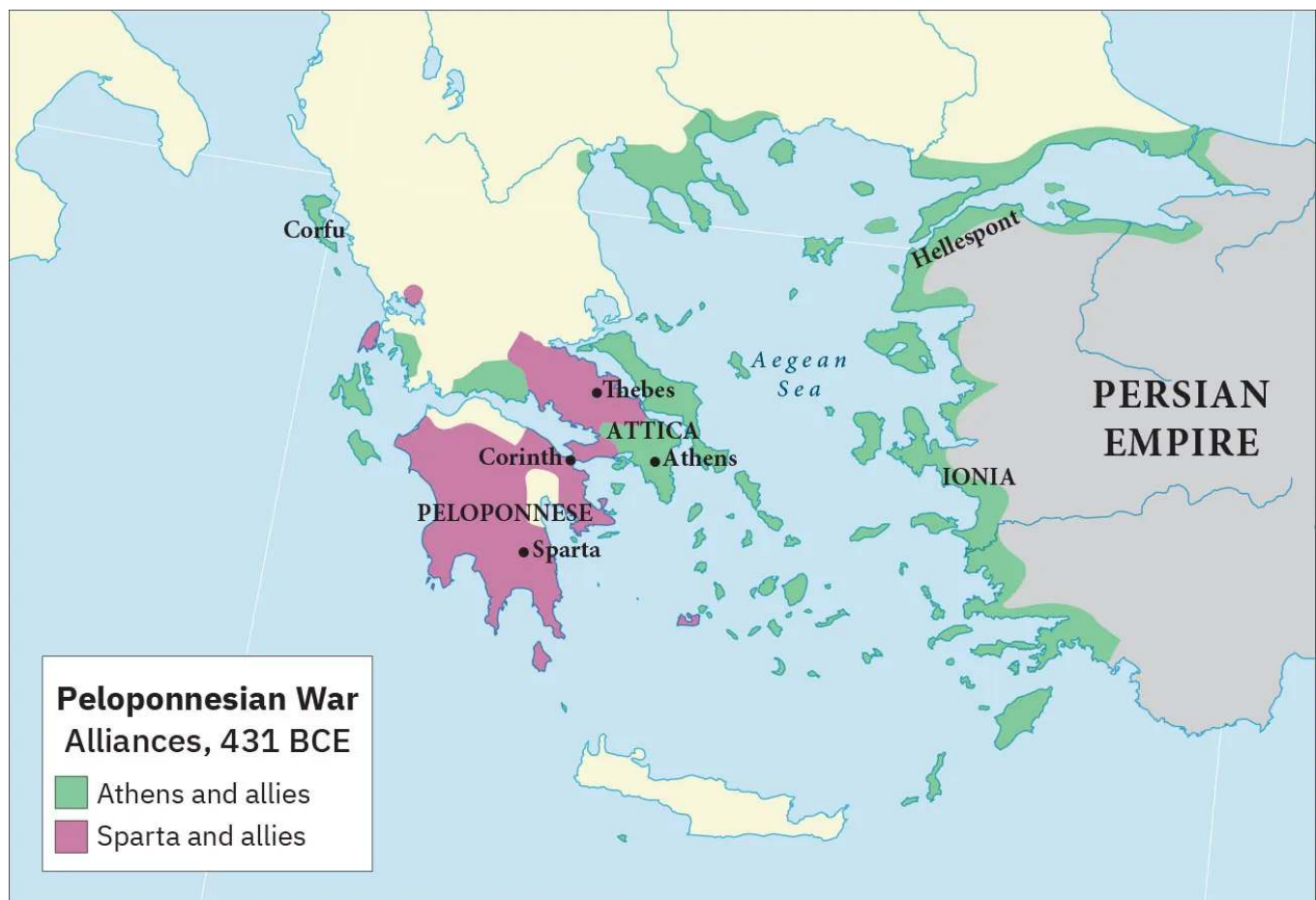


Figure 6.16 The Peloponnesian War. Athens and its allies controlled the coasts and islands of the Aegean, making it a powerful naval force to contend with. Sparta and its allies were largely land based, though they eventually were able to outmaneuver the Athenians at sea in some important battles. (credit: modification of work “The Alliances of the Peloponnesian War” by U.S. Army Cartographer/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The political leader Pericles persuaded his fellow Athenians to withdraw from the countryside of Attica and move within the walls of Athens, reasoning that the navy would provide them food and supplies and the wall would keep them safe until Sparta tired of war and sought peace. Pericles’s assessment proved correct. In 421 BCE, after ten years of war, the Spartans and Athenians agreed to the Peace of Nicias, which kept the Athenian empire intact. The cost of the war for Athens was high, however. Due to the crowding of people within its walls, a plague had erupted in the city in 426 BCE and killed many, including Pericles.

Link to Learning

We know of the 426 BCE plague in Athens from the writings of Thucydides, the ancient chronicler and historian of the Peloponnesian War. But what was the mysterious illness? And how did it affect Athenian society and politics? Take a look at [this article about the plague in Athens from The National Geographic](#) for some modern answers.

Several years later, arguing that the empire could thrive only by expanding, an ambitious young Athenian politician named Alcibiades (a kinsman of Pericles) inspired a massive invasion of Sicily targeting Syracuse, the island’s largest city-state. Just as the campaign began in 415 BCE, Alcibiades’s political enemies in Athens accused him of impiety and treason, and he fled to Sparta to avoid a trial. Without his leadership, the expedition against Syracuse floundered, and in 413 BCE the entire Athenian force was destroyed. In exile, Alcibiades convinced the Spartans to invade Attica again, now that Athens had been weakened by the disaster in Syracuse. In the years that followed, the Spartans realized they needed a large fleet to defeat Athens, and they secured funds for it from Persia on the condition that Sparta restore the Greek cities in Ionia to Persian rule. In 405 BCE, the new Spartan fleet destroyed the Athenian navy at the Battle of Aegospotami in the Hellespont. The Athenians, under siege, could not secure

food or supplies without ships, and in 404 BCE the city surrendered to Sparta. The Peloponnesian War ended with the fall of the city and the collapse of the Athenian empire.

The conclusion of the Peloponnesian War initially left Sparta dominant in Greece. Immediately following the war, Sparta established oligarchies of local aristocrats in the city-states that had been democracies under the Delian League. And it set up the Era of the Thirty Tyrants, a brief rule of oligarchs in Athens. With regard to Persia, Sparta reneged on its promise to restore the Greek city-states in Ionia to Persian control. Persia responded by funding Greek resistance to Sparta, which eventually compelled Sparta to accept Persia's terms in exchange for Persian support. This meant turning over the Ionian city-states as it had previously promised.

Now with Persian backing, the Spartans continued to interfere in the affairs of other Greek city-states. This angered city-states like Thebes and Athens. In 371 BCE, the Thebans defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Leuctra in Boeotia. The next year they invaded the Peloponnese and liberated Messene from Spartan rule, depriving the Spartans of most of their helot labor there. Without the helots, the Spartans could not support their military system as before, and their Peloponnesian League collapsed. Alarmed by the sudden growth of Thebes's power, Athens and Sparta again joined forces and, in 362 BCE, fought the Thebans at the Battle of Mantinea. The battle was inconclusive, but Thebes's dominance soon faded. By 350 BCE, the Greek city-states were exhausted economically and politically after decades of constant warfare.

The Classical "Golden Age"

Many historians view the Greek Classical period and the cultural achievements in Athens in particular as a "Golden Age" of art, literature, and philosophy. Some scholars argue that this period saw the birth of science and philosophy because for the first time people critically examined the natural world and subjected religious beliefs to reason. (Other modern historians argue that this position discounts the accomplishments in medicine and mathematics of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.) For example, around 480 BCE, Empedocles speculated that the universe was not created by gods but instead was the result of the four material "elements"—air, water, fire, earth—being subjected to the forces of attraction and repulsion. Another philosopher and scientist of the era, Democritus, maintained that the universe consisted of tiny particles he called "atoms" that came together randomly in a vortex to form the universe.

Philosophers questioned not only the traditional views of the gods but also traditional values. Some of this questioning came from the sophists ("wise ones") of Athens, those with a reputation for learning, wisdom, and skillful deployment of rhetoric. Sophists emerged as an important presence in the democratic world of Athens beginning in the mid-fourth century BCE. They claimed to be able to teach anyone rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, for a fee, as a means to achieve success as a lawyer or a politician. While many ambitious men sought the services of sophists, others worried that speakers thus trained could lead the people to act against their own self-interest.

Many thought Socrates was one of the sophists. A stonecutter by trade, Socrates publicly questioned sophists and politicians about good and evil, right and wrong. He wanted to base values on reason instead of on unchallenged traditional beliefs. His questioning often embarrassed powerful people in Athens and made enemies, while his disciples included the politician Alcibiades and even some who had opposed Athenian democracy. In 399 BCE, an Athenian jury court found Socrates guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth, and he was sentenced to death (Figure 6.17).



Figure 6.17 The Death of Socrates. Socrates (center with upraised arm) was forced to drink hemlock, a poison. His last moments were imagined to great dramatic effect in this large oil painting of 1787 by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. (credit: "The Death of Socrates" by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Socrates left behind no writings of his own, but some of his disciples wrote about him. One of these was Plato, who wrote dialogues from 399 BCE to his death in 347 BCE that featured Socrates in conversation with others. Through these dialogues, Plato constructed a philosophical system that included the study of nature (physics), of the human mind (psychology and epistemology, the theory of knowledge), and ethics. He maintained that the material world we perceive is an illusion, a mere shadow of the real world of ideas and forms that underlie the universe. According to Plato, the true philosopher uses reason to comprehend these ideas and forms.

Plato established a school at the Academy, which was a gymnasium or public park near Athens where people went to relax and exercise. One of his most famous pupils was Aristotle, who came to disagree with his teacher and believed that ideas and forms could not exist independently of the material universe. In 334 BCE, Aristotle founded his own school at a different gymnasium in Athens, the Lyceum, where his students focused on the reasoned study of the natural world. Modern historians view Plato and Aristotle as the founders of Western (European) philosophy because of the powerful influence of their ideas through the centuries.

Athens in the Golden Age was also the birthplace of theater. Playwrights of the fifth century BCE such as Sophocles and Euripides composed tragedies that featured music and dance, like operas and musicals today (Figure 6.18). The plots were based on traditional myths about gods and heroes, but through their characters the playwrights pondered philosophical questions of the day that have remained influential over time. In Sophocles's *Antigone*, for example, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, must decide whether to obey the laws or follow her religious beliefs.



Figure 6.18 Dionysus. This terracotta representation of a theatrical mask a Greek actor might have worn dates from the first or second century BCE and portrays Dionysus, Zeus's son and the god of wine. (credit: "Terracotta figurine of a theatrical mask representing Dionysos" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

For an example of Greek theatre, watch [this modern performance of *Lysistrata*](#) by the comic poet Aristophanes. In this comedy, first performed in 411 BCE, the women of Greece plot to end the Peloponnesian War. In the Greek original, the actors would have worn masks and sung their parts, as in a modern opera.

The study of history also evolved during the Golden Age. Herodotus and Thucydides are considered the first true historians because they examined the past to rationally explain the causes and effects of human actions. Herodotus wrote a sweeping history of wide geographic scope, called *Histories* ("inquiries"), to explore the deep origins of the tension between the Persian and Greek worlds. In *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides employed objectivity to explain the politics, events, and brutality of the conflict in a way that is similar in some respects to the approach of modern historians.

Finally, this period saw masterpieces of sculpture, vase painting, and architecture. Classical Age Greek artists broke free of the heavily stylized and two-dimensional art of Egypt and the Levant, which had inspired Greek geometric forms, and produced their own uniquely realistic styles that aimed to capture in art the ideal human form. Centuries later, and especially during the European Renaissance, artists modeled their own works on these classical models.

Beyond the Book

Ancient Greek Sculpture and Painting

In the Archaic period, the Greeks had more contact with the cultures of Phoenicia and Egypt, and artists modeled their work on examples from these regions. For instance, ancient Egyptian artists followed strict conventions in their heavily stylized works, such as arms held close to the sides of the body and a parallel stance for the feet. Greek artists adopted these conventions in their statues of naked youths, or *kouroi*, which were often dedicated in religious sanctuaries (Figure 6.19).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.19 The Early Influence of Egyptian Sculpture. This basalt statue (a) is one of only seven statues of Cleopatra to survive from the ancient world. Its conventions like arms close to the body and parallel feet are mirrored in a Greek marble statue of a youth from about 580 BCE (b). (credit a: modification of work “Cleopatra statue at Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum” by E. Michael Smith Chiefio/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Marble statue of a kourios (youth)” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1932/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

During the Classical period, Greek sculptors still produced statues of naked youths for religious sanctuaries, but in more lifelike poses that resembled the way the human body appears naturally (Figure 6.20).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.20 Realism in Ancient Greek Art. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the Greek sculptor Myron produced a lifelike bronze statue of an athlete throwing a discus. Here (a) is a Roman marble copy of his statue. Approximately one century later, the Greek sculptor Praxiteles produced a similarly realistic statue (b), possibly depicting the Greek god Hermes holding Dionysus as a baby. (credit a: modification of work “Discobolus side 2” by Ricky Bennison/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work “Hermes of Praxiteles” by Dottie Day/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Greek painting is most often preserved on vases. In the Archaic period, artists frequently decorated vases with motifs such as patterning, borrowed from Phoenician and Egyptian art (Figure 6.21).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.21 The Influence of Phoenician Decorative Art. This Phoenician silver bowl from the seventh century BCE (a) features lotus flowers and palm trees, which were Egyptian motifs, and repetitive pattering. A Greek jug from the same period (b) also uses repetitive patterns for decoration. (credit a: modification of work "Dish with Tambourine Players" by Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work "Corinthian jug 620 BC Staatliche Antikensammlungen" by Bibi Saint-Pol/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

By the Classical era, especially in Athens, vase painters were relying less on patterning and instead depicting realistic scenes from myths and daily life (Figure 6.22).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.22 Greek Realism in Art. A Greek terracotta cup from the sixth or fifth century BCE (a) depicts charioteers. A wine jug from the fifth century BCE (b) depicts a scene from Greek mythology. (credit a: modification of work “Red-figured Kylix Greek 6th-5th century BCE terracotta (2)” by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “5th century BC Psykter” by Giovanni Dall’Orto/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

In the Classical period, Greek artists thus came into their own and no longer borrowed heavily from the art of Egypt and Phoenicia.

- What do the many artistic influences on Greece suggest about its connections with other parts of the ancient world?
- Why might Greek art have relied heavily on mythical symbols and depictions? What does this indicate about Greek culture?

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3.3: The Hellenistic Era

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the events that led to the rise of Alexander the Great
- Analyze Alexander the Great's successes as a military and political leader
- Discuss the role that Alexander the Great's conquests played in spreading Greek culture

The Classical period in Greece ended when Greece lost its freedom to the Kingdom of Macedon and Macedon's king Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. The period that followed Alexander's death is known as the Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE). Alexander's empire was divided among his top generals, including Seleucus, Ptolemy, and Antigonos. During this time, Greeks, also called Hellenes, ruled over and interacted with the populations of the former Persian Empire. The resulting mixture of cultures was neither Greek nor non-Greek but “Greek-like,” or Hellenistic, a term that refers to the flourishing and expansion of Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean and Near East during this period.

The Kingdom of Macedon

The ancient Kingdom of Macedon straddled today's Greece and northern Macedonia. The Macedonians did not speak Greek but had adopted Greek culture in the Archaic period, and their royal family claimed to be descended from the mythical Greek hero Heracles.

King Philip II of Macedon, who reigned from 359 to 336 BCE, transformed the kingdom into a great power. He recruited common farmers and developed them into a formidable infantry, with trained aristocrats as cavalry. His tactical skills and diplomacy allowed Philip to secure control of new territory in Thrace (modern-day northern Greece and Bulgaria), which provided access to precious metals and thus the economic resources to expand his military power.

In 338 BCE, Athens and Thebes finally put decades of conflict aside to ally against the rising power of Macedon. At the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), the Macedonians crushed this allied army. Philip sought to unite the Greek city-states under his leadership after this victory, and he organized them toward the goal of waging war against the Persian Empire. However, in 336 BCE, Philip was killed by an assassin with a personal grudge.

Philip II was succeeded by his twenty-year-old son Alexander III, later known as Alexander the Great, who immediately faced an invasion by Thracian tribes from the north and a rebellion in Greece led by Thebes and Athens. Within a year, the young king had crushed these opponents and announced he was carrying out his father's plan to wage war against Persia. Darius III, the Persian king, amassed armies to face him, but they were mainly draftees from the subject peoples of the Persian Empire. At the battles of Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (330 BCE), these forces collapsed against the Macedonians, commanded by Alexander himself.

At first, Alexander envisioned his campaign as a war of vengeance against Persia. Although he was Macedonian, he saw himself as a Hellene and often compared himself to the hero Achilles of the *Iliad*, from whom he claimed to be descended through his mother. In 330 BCE, Alexander's forces sacked and later burned Persepolis, the jewel of the Persian Empire. After the assassination of Darius III by disgruntled Persian nobles that same year, however, Alexander claimed the Persian throne and introduced Persian customs to his court, such as having his subjects prostrate themselves before him. To consolidate his control of the Persian Empire, in 330–326 BCE he advanced his army deep into central Asia and to the Indus River valley (modern Pakistan) (Figure 6.23). In 326 BCE, his exhausted troops mutinied and refused to advance to the Ganges River in central India as Alexander desired. He led his army back to Babylon in Mesopotamia, where he died in 323 BCE at the age of thirty-three, probably due to the cumulative impact of injuries experienced during the campaign.

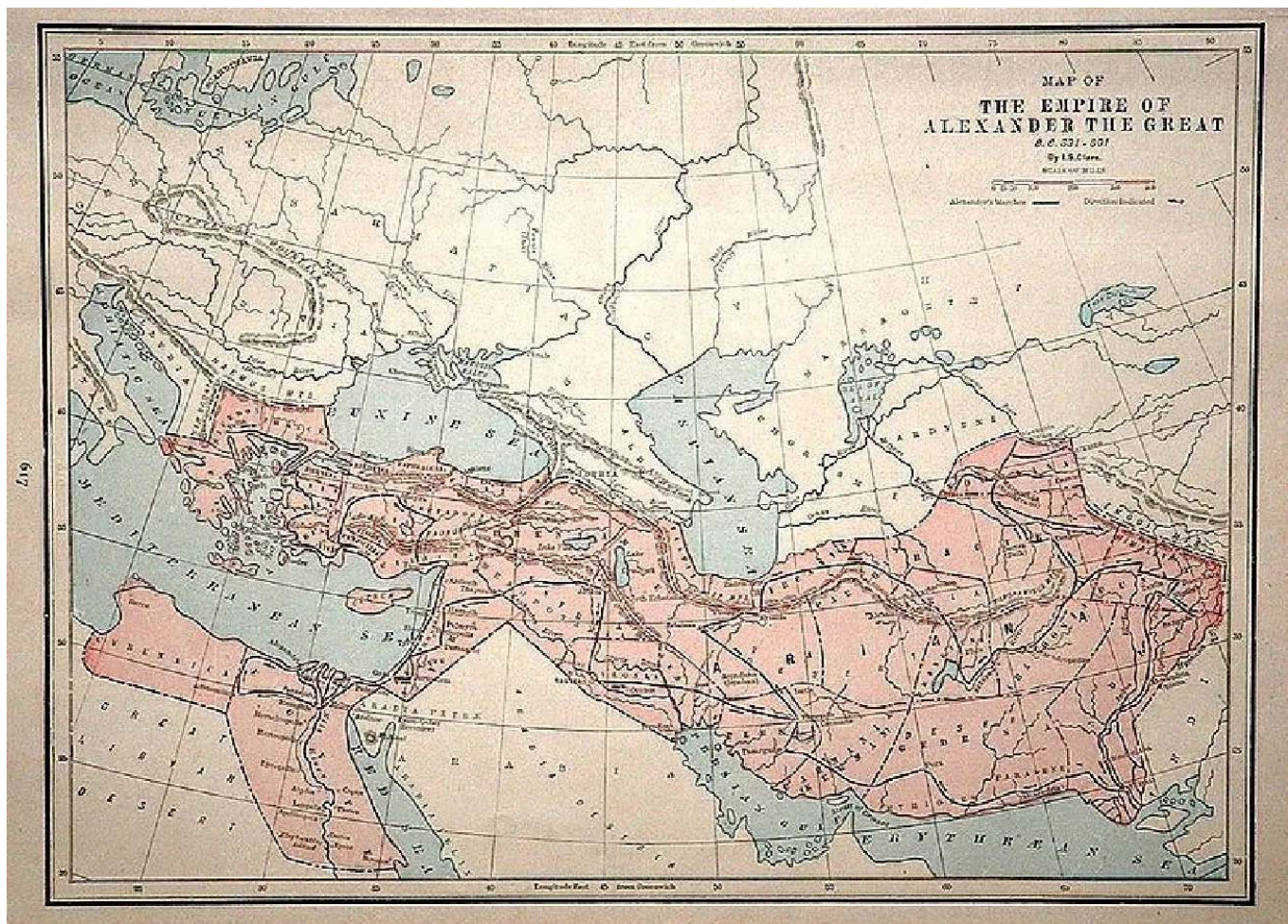


Figure 6.23 The Conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander advanced his army as far as central Asia and the Indus River, but he was unable to reach the Ganges River as he desired. (credit: "Map of the Empire of Alexander the Great (1893)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Dueling Voices

Why Did Alexander Burn Persepolis?

When Alexander reached Persepolis after the Battle of Gaugamela, he saw what was possibly the most beautiful city in the entire Persian Empire. Over the centuries Darius, Xerxes, and others had adorned it with colorful palaces, public buildings, and artwork. Within a few months of his arrival, however, Alexander had reduced the once-stunning imperial city to ashes and ruins. Why?

Historians have pondered this question for thousands of years. Though there are several accounts, the earliest was penned centuries after the actual events. The most common explanation cites a long night of drunken revels and a Greek woman named Thaïs (Figure 6.24). This account is by the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus:

Alexander held games to celebrate his victories; he offered magnificent sacrifices to the gods and entertained his friends lavishly. One day when the Companions [fellow cavalry soldiers] were feasting, and intoxication was growing as the drinking went on, a violent madness took hold of these drunken men. One of the women present [Thaïs] declared that it would be Alexander's greatest achievement in Asia to join in their procession and set fire to the royal palace, allowing women's hands to destroy in an instant what had been the pride of the Persians.

—Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of World History*

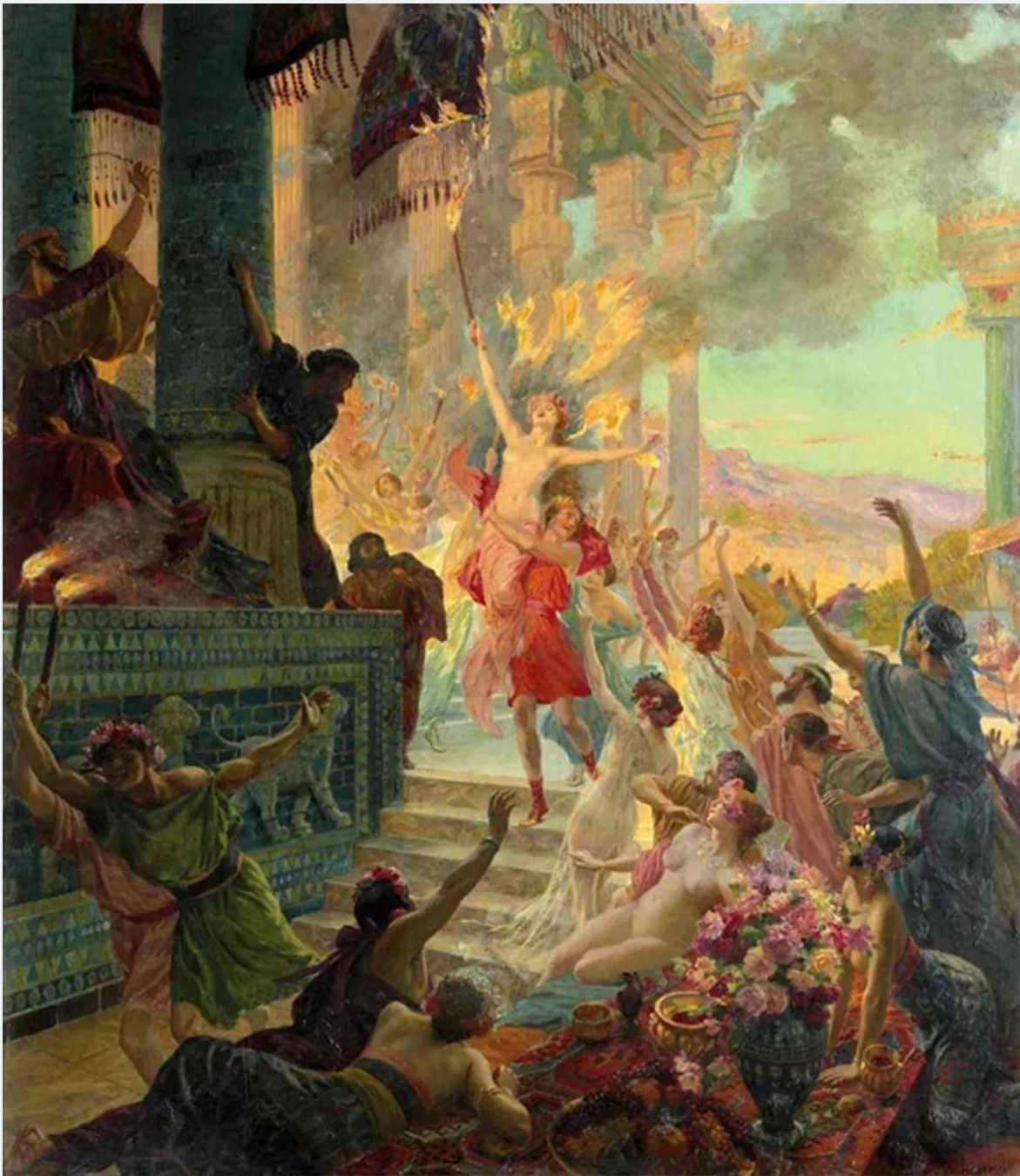


Figure 6.24 *Thaïs Burns Persepolis*. This 1890 painting by the French artist Georges Rochegrosse imagines Thaïs, held aloft while brandishing a torch, leading the maddened crowd as they burn the city in a drunken spectacle. (credit: “The burning of Persepolis, 1890, by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Later Roman historians such as Quintus Curtius Rufus and Plutarch provide similar accounts, saying the fire was the result of an out-of-control party and lit at Thaïs’s insistence. But at least one ancient writer disagrees. Relying on sources from Ptolemy and other contemporaries of Alexander, the historian Arrian of Nicomedia makes no mention of Thaïs or a night of heavy drinking. In *Anabasis*, he says the destruction of the city was intentional, the product of calculated revenge “for their invasion of Greece...for the destruction of Athens, the burning of the temples, and all the other crimes they had committed against the Greeks.”

What really happened at Persepolis? Was Thaïs the instigator or merely the scapegoat? Thousands of years later we may be able only to speculate about the cause of this catastrophic event.

- Given what you’ve read, who do you think was responsible for the burning of Persepolis? Why?
- If Thaïs wasn’t responsible, why do you think some ancient historians were convinced of her culpability?

Though his Bactrian wife Roxane was pregnant when he died, Alexander had made no arrangements for a successor. Members of his court and his military commanders thus fought among themselves for control of the empire in what historians refer to as the Wars of the Successors. One of the more colorful contestants was Pyrrhus, who was not Macedonian but was the king of Epirus and Alexander’s cousin. Pyrrhus temporarily seized the throne of Macedon and attempted to carve out an empire for himself in Sicily and southern Italy. He never lost a battle, but he lost so many troops in a campaign defending Magna Graecia in southern Italy from Rome that he was never able to capitalize on his success. (Today the term *pyrrhic victory* refers to a win so costly that it is in effect a loss.) In 272 BCE, Pyrrhus died after being struck by a roof tile thrown at him by an elderly woman during a street battle in the city of Argos. His death marked the end of the wars among Alexander’s generals.

By the middle of the third century BCE, certain generals and their descendants were ruling as kings over different portions of Alexander’s empire (Figure 6.25). Antigonos and his descendants, the Antigonids, ruled Macedon and much of Greece. Some city-states in Greece organized federal leagues to maintain their independence from Macedon. The Achaean League was in the Peloponnese and the Aetolian League in central Greece. Another Macedonian general, Ptolemy, was king of Egypt. To win the support of the Egyptian people, Ptolemy and his successors assumed the title of pharaoh and built temples to Egyptian gods. Yet another Macedonian general, Seleucus and his descendants, the Seleucids, ruled as kings over much of the former Persian Empire, from Asia Minor in the west to central Asia in the east. They adopted many practices of the Persian Empire, including honoring local gods, as revealed by cuneiform records of the offerings they made.

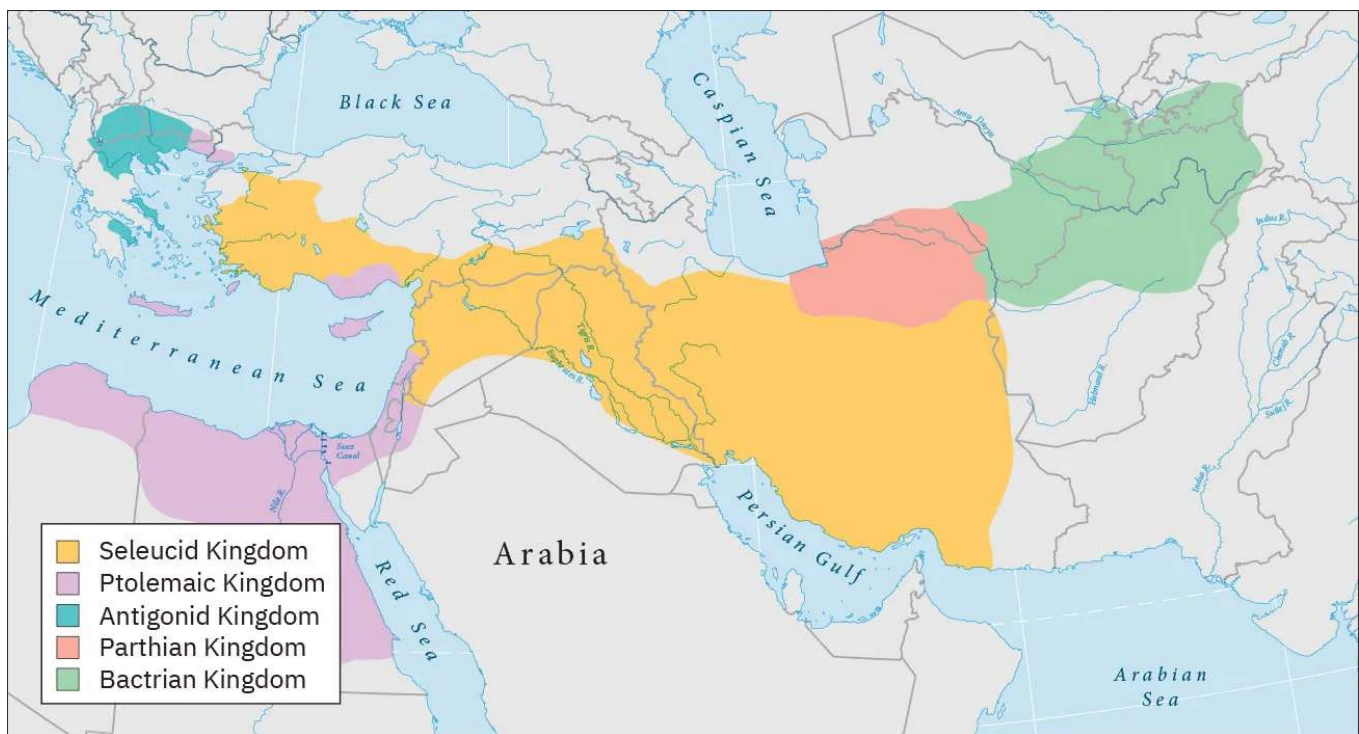


Figure 6.25 The Hellenistic World. The conquests of Alexander and conflicts over the spoils that raged for decades after his death resulted in the reordering of what had once been the Persian Empire. While the borders regularly shifted over the years, this map provides a snapshot of the Hellenistic kingdoms in about 263 BCE. (credit: modification of work “The Hellenistic World in late 281 BC” by “Cattette”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

The Seleucid Kingdom was an enormous and complicated region, stretching from the Aegean Sea to today’s Afghanistan, with a population of some thirty million people of various ethnic and linguistic groups. Keeping control over the vast kingdom proved difficult, and some of the far eastern portions like Bactria and Parthia began to break away around 250 BCE. Both became separate Hellenistic kingdoms, ruled initially by former Greek governors of the areas. Around 200 BCE, the Bactrian kingdom invaded and conquered the Indus River valley. The most famous of the Bactrian kings of India was Menander I, whose kingdom stretched from

the Indus River valley to the upper Ganges in central India. Menander converted to Buddhism and became a holy man, known in India as Milinda. The Greek colonists who settled in Bactria and India introduced their art into the region, which influenced Indian sculpture, painting, and architecture. By the end of the second century BCE, however, the Bactrian kingdom had collapsed due to constant civil wars between rival claimants to the throne. We know of their existence only through the coins they issued as kings (Figure 6.26).



Figure 6.26 A Greco-Bactrian Coin. Even after the Bactrian kingdom split away from the Seleucid Empire in the third century BCE, Greek influence there remained. This Greco-Bactrian coin, likely from the second century BCE, shows a Greek goddess and Greek letters on one side and a humped bull, an Indian symbol, and Kharosthi script (Indo-Persian) on the other. (credit: “Bactrian coin, 1st or 2nd century BC” by Jean-Michel Moullec/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In these Hellenistic kingdoms, where peace treaties and alliances could be secured through arranged marriages, elite women might achieve political power unimaginable in Classical Greece. In Egypt, for example, Ptolemy II married his sister Arsinoe, as was the custom for pharaohs, and installed her as co-ruler. Dynastic queens also often ruled when the designated heir was just a child. In 253 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus II ended his war for control of Syria with a treaty by which he married Berenice, the daughter of his opponent Ptolemy II. However, Antiochus’s former wife Laodice murdered Berenice and her children upon Antiochus’s death in 246 BCE to secure the succession for her own young son Seleucus II. Ptolemy III subsequently declared war to avenge the death of his sister and her children.

In 194 BCE, Antiochus III ended yet another war for control of Syria by giving his daughter Cleopatra I in marriage to Ptolemy V. Upon Ptolemy’s death in 180 BCE, Cleopatra ruled because their sons and daughter were still children. The most famous of the powerful Hellenistic queens was this Cleopatra’s descendant, Cleopatra VII, who reigned from 51 to 31 BCE. The last of the Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII reigned as co-ruler with her brothers Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV, as well as with Ptolemy XV, also called Caesarion, who was her son with the Roman general Julius Caesar.

Hellenistic Culture

A characteristic cultural feature of the Hellenistic period was the blending of Greek and other cultures of the former Persian Empire. The Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties both employed Greeks and Macedonians as soldiers and bureaucrats in their empires. Alexander the Great and subsequent Hellenistic kings founded Greek cities in the former Persian Empire for Greek and Macedonian colonists, often naming them in honor of themselves or their queens. These cities included the institutions of the Greek cities of their homeland—temples to Greek gods, theaters, *agora* (marketplaces), and gymnasia—so the colonists could feel at home in their new environment. At the site of Ai Khanum in modern Afghanistan, archaeologists have uncovered the impressive remains of one such Hellenistic city with a gymnasium.

Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander himself in 331 BCE, was the capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the largest Hellenistic city, with a population that reached one million. There the Ptolemies founded the *Museon*, or “home of the Muses,” from which the term “museum” derives. They modeled this on Aristotle’s Lyceum, as a center for scientific research and literary studies. These same kings also patronized the Alexandrian Library, where they assembled the largest collection of books in the

ancient world. Antioch, in today's southeastern Turkey, was the largest city of the Seleucid kingdom, with a population of half a million. In cities such as Alexandria and Antioch, the Greek-speaking population became integrated with the indigenous population.

Most Greek cities in this period were no longer independent since they were usually under the control of one of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The city-states of the Achaean and Aetolian Leagues in Greece were the exception, fiercely maintaining their independence against the Antigonid rulers of Macedon. Having lost the right of self-government, many Greeks in cities under the rule of kings no longer focused on politics and diplomacy but turned to the search for personal happiness. New religions emerged that promised earthly contentment and eternal life and combined Greek and non-Greek elements. For example, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis became common in many Hellenistic cities.

Mithras was a Persian sun god worshiped by the Medes, but in the second century BCE, Greeks in Hellenistic cities came to believe Mithras would lead them, too, to eternal life. His followers built special chapels decorated with symbols whose meaning is still disputed. The emphasis on secret religious rituals, or *mysteries*, about which followers were sworn to silence, lends the worship of Isis and Mithras in this period the name mystery religions (Figure 6.27).



Figure 6.27 Mithras. This stone relief from the second century CE depicts the Persian sun god Mithras, who became the center of a mystery religion. (credit: modification of work “Cult Relief of Mithras Slaying the Bull (Tauroctony)” by Yale University Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Another religion practiced in Hellenistic cities was Judaism, whose followers included migrant Jewish people and new converts. By the second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek under the Ptolemies, since ancient Judea was within their control for much of the Hellenistic period and many Jewish people had immigrated to Alexandria.

Some Greeks preferred new philosophies to religion as a means to achieve happiness. Hellenistic philosophy emphasized the search for internal peace and contentment. Stoicism, for example, maintained that the universe was governed by divine reason (*Logos*), which determined the fate of all people. Happiness therefore resulted from learning how to cope with life and accepting fate while avoiding extreme negative emotions such as fear and anger. Epicureans, however, maintained that the key to happiness was to avoid physical and mental pain by pursuing pleasure. The founders of these two philosophical schools, Zeno and Epicurus respectively, both lived in the early third century BCE and taught in Athens, which continued to be a center of learning in this period. The Stoics were so named because Zeno instructed his students in the *stoa poikile*, or “painted porch” in the Athenian *agora*. The mystery religions and philosophies of the Hellenistic era continued to flourish as these cities became incorporated into the expanding Roman Empire.

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3.4: Winged Victory of Samothrace



Winged Victory of Samothrace
by CosmoWenman



Winged Victory of Samothrace by [CosmoWenman](#) on [Sketchfab](#)

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3.5: The Roman Republic

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the key institutions of the Roman Republic
- Discuss class differences and conflict in the Roman Republic
- Analyze the challenges that strained democratic institutions in the Roman Republic, including the Punic Wars

Many elements of early Roman culture and society resulted from Greek influence on the Italian peninsula. Later, when the Roman state expanded and built an empire, its people transmitted their culture—heavily indebted to Ancient Greece—to the Celtic and Germanic tribes of central and western Europe. They also transmitted their language, which is why French, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish are known as “Romance” languages: They are descended from the Latin language spoken by the Romans. The classical civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome were therefore the foundation for what became known as Western civilization.

The Foundation and Function of the Roman Republic

During the Archaic period, Greeks established colonies on Sicily and in southern Italy that went on to influence the culture of Italy. By around 500 BCE, the inhabitants of central Italy, who spoke Latin, had adopted much of Greek culture as their own, including the idea that citizens should have a voice in the governance of the state. For example, the people of the small city-state of Rome referred to their state as *res publica*, meaning “public thing” (to distinguish it from the *res privata*, or “private thing,” that had characterized oligarchical and monarchical rule under the Etruscans). *Res publica*—from which the word “republic” derives—signified that government happens in the open, for everyone to see. Early Romans also adopted Greek gods and myths as well as other elements of Greek culture.

The Romans passed down many traditions about the early history of their republic, recorded by historians such as Livy in the first century BCE. These stories often reflected the values that the Romans revered. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded in 753 BCE by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war (Figure 6.28). It was said that Romulus killed his brother when Remus mocked his construction of a wall around the new city and jumped over it. This story brought into focus for Romans their respect for boundaries and private property.

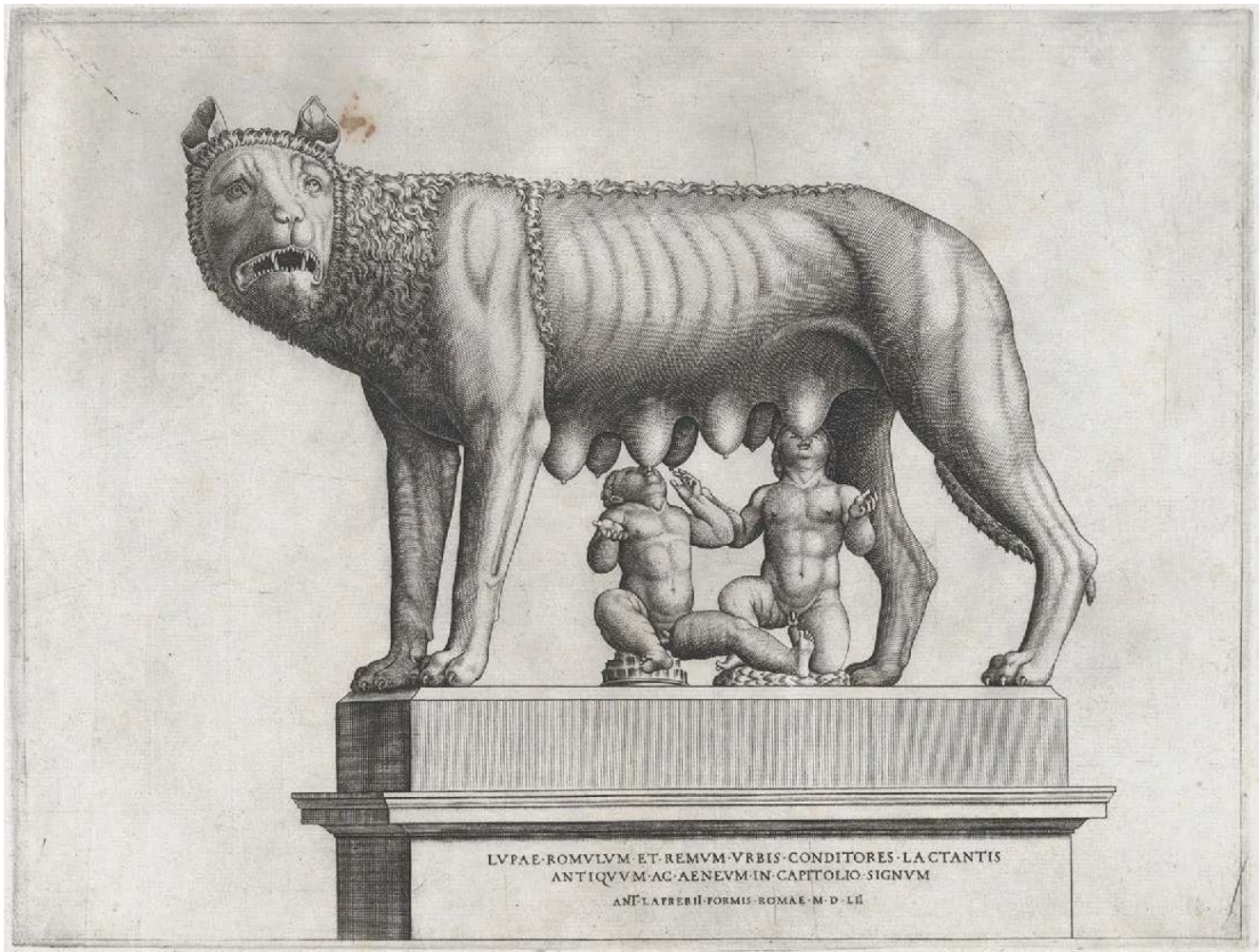


Figure 6.28 Romulus and Remus. This sixteenth-century engraving illustrates the legend that the infants Romulus and Remus, later the founders of Rome, were suckled by a she-wolf after a jealous king ordered them abandoned to die. (credit: modification of work “Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae: Romulus and Remus” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, Transferred from the Library, 1941/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Romulus assembled a group of criminals and debtors to inhabit his city, and, to secure wives for them, he invited the neighboring Sabines to attend a festival with their unmarried daughters and sisters. The Romans seized the women, and when the Sabines returned with an army to recover them, the women, now Roman wives, said they had been treated with respect and wished to remain. The Sabines and the Romans then joined together in a single city-state. This story showed that a person did not have to be born a Roman to receive the rights of citizenship. It also reflected women’s social status in Rome, which was higher than their status in other ancient cultures. They couldn’t vote or hold public office, but they could own property and freely participate in public events such as banquets.

These stories also include details of Roman ideas about government. For example, they note that in its early centuries, Rome was a monarchy, with the first king being Romulus. After the passing of the fourth king, the throne was assumed by Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, an Etruscan. The next two kings were also Etruscan. The last of these, Tarquin the Proud, was the final king of Rome, whose son raped a young Roman woman named Lucretia. This act triggered a rebellion against the monarchy, which ultimately ousted the Etruscan king. In 509 BCE, the victorious Romans declared their government to be a republic and vowed never to be subject to tyranny again. This story emphasized the Roman respect for the rule of law. No one, no matter how powerful, was above it.

In Their Own Words

Lucretia’s Sacrifice for Rome

Like many stories about Rome’s early history, the story of the rape of Lucretia emphasizes Roman values, in this case, virtue. Revered as a model Roman woman, Lucretia embodied sexual purity and loyalty to her husband at the expense of her safety, her autonomy, and even her life. According to the story, Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king, is staying at Collatinus and Lucretia’s home. During the night, Tarquinius enters Lucretia’s chambers with his sword in hand. He threatens her with successive acts of violence and disgrace before raping her. While recounting the events, Lucretia asks her family to pledge that they will avenge her, and then she dies by suicide. Scholars debate the reason for her suicide, with some indicating it was related to shame, others viewing it as Lucretia asserting control, while still others see it as an allegory for the death of the Roman monarchy.

The historian Livy’s account of Lucretia’s suicide, written in the first century BCE, shows the story’s enduring value in Roman culture. It begins as Lucretia’s husband and father run to her aid after hearing she has been raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king. Lucretia they found sitting sadly in her chamber.

The entrance of her friends brought the tears to her eyes, and to her husband’s question, “Is all well?” She replied, “Far from it; for what can be well with a woman when she has lost her honor? The print of a strange man, Collatinus [her husband], is in your bed. Yet my body only has been violated; my heart is guiltless, as death shall be my witness. But pledge your right hands and your words that the adulterer shall not go unpunished. Sextus Tarquinius is he that last night returned hostility for hospitality, and armed with force brought ruin on me, and on himself no less—if you are men—when he worked his pleasure with me.” They give their pledges, every man in turn. They seek to comfort her, sick at heart as she is, by diverting the blame from her who was forced to the doer of the wrong. They tell her it is the mind that sins, not the body; and that where purpose has been wanting there is no guilt. “It is for you to determine,” she answers, “what is due to him; for my own part, though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.” Taking a knife that she had

concealed beneath her dress, she plunged it into her heart, and sinking forward upon the wound, died as she fell. The wail for the dead was raised by her husband and her father.

—Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita (The History of Rome)*

- Why does Lucretia choose death?
- What does her choice say about Roman values concerning the conduct of women, chastity, and reputation?

Archaeological evidence seems to indicate at least some historical basis for these accounts of Rome's founding. In 1988, a wall was discovered around the Palatine Hill where Romulus reportedly built his fortification. Archaeologists also found Greek pottery from this period at the same location, suggesting trade took place. The city of Rome is located along the Tiber River where it was no longer navigable to sea-going vessels. Greek merchants would have sailed up the Tiber from the Mediterranean Sea and traded with the native peoples there. Greek merchants and colonists arriving in Italy at this time influenced the Iron Age culture in northern and central Italy, which then evolved through Greek influence into the Latin and Etruscan cultures. Around 600 BCE, the Etruscans colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city-state. The story of the Tarquin dynasty reflects this Etruscan period of Roman history. Modern historians maintain that the story of the expulsion of the Tarquins is loosely based on historical events, which saw the Roman city-state free itself from Etruscan domination and establish an independent republic around 500 BCE.

In the early republic, Rome was ruled by elected magistrates instead of kings, and by a Council of Elders or Senate. Roman society was divided into two classes or orders, patricians and plebeians. The patricians were the aristocratic elite, who alone could hold public office and sit in the Senate. From the beginning of the republic through the third century BCE, the plebeians, or common people, worked to achieve equality before the law in Roman society. The political conflict between these two classes is known as the Struggle of the Orders.

Rome was located on a coastal plain known as Latium. East of it were the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, inhabited by warlike tribes that made periodic raids. When Rome was under threat, the plebeians could gain leverage with the patricians by refusing to fight until their demands were met. In 450 BCE, the plebeians went on strike for the first time. They feared that patrician judges were interpreting Rome's unwritten laws to take advantage of ignorant plebeians, so they demanded the laws be written down. The patricians agreed. In the Twelve Tables, published in the Forum, Rome's laws were written for the first time and were then accessible to all citizens.

Link to Learning

Read excerpts from Rome's [Twelve Tables of law](#) from Fordham University's Ancient History Sourcebook. What do these laws tell us about Roman society in 450 BCE, when they were first written down?

After 450 BCE, the plebeians met in a Plebian Assembly that annually elected ten officials known as tribunes. These tribunes attended meetings of Rome's assemblies, the Senate, and the law courts. If they saw any public body or official taking action that would bring harm to plebeians, they could say "Veto" or "I forbid" and stop that action. This power to veto gave plebeians a way to protect themselves and put a check on the power of patrician officials.

In the fourth and third centuries BCE, plebeians won more concessions by again seceding from the patrician state. After 367 BCE, one of the two consuls, the highest officials in the republic, had to be a plebian. After 287 BCE, the Plebian Assembly could pass laws for the republic that were introduced to it by the tribunes, and their laws applied to all Roman citizens. By the third century BCE, the Struggle of the Orders had effectively concluded, since it was now possible for plebeians to pass laws, serve as elected officials, and sit in the Senate, equals of the patricians under Roman law. The Struggle of the Orders did not bring equality to everyone in Rome, however. Rather, it gave well-off plebeians access to positions of power.

Romans were a very conservative people who greatly venerated the *mos maiorum* or "way of the ancestors." Their political system was a combination of written laws and political traditions and customs that had evolved since the birth of the Republic. By the third century BCE, this system was being administered by a combination of public assemblies, elected officials, and the Senate.

The Roman Republic had three main public assemblies—the Plebian Assembly, the Tribal Assembly, and the Centuriate Assembly—that elected various officials every year. Only plebeians could attend the Plebian Assembly, organized into thirty-five regional tribes with a single vote each. It was this assembly that annually elected the ten tribunes, who possessed veto power and could

present laws to the assembly for approval. The Tribal Assembly was likewise divided into thirty-five tribes based on place of residence, with each tribe casting one vote, but both plebeians and patricians could attend. Every year, the Tribal Assembly elected the Quaestors, treasurers in charge of public money.

Only the Centuriate Assembly could declare war, though the Senate remained in control of foreign policy. Both plebeians and patricians could attend this assembly, which was organized into blocs. The number of votes assigned to each bloc was based on the number of centuries—meaning a group of one hundred men in a military unit—that bloc could afford to equip with weapons and armor. Wealthier citizens had more votes because they could pay more to support the military. This assembly also elected military commanders, judges, and the censor, whose main task was to conduct the census to assess the wealth of Rome's citizens.

All elected officials joined the Roman Senate as members for life after their term in office. By far the most powerful institution in the Roman state, the Senate decided how public money was to be spent and advised elected officials on their course of action. Elected officials rarely ignored the Senate's advice since many of them would be senators themselves after leaving office.

The patron-client system was another important element in the Roman political system. A patron was usually a wealthy citizen who provided legal and financial assistance to his clients, who were normally less affluent citizens. In return, clients in the Roman assemblies voted as directed by their patrons. Patrons could inherit clients, and those with many wielded great influence in Rome.

The Expansion of the Roman Republic

The early Romans did not plan on building an immense empire. They were surrounded by hostile city-states and tribes, and in the process of defeating them they made new enemies even as they expanded their network of allies. Thus they were constantly sending armies farther afield to crush these threats until Rome emerged in the second century BCE as the most powerful state in all the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Roman Senate developed certain policies in conducting wars that proved quite successful (Figure 6.29). One was to divide and conquer. The Romans always tried to defeat one enemy at a time and avoid waging war against a coalition. Thus they often attempted to turn their enemies against each other. Another tactic was to negotiate from strength. Even after suffering enormous defeats in battle, Rome would continue a war until it won a major engagement and reach a position from which to negotiate for peace with momentum on its side. Yet another successful strategy was to establish colonies in recently conquered lands to serve as the first line of defense if a region revolted against Rome. Well-constructed roads were also built to link Rome to these colonies, so armies could arrive quickly in a region that rebelled. Thanks to these networks across Italy, the language and culture of Rome eventually spread throughout its empire as well. Romans also transformed former enemies into loyal allies who could enjoy self-government as long as they honored Rome's other alliances and provided troops in times of war. Some even received Roman citizenship.

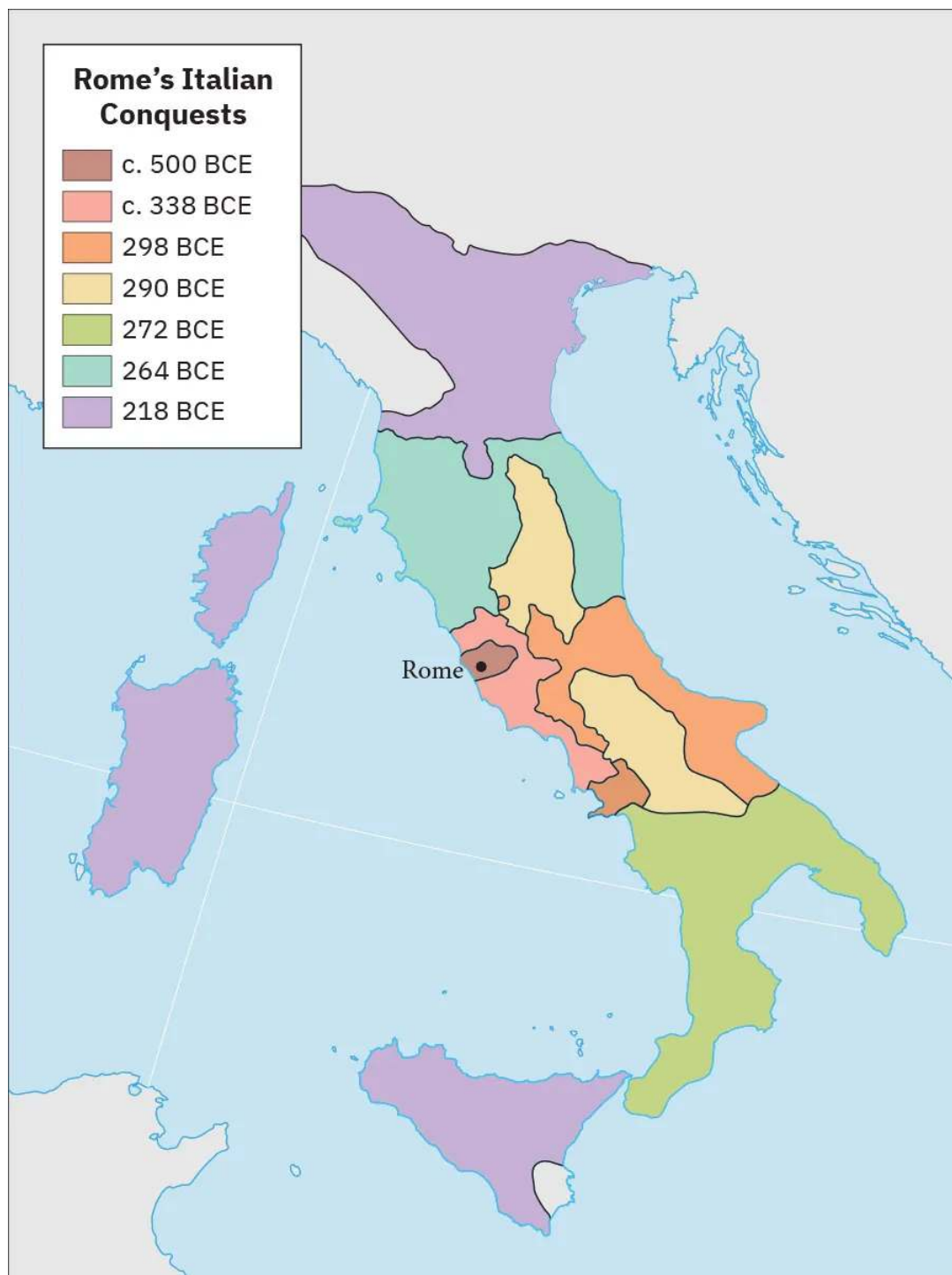


Figure 6.29 Rome's Conquests in Italy. This map shows the expansion of Rome across Italy over time and its addition of new allies. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Roman conquest of Italy" by "Javierfv1212"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Roman Conquest of the Mediterranean

After conquering most of the Italian peninsula, Rome came to challenge the other major power in the region, Carthage. A series of wars ensued, called the Punic Wars, in which Rome and Carthage vied for dominance. During the First Punic War (264–241 BCE), Rome and Carthage battled for control of the island of Sicily. Although Carthage had the largest fleet at the time, the Romans won by dropping a hooked plank on the deck of an opposing ship and using it as a causeway to cross over, transforming a sea battle in which they were at a disadvantage into a land battle where they could dominate. After the destruction of its fleet, Carthage sued for peace, and the war ended with Rome annexing Sicily.

Carthage desired revenge. In the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), the Carthaginian general Hannibal marched his army, along with dozens of war elephants, from Hispania (modern-day Portugal and Spain), across southern Gaul, and then over the Alps into Italy. Hannibal hoped Rome's allies would abandon it and leave the city at his mercy. Most of Rome's Italian allies remained loyal, however, even after Hannibal repeatedly defeated Roman armies, and after his decisive victory at the Battle of Cannae. As Hannibal's army was rampaging through Italy, Rome sent an army across the Mediterranean to Africa to attack Carthage, which summoned Hannibal back to defend his homeland (Figure 6.30).



Figure 6.30 Hannibal's Invasion of Rome. This map shows the route Hannibal followed from Hispania over the Alps to attack Italy before finally returning to defend Carthage in the Second Punic War. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

At the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE, the Roman army defeated Hannibal, and the Roman commander Scipio earned the nickname "Africanus" (Figure 6.31). Carthage sued for peace and was stripped of all its overseas territory. Rome thus acquired Carthage's lands in Hispania.



Figure 6.31 Hannibal and Scipio. This classical battle scene, painted by the Italian artist Bernardino Cesari in the early 1600s, is believed to represent Hannibal's defeat by the Roman commander Scipio in 202 BCE. (credit: "Hannibal and Scipio Africanus" by Bernardino Cesari/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

During the war, King Philip V of Macedon, concerned by the growth of Rome just across the Adriatic Sea from his own kingdom, made an alliance with Carthage. After Rome's victory against Carthage, Rome declared war against this new enemy. Philip's Macedonian troops won numerous victories over Roman armies, but in 196 BCE at the Battle of Cynoscephalae in northern Greece, Philip suffered a defeat and lacked the resources to continue. Consequently, he agreed to become an ally of Rome. Rome also liberated all regions in Greece formerly under Macedonian control.

Philip's defeat emboldened the king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus III, to advance his army into Greece, hoping to obtain the territory Philip had vacated. Rome feared that Antiochus's occupation of Greece posed a threat to Italy, just as Philip had. In 190 BCE, Roman armies smashed the forces of Antiochus III at the Battle of Magnesia in western Asia Minor. Antiochus then agreed to withdraw from Asia Minor.

Rome discovered in the second century BCE that there was no end to the threats from hostile powers. Perseus, the son of Philip V, renounced the alliance with Rome. When he made alliances with Balkan tribes that threatened to invade Italy, Roman armies invaded Macedon and defeated his army at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BCE. Rome then dissolved the monarchy in Macedon, which soon afterward became a Roman province, and Perseus died of starvation as a prisoner in Rome. When the Achaean League in the

Peloponnese in Greece challenged Roman control of Greece and Macedon, Rome declared war and sacked Corinth, the League's largest city, in 146 BCE. In that same year, Roman armies also destroyed the city of Carthage in the Third Punic War, fearing the city's revival as an economic and military power. After 146 BCE, no power remained in the Mediterranean that could challenge Rome (Figure 6.32).



Figure 6.32 The Expansion of Rome. This map shows Rome's expansion in the second century BCE as it responded to perceived threats to its power from neighboring kingdoms. (credit: modification of work "Expansion of Rome, 2nd century BC" by The Department of History, United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

A Republic of Troubles

Rome's constant wars and conquests in the third and second centuries BCE created a host of social, economic, and political problems for the republic. The Roman people grew dissatisfied with the leadership of the Senate and the aristocratic elite, and they increasingly looked to strong military leaders to address the problems.

A number of factors contributed to these problems and transformations. From the foundation of the republic, most Roman citizens had owned and operated small family farms. Indeed, to serve as Roman soldiers, men had to own property. However, the Punic Wars had strained this traditional system. Roman soldiers were often away from home for long periods of time, leaving the women and children to maintain their holdings. When they ultimately did return, many found their property in another's hands. Others decided to sell their neglected farms and move their families to the expanding city of Rome, where they joined the growing ranks of the landless working class known as the proletariat. By the first century BCE, the population of the city of Rome may have exceeded one million.

The growth of the proletariat disrupted the Roman political system and invited large-scale corruption. The traditional patron-client system collapsed, since landless Romans didn't need the assistance of patrons to settle property disputes. Politicians therefore had to win the support of the urban masses with free food and entertainment, such as gladiatorial combats, and promises to create jobs through public works projects. Some even organized the poor into violent gangs to frighten their political rivals. These conditions resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the government of the republic.

To meet the growing demand for grain, wine, and olive oil to feed the urban population, large landowners bought land from poor Roman farmers and leased public land from the Roman state to create large plantations. These were very profitable because

landowners could cheaply purchase enslaved people, who were plentiful. For example, after the defeat of Perseus of Macedon in 168 BCE, the Romans enslaved 150,000 people from Epirus as punishment since this kingdom had been allied with Perseus in the war. Pirates from Cilicia (in southeast Turkey) and from the Greek island of Crete also kidnapped people throughout the eastern Mediterranean and sold them to Roman traders. The island of Delos in the Aegean Sea became a massive human market in the second century BCE, where reportedly ten thousand people were bought and sold every day.

Terrible working conditions resulted in massive revolts by the enslaved, beginning in the second half of the second century BCE. The most famous was led by Spartacus, an enslaved man and gladiator from Thrace (modern Bulgaria). In 76 BCE, Spartacus and other enslaved gladiators rose against their owners and were quickly joined by hundreds of thousands of others (Figure 6.33). Spartacus's forces defeated two Roman armies before being crushed in 71 BCE. The Romans crucified thousands of the rebels along Italy's major roads to send a warning to enslaved people across Italy.



Figure 6.33 Spartacus. This is a detail of a larger-than-life marble statue by the nineteenth-century French sculptor Denis Foyatier, showing Spartacus breaking his chains. Now in the Louvre, the statue originally stood in Paris's famous Jardin des Tuileries on the Avenue of Great Men. (credit: "Spartacus, Denis Foyatier, 1830" by Gautier Poupeau/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In addition to the proletariat and enslaved people, new classes of wealthy Romans were also unhappy with the leadership of the traditional elite. The most profitable enterprise for these new Roman entrepreneurs was acting as bankers and public contractors, or publicans. The republic relied on publicans to construct public works such as aqueducts and theaters, as well as to operate government-owned mines and collect taxes. Roman governors often looked the other way when publicans squeezed additional tax revenues from the populations of the provinces.

This tumultuous and complicated environment led to the rise of two of the Late Republic's most intriguing political figures, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. The Gracchi, as they are collectively known, were plebian brothers whose families had been members of the elite for generations (Scipio Africanus was their grandfather). Tiberius, the elder brother, was concerned to see the large plantations being worked by enslaved foreigners rather than Roman farmers. He feared Rome's military was in danger since Rome relied on its land-owning farmers to equip themselves and serve in the army. In 133 BCE, as a tribune, he proposed a law to distribute public land to landless Romans. This measure struck a blow at the senatorial class, many of whom had accumulated huge swaths of land formerly owned by independent farmers who had gone to war. The assembly voted to approve the proposal, but many senators were horrified not only because they stood to lose land but also because, to win the vote, Tiberius had violated the traditions of the Republic. The Republic was ruled by the upper classes, and in courting popular opinion, the brothers had challenged elite control over high political institutions. Convinced he was assuming too much popular support and violating the traditions of Rome, the Senate declared a state of emergency and a group of senators beat Tiberius to death.

Ten years later Tiberius's brother Gaius, an astute politician as well, was also elected tribune. He won over poor Roman farmers with his proposal to establish new colonies to give them land. He also provided free grain for the poor and called for new public works projects to create jobs for the working class and lucrative contracts for wealthy publicans. His measures passed the Plebian

Assembly. Gaius was also elected tribune for two years straight, in violation of Roman political tradition. The final straw for the Senate was Gaius's proposal to establish a new court system that could try senators for corruption. In 121 BCE, the senators took action to subdue Gaius. He attempted to use force himself to resist the Senate, but in the end his supporters were massacred and he died, either by his own hand or at the hands of senators who had opposed his rise to power.

The Rise of Client Armies

After the assassination of Gaius Gracchus, Rome's political class was divided into two warring factions. The *populares* were politicians who, like Gaius, sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society, whereas the *optimates* were the champions of the old order and the traditional leadership of the elite in the Roman Senate. In 112 BCE, Rome went to war against Jugurtha, the king of Numidia (modern Algeria/Tunisia) in North Africa, after he slaughtered Romans there who had supported his brother as king. Roman armies suffered defeat after defeat, and due to the decline in numbers of Roman farmers, Rome was having difficulty filling the ranks.

Gaius Marius was a plebian and commoner who rose up the ranks of the Roman army and emerged as the leader of the *populares*. In 107 BCE, he ran for consul by denouncing the traditional Roman elites as weak and ineffective generals and promising to quickly end the war with Jugurtha. Such rhetoric was wildly popular with the common people who supported him. Once in power, Marius reformed the entrance requirements for the army to open it to proletariats, extending them the opportunity for war gains and even land for their service. These reforms led to the emergence of professional client armies, or armies composed of men more loyal to their commander than to the state.

By 105 BCE, Jugurtha was captured and then paraded through the Roman streets in chains. That same year, Rome faced new threats from the north in the form of Germanic tribes crossing the Rhine River and seeking to invade Italy. The Romans elected Marius consul for five consecutive terms (105–101 BCE) to lead his professional army against these enemies. After his victories, however, his enemies in the Senate wanted to embarrass him politically, so they prevented his proposal to give veterans land from becoming law. Marius was intimidated by these events and retired from politics.

In 90 BCE, Rome was again in turmoil when its Italian allies revolted after years of providing troops without having any voice in governing. During this "Social" War (90–88 BCE), the Romans under the leadership of Sulla, an *optimatus*, defeated the rebels. Shortly thereafter, in 88 BCE, Rome's provinces in Greece and Asia Minor also revolted, after years of heavy taxes and corrupt governors. The rebels massacred thousands of Roman citizens and rallied around Mithridates, the Hellenistic king of Pontus in north Asia Minor. *Optimates* in the Senate appointed Sulla to lead an army against Mithridates. Like Marius, Sulla had promised his recruits land in return for their service. *Populares* in the Plebian Assembly, however, assigned command of the army to Marius, who had come out of retirement.

Sulla, then outside Rome with his client army, convinced his soldiers to choose personal loyalty to their general and his promise of land over their allegiance to Rome, and they marched on the city. Sulla's army hunted down and murdered many *populares*, and after establishing his own faction in charge of Rome, Sulla marched against Mithridates (Figure 6.34).

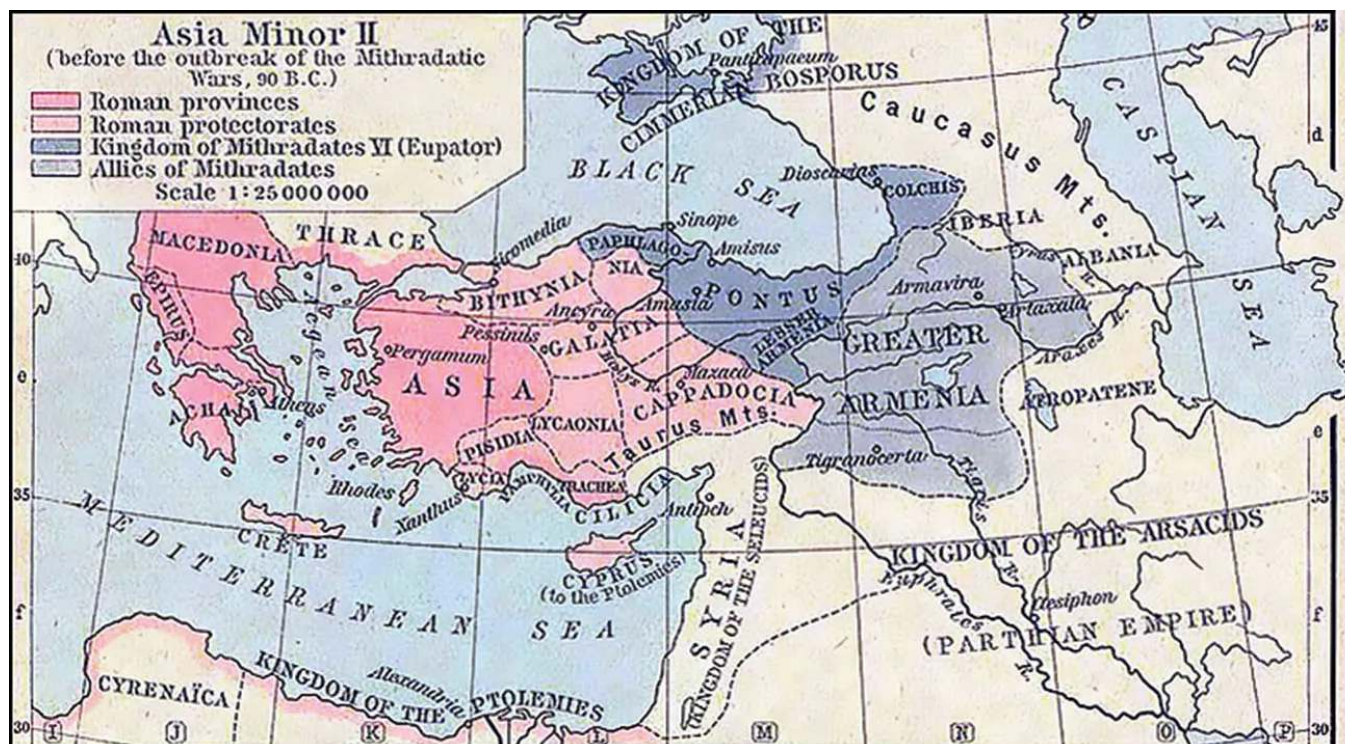


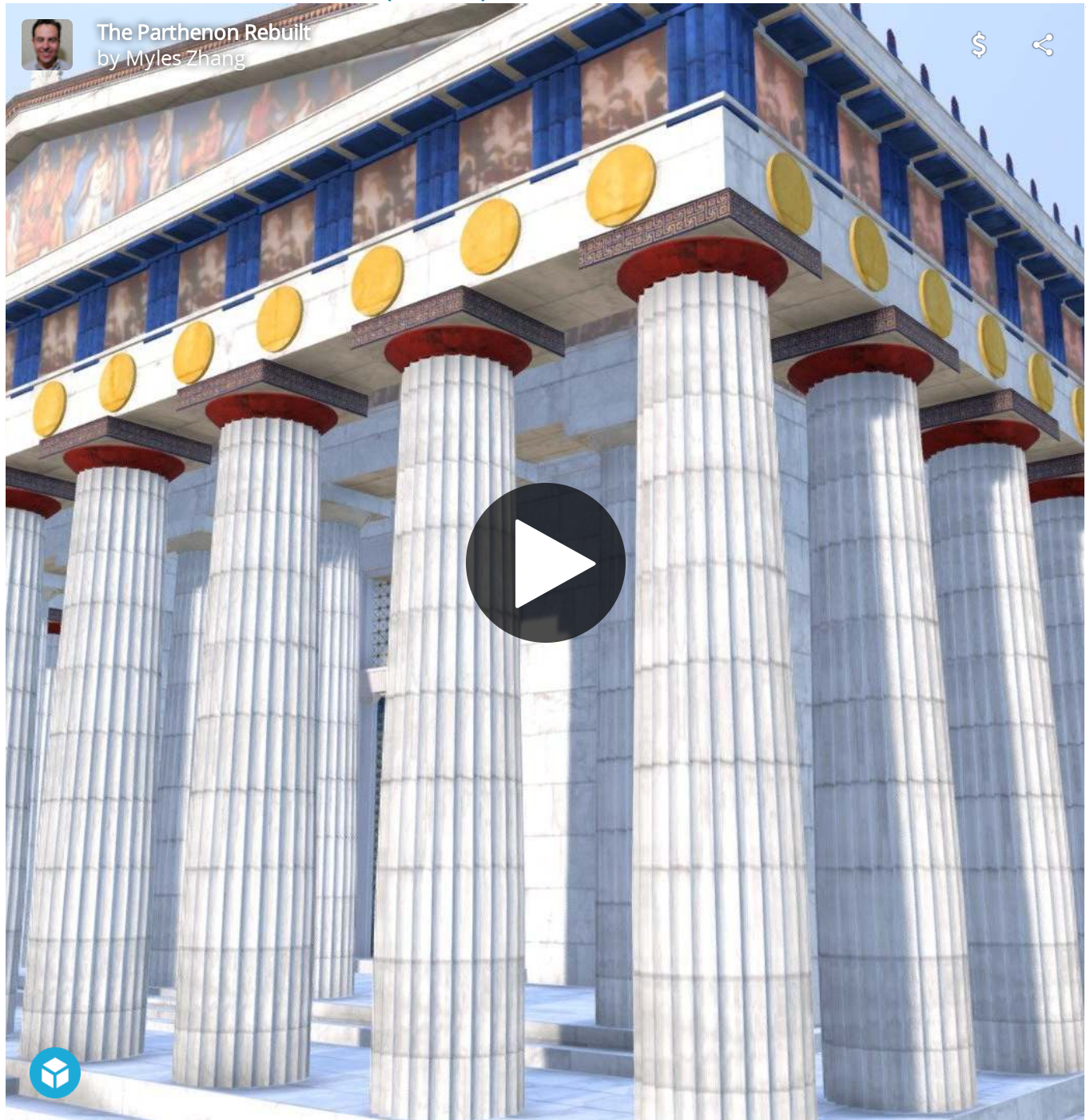
Figure 6.34 Rome and King Mithridates. As Rome expanded far beyond Italy, keeping its citizens in distant provinces safe could be a challenge. That was the case when parts of Greece and Asia Minor rebelled and rallied around King Mithridates of Pontus. This 1911 map of the eastern Mediterranean in 88 BCE shows Rome and its allies (red) and King Mithridates's kingdom and his allies (gray). (credit: modification of work "Asia Minor at the time of the First Mithridatic War" by The Historical Atlas by William River Shepherd, University of Texas Libraries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 87 BCE, Marius, who had been in hiding, rallied his old veterans and marched on Rome, marking the second time in two years that Roman soldiers had chosen personal loyalty to their general over obedience to Rome's laws. Marius's men now hunted down and murdered *optimates*. After winning his seventh term as consul in 87 BCE, Marius died in office from natural causes. Having forced Mithridates out of Greece and restored Roman rule there, Sulla led his army back to Rome in 83 BCE to overthrow the *populares* who were still in charge. While in Rome, he compelled the Senate to appoint him dictator. The office of dictator was an ancient republican office used only during emergencies because it granted absolute authority for a limited time to handle the emergency. When Sulla assumed the office, it hadn't been used since the Second Punic War.

During Sulla's time as dictator, he ordered the execution of his political enemies and reformed the laws. In 79 BCE, he relinquished the office and retired from public life, convinced he had saved the republic and preserved the power of the traditional elite in the Senate. Instead, however, within half a century the Roman Republic was dead.

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3.5.1: The Parthenon Rebuilt (Athens)



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3.6: The Age of Augustus

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the key events of the First and Second Triumvirate
- Analyze the personal charisma and leadership styles of Julius Caesar and Augustus
- Explain the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the first emperor

The social troubles that rocked Rome following the Punic Wars led to populists like the Gracchi and military leaders like Sulla, who marched on Rome in his attempt to restore order. Such events made it clear to many that Rome's republican institutions were no longer able to adapt to the transformed landscape produced by decades of territorial expansion. These problems also presaged the political transformations Rome was to suffer through in the following decades. Between 60 BCE and 31 BCE, a string of powerful military leaders took the stage and bent the Republic to their will. In their struggle for power, Rome descended further into civil war and disorder. By 27 BCE, only one leader remained. Under his powerful hand, the Republic became a mere façade for the emergent Roman Empire.

The First Triumvirate

Sulla was unable to crush the *populares* completely since some discontented groups still opposed the Senate leadership. After his retirement, new military and political leaders sought power with the support of these groups. Three men in particular eventually assumed enormous dominance. One was Pompey Magnus, who became a popular general, and thousands of landless Romans joined his client army on the promise of land. In 67 BCE, Roman armies under Pompey's command suppressed pirates in the eastern Mediterranean who had threatened Rome's imported grain supplies. Pompey next conclusively defeated Mithridates of Pontus, who had again gone on the attack against Rome. By 63 BCE, Pompey had subdued Asia Minor, annexed Syria, destroyed the Seleucid kingdom, and occupied Jerusalem.

Another politician and military commander of this era was Crassus. He had served under Sulla, achieved popularity in Rome by fighting against Spartacus, and used the support of disaffected wealthy Romans such as publicans to amass a huge fortune. The third influential figure was Julius Caesar, whose original source of popularity was the fact that Marius was his uncle. When Sulla took control, Caesar lost much of his influence, but by 69 BCE he was making a political comeback and winning the support of *populares* in Rome.

The *optimates* in the Senate distrusted all these men and cooperated to block their influence in Roman politics. In response, in 60 BCE the three decided to join forces to advance their interests through a political alliance known to history as the First Triumvirate ("rule by three men"). Together its members had the wealth and influence to run the Roman Republic, but they were all very ambitious and each greatly distrusted the others. After serving as consul in 60 BCE, Julius Caesar took command of the Roman army in Gaul (modern France). Over the next ten years, his armies conquered all Gaul and launched attacks against German tribes across the Rhine, and on the island of Britain across the English Channel. The Roman people were awed by Caesar's military success, and Pompey and Crassus grew jealous of his popularity. In 54 BCE, Crassus invaded the Parthian Kingdom in central Asia, hoping for similar military and political triumphs. The invasion was a disaster, however, and Crassus was captured by the Parthians and executed.

The Roman Empire had now grown large, thanks to Pompey's and Caesar's conquests (Figure 6.35). After Crassus's death, Pompey decided to break with Caesar and support his old enemies the *optimates*. In 49 BCE, the *optimates* and Pompey controlled the Senate and demanded that Caesar disband his army in Gaul and return to Rome to stand trial on various charges. Instead, Caesar convinced his client army to march on Rome. In January of that year he famously led his troops across the Rubicon River, the traditional boundary between Italy and Gaul. Since Caesar knew this move would trigger war, as it was illegal to bring a private army into Rome proper, the phrase "crossing the Rubicon" continues to mean "passing the point of no return." In 48 BCE, Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus in northern Greece. Shortly after this, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered by the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy XIII, who hoped to win Caesar's favor.

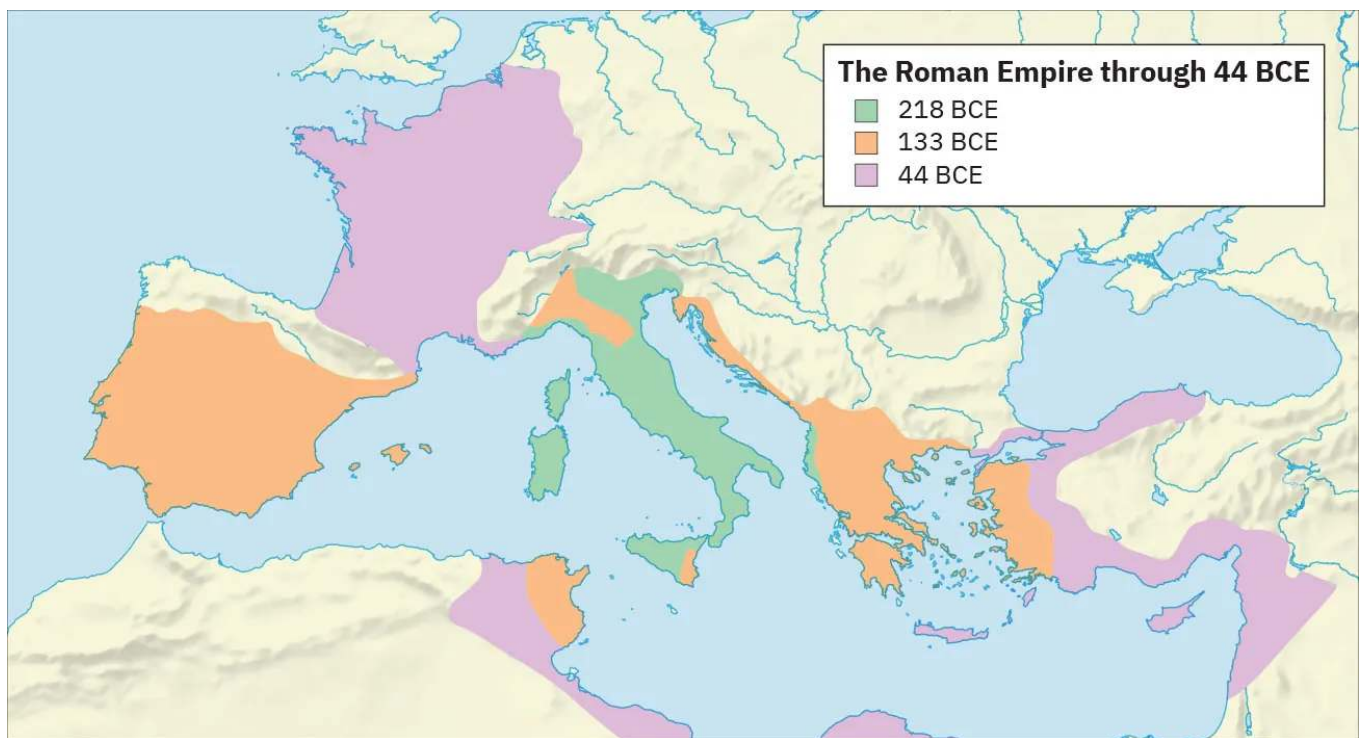


Figure 6.35 The Roman Empire through 44 BCE. Some of the areas marked in purple, like Gaul and Syria, were added to the Roman Empire by the victories of Julius Caesar and Pompey, respectively. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To prosecute the war against Pompey, Caesar had himself appointed dictator in 48 BCE. Despite the tradition that dictatorship was to be temporary, Caesar's position was indefinite. In 46 BCE, he was appointed dictator for a term of ten years, and in 44 BCE his dictatorship was made permanent, or for life. These appointments and other efforts to accumulate power unnerved many Romans, who had a deep and abiding distrust of autocratic rulers that stretched all the way back to the period of Etruscan rule. Caesar had hoped to win over his former enemies by inviting them to serve again in the Senate and appointing them to positions in his government. However, these former *optimates* viewed him as a tyrant, and in 44 BCE two of them, Brutus and Cassius, led a conspiracy that resulted in his assassination.

Link to Learning

In Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, written in about 1599, Marc Antony gives one of the most famous speeches in English literature, based in part on the work of ancient Roman historians like Plutarch. In this [short clip of that speech from the 1970 film adaptation](#) of the play, Charlton Heston plays the part of Marc Antony.

From Republic to Principate

Octavian was only eighteen when Caesar was killed, but as Caesar's adopted son and heir he enjoyed the loyalty and political support of Caesar's military veterans. In 43 BCE, Octavian joined forces with two seasoned generals and politicians, Marc Antony and Lepidus, who both had been loyal supporters of Caesar. Marc Antony had been particularly close to him, as evidenced by the fact that Caesar left his legions under Antony's command in his will. Together these three shared the power of dictator in Rome in a political arrangement known as the Second Triumvirate. Unlike the First Triumvirate, which was effectively a conspiracy, the Second Triumvirate was formally recognized by the Senate. In 42 BCE, the army of the Second Triumvirate, under the command of Antony, defeated the forces of Julius Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece. The Second Triumvirate also ordered the execution of thousands of their political opponents.

After crushing the remnants of the *optimates*, the three men divided the Roman Empire between them: Octavian took Italy, Hispania, and Gaul; Lepidus Africa; and Antony Macedon, Greece, and Asia Minor. Soon they quarreled, however, and civil war erupted once again. Having greater support from Caesar's troops than his two opponents, in 36 BCE Octavian forced Lepidus into retirement. Antony countered by forming an alliance with Cleopatra VII, the Macedonian queen of Egypt, whom he married. Cleopatra was at that time co-ruler with Ptolemy XV, her son by Julius Caesar. With her financial support, Antony raised an army and fleet. In 31 BCE, in the naval Battle of Actium off the coast of northern Greece, Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. When he afterwards invaded Egypt, the pair died by suicide (Figure 6.36), and Octavian installed himself as the new Egyptian pharaoh after executing Ptolemy XV. Octavian used the wealth of his kingdom in Egypt to finance his restructuring of the Roman state.



Figure 6.36 Cleopatra and the Asp. This mid-seventeenth-century painting by the Italian artist Cuido Cagnacci was modeled on one of many ancient accounts about how Cleopatra died. In this version, she allows a poisonous Egyptian snake, an asp, to bite her. If the story is true, she may have been incorporating Egyptian symbolism in her final act, the asp being associated with the Egyptian god Re. (credit: "The Death of Cleopatra" by Purchase, Diane Burke Gift, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, by exchange, Friends of European Paintings Gifts, Gwynne Andrews Fund, Lila Acheson Wallace, Charles and Jessie Price, and Álvaro Saieh Bendeck Gifts, Gift and Bequest of George Blumenthal and Fletcher Fund, by exchange, and Michel David-Weill Gift, 2016/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

One of Octavian's primary tasks after 31 BCE was to consolidate his position in order to preserve the peace and stability he had created. To avoid the fate of his adopted father, he successfully maintained a façade that the Roman Republic was alive and well, assuming titles and powers traditionally associated with it. After stacking the Senate with his supporters, in 27 BCE Octavian officially stepped down as dictator and "restored" the Republic.

The Senate immediately appointed him proconsul or governor of all Roman frontier provinces, which made him effectively the commander of the entire Roman army. The Senate also recognized him as the *Princeps Senatus*, or "leader of the Senate," meaning the senator who enjoyed the most prestige and authority due to his service to the Republic. (The name of this political order, the principate, derives from this title.) Finally, the Senate voted to honor Octavian with the title of *Augustus* or "revered one," used to

describe gods and great heroes of the past. As these honors and titles suggest, Octavian, traditionally referred to as Augustus after 27 BCE, had assumed enormous power. Despite his claim that he had restored the Republic, he had in fact inaugurated the Empire, with himself as emperor possessing almost godlike authority (Figure 6.37).



Figure 6.37 A Temple in the Roman Empire. The power of Augustus laid the foundation for the emergence of the imperial cult, in which Roman emperors were worshiped during their reigns (largely in the east) and assumed demigod status after their deaths. At temples like this one in Vienne, France, built during Augustus's lifetime, people demonstrated their loyalty to the Roman Empire through the rituals of this cult. (credit: "Temple of Augustus and Livia in Vienne" by O.Mustafin/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

After 27 BCE, Augustus held elected office as one of the two consuls, so he could sit in the Senate, oversee the law courts, and introduce legislation to the Centuriate Assembly, but the senators disliked this arrangement because it closed the opportunity for one of them to hold this prestigious office instead. In 23 BCE, therefore, the Senate gave Augustus several powers of a tribune. He could now veto any action taken by government officials, the Senate, and the assemblies, and he could introduce laws to the Plebian Assembly. He could wield political and military power based on the traditional constitution of the Republic.

As emperor, Augustus successfully tackled problems that had plagued Rome for at least a century. He reduced the standing army from 600,000 to 200,000 and provided land for thousands of discharged veterans in recently conquered areas such as in Gaul and Hispania. He also created new taxes specifically to fund land and cash bonuses for future veterans. To encourage native peoples in the provinces to adopt Roman culture, he granted them citizenship after twenty-five years of service in the army. Indigenous cities built in the Roman style and adopting its political system were designated *municipia*, which gave all elected officials Roman citizenship. Through these "Romanization" policies, Augustus advanced Roman culture across the empire.

Augustus also finally brought order and prosperity to the city of Rome. He began a vast building program that provided jobs for poor Romans in the city and reportedly boasted that he had transformed Rome from a city of brick to a city of marble. To win over the masses, he also provided free grain (courtesy of his control of fertile Egypt) and free entertainment (gladiator combats and chariot races), making Rome famous for its bounty of "bread and circuses." He also established a permanent police force in the city, the Praetorian Guard, which he recruited from the Roman army. He even created a fire department.

Augustus provided wealthy Romans outside the ranks of the Senate with new opportunities for advancement via key positions he reserved for them, such as prefect (commander/governor) of the Praetorian Guard and prefect of Egypt. These officials could join the Senate and become members of the senatorial elite. Augustus thus created an effective new bureaucracy to govern the Roman Empire. Emperors who followed him continued these practices.

Augustus was keenly aware that the peace and prosperity he had created was largely built upon his image and power, and he feared what might happen when he died. As a result, the last few decades of his life were spent arranging for a political successor. This was a complicated matter since there was neither an official position of emperor nor a republican tradition of hereditary rule. Augustus had no son of his own, and his attempts to groom others to take control were repeatedly frustrated when his proposed successors died before him. Before his own death in 14 CE, Augustus arranged for his stepson Tiberius to receive from the Senate the power of a proconsul and a tribune. While not his first choice, Tiberius was an accomplished military leader with senatorial support.

Despite the smooth transition to Tiberius in 14 CE, problems with imperial inheritance remained. There were always risks that a hereditary ruler might prove incompetent. Tiberius himself became dangerously paranoid late in his reign. And he was succeeded by his grandnephew and adopted son Gaius, known as Caligula, who after a severe illness became insane. The prefect of the Praetorian Guard assassinated Caligula in 40 CE, and the guard replaced him with his uncle Claudius (40–54 CE). The Roman Senate agreed to this step only out of fear of the army. Claudius was an effective emperor, however, and under his reign the province of Britain (modern England and Wales) was added to the empire.

The government of Claudius's successor, his grandnephew Nero (54–68 CE), was excellent as long as Nero's mother Agrippina was the power behind the throne. After ordering her murder, however, Nero proved a vicious despot who used the Praetorian Guard to intimidate and execute his critics in the Senate. By the end of his reign, Roman armies in Gaul and Hispania were mutinying. The Senate declared him an enemy of state, and he died by suicide. During the year after his death, 68–69 CE, four different generals assumed power, thus earning it the name "Year of the Four Emperors."

Of the four, Vespasian (69–79 CE) survived the civil war and adopted the name Caesar and the title Augustus, even though he was not related to the family of Augustus or their descendants (the Julio-Claudian dynasty). On Nero's death, he had been in command of Roman armies suppressing the revolt of Judea (Roman armies eventually crushed this revolt and sacked Jerusalem in 70 CE). In his administration, Vespasian followed the precedents established by Augustus. For example, he ordered the construction of the Colosseum as a venue for the gladiator shows he provided as entertainment for the Roman masses, and he arranged for his two sons, Titus (79–81 CE) and Domitian (81–96 CE), to succeed him as emperor. Domitian, like Nero, was an insecure ruler and highly suspicious of the Senate; he employed the Praetorian Guard to arrest and execute his critics in that body. In 96 CE, his wife Domitia worked with members of the Senate to arrange for his assassination. Thus the flaws of the principate continued to haunt the Roman state long after its founder was gone.

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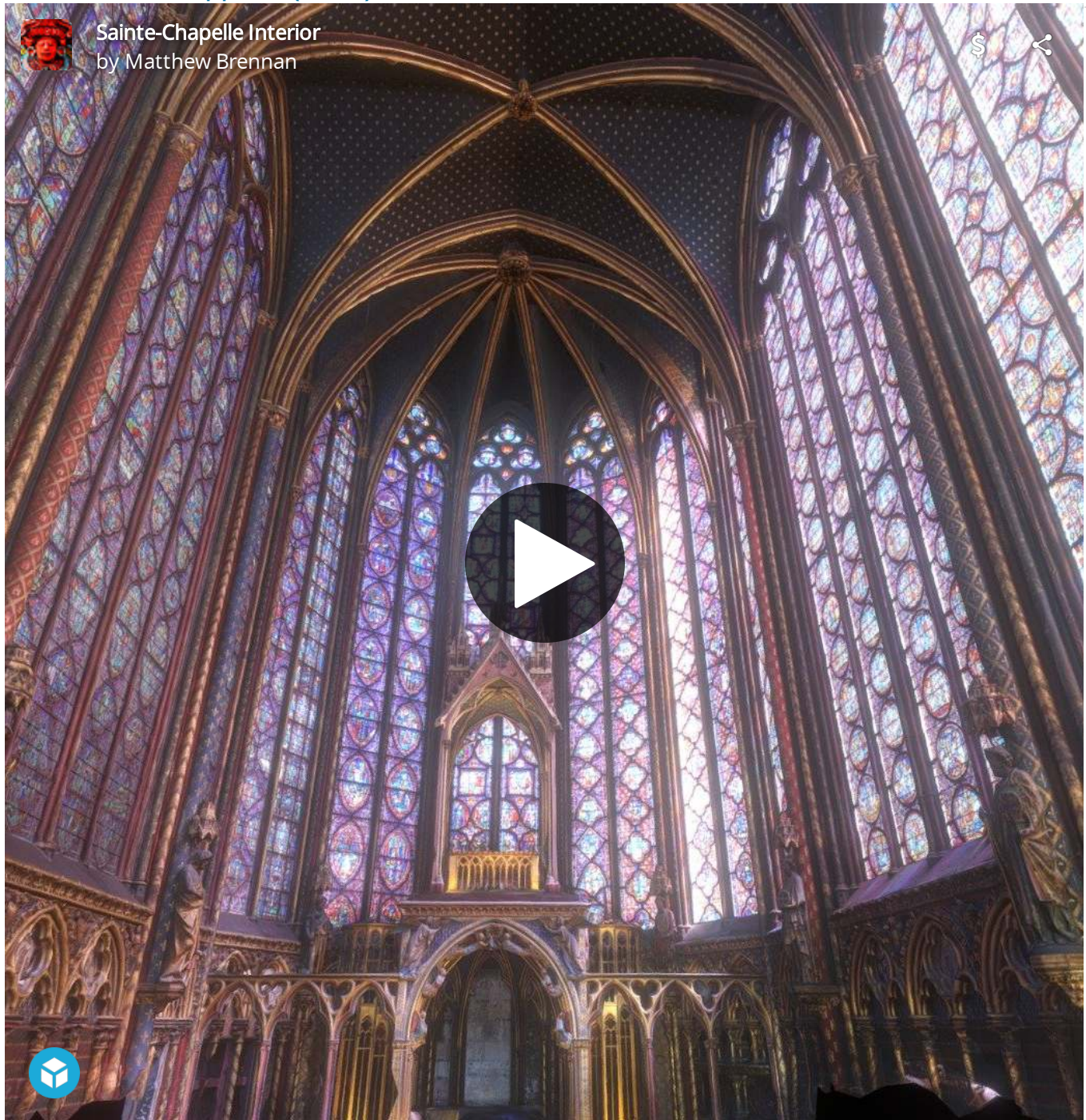
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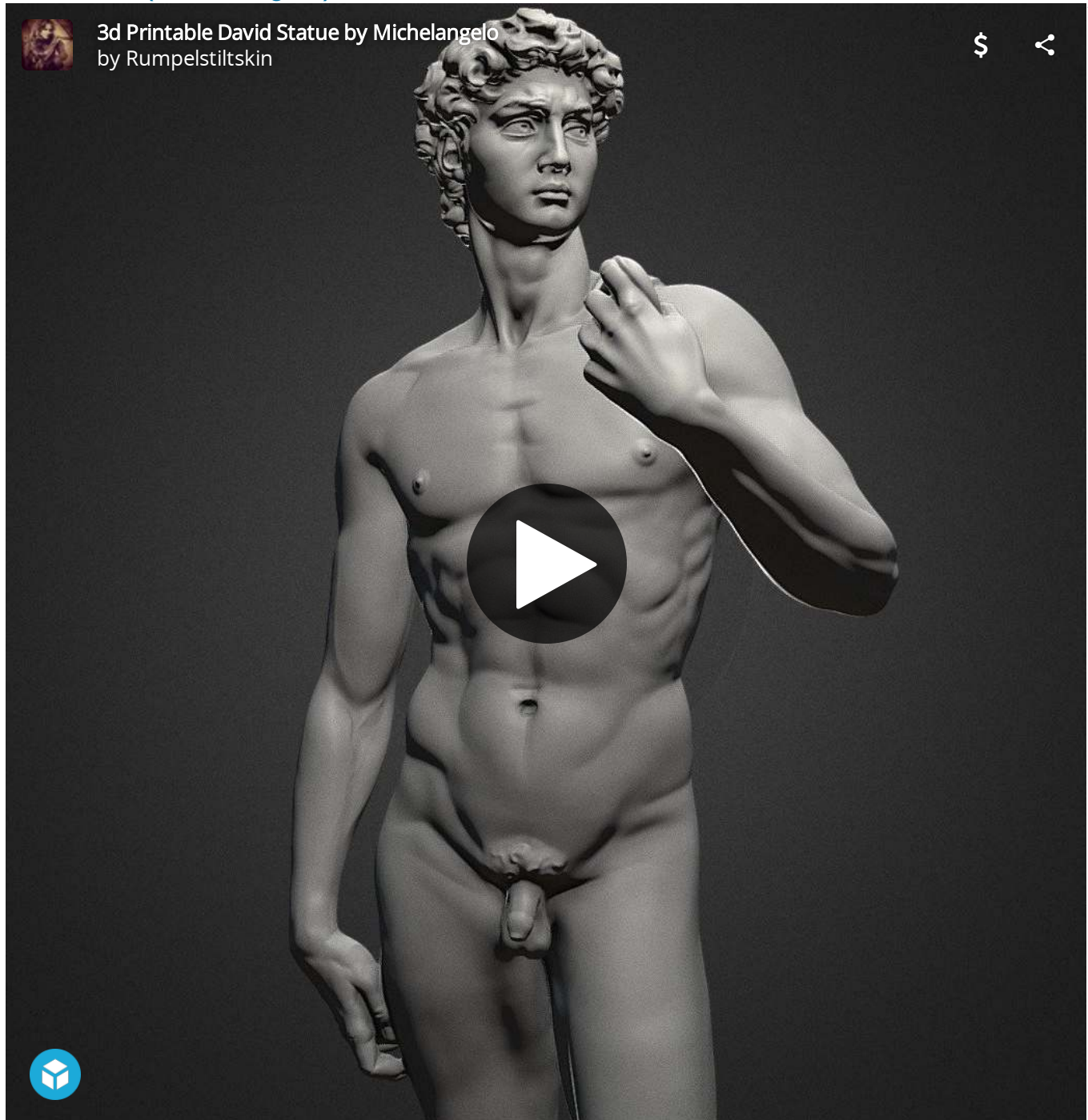
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