

Chapter 1

Early Civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt

Key Topics

Events

- The Agricultural and Urban-State Revolutions
- The Emergence of Urban Society in Mesopotamia
- The Organization of the Pharaonic State in Egypt

Culture and Society

- Ancient World Views
- Temples and Palaces in Mesopotamian Society
- The Pharaonic Ideology of Rule
- Religion and Society
- Daily Life

1. THE MESOPOTAMIAN MIRACLE

Why Mesopotamia?

As far as we can tell, the great leap from peasant village to true city occurred between 3300 and 3000 b.c. in the land of Sumer, in the southern part of Mesopotamia. Here, for the first time, human energies were channeled into the creation of great temple complexes as well as large-scale irrigation and flood-control projects. Directing these operations was a talented elite that drew on the then-revolutionary information storage recovery technique of writing to control the collection, storage, and redistribution of the agricultural surpluses on which this new mode of human organization depended.

A Hostile Environment

Paradoxically, this spectacular development took place in what is, from many viewpoints, a hostile environment. The climate of central and southern Mesopotamia is dry and subtropical, with temperatures reaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and an average annual rainfall of less than ten inches. Unlike the Nile, which floods at a time suitable for the cereal crop cycle, the **Tigris** and **Euphra-**

tes rivers flood between April and June: too late for the summer planting and too early for the winter planting. As a result, agriculture is possible only by means of artificial irrigation and careful crop management. To bring moisture to the fields at the low water levels of the planting seasons, deep canals must be dug and maintained. Rivers change their courses with devastating results. Silting is a perennial problem that can be resolved only by unending labor and a high degree of community cooperation. Essential resources such as stone, timber and metals are in scant supply and have to be imported.

Salinization

Salinization has always been another challenge, especially in the south, where the low water table encourages salt to collect and rise to the surface when the fields are not properly leached by fresh inundations. Without adequate drainage, the soil quickly becomes sterile, making it difficult, if not impossible, to restore to productivity. The rivers, with their unpredictable and often violent floods, are yet another threat to the cities and villages precariously located along their banks. Without human intervention, southern Mesopotamia hovers between swamp and desert, yet it offers immense advantages over the surrounding regions. When properly irrigated, the land is immensely fertile, and in antiquity it was one of the richest food-producing areas in the world. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers are excellent means of transportation, and their regular burden of mud, though not as rich as that of the Nile, is the basis for the natural fertility of the region. It was these factors and, most importantly, the organizational abilities of the Mesopotamians themselves that sustained the brilliant civilization that flourished there for thousands of years—one that has never ceased to influence our own culture.

The Agricultural Revolution

The story of the growth of Mesopotamian civilization begins in the fringes of the region, in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains to the north, and in the hills of Palestine and Lebanon to the west. There, between 8000 and 6000 B.C., occurred an extraordinary event that changed forever the history of the region: the Agricultural, or Neolithic, Revolution.

Why Then?

That it was a revolution there can be no dispute. It transformed the way human beings lived and shattered a tradition over two million years old. However, why the Agricultural Revolution occurred at this precise time is still largely a matter of conjecture. Why, for instance, did it not occur during one of the earlier interglacial periods when, presumably, the same conditions prevailed? It is difficult to find any uniformly satisfying answers. We know that agriculture developed more or less simultaneously in many different parts of the globe, so it is unlikely that it resulted from any single cause, such as climatic change or population growth, although both have been offered as explanations. We also know that the move to agriculture was not always permanently successful. In some places it was tried for a while and then abandoned. It is even possible that certain plants and animals were domesticated more than once and by different peoples.



The Ancient Middle East

The Ancient Middle East is made up essentially of two giant oases, the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, the narrow band of inhabitable land bordering the Nile. The two oases are connected by a land bridge approximately 50 to 80 miles wide.

Most modern explanations of the origins of agriculture tend to emphasize the role of microenvironments and longstanding human-plant and human-animal relationships. Such factors as changing climatic conditions, the presence of animals and plants that offered good potential for domestication, and the cultural and technological levels of achievement of the human populations present undoubtedly played important roles in the development of agriculture. Useful also would have been the proximity of other cultural groups which would have allowed or accelerated the borrowing of technologies among a variety of populations.

The Technology of Agriculture: Domestication

The key to understanding agriculture is the process known as **domestication**. Domestication was the essential technological breakthrough that allowed human beings to escape the age-old system of hunting and gathering and to control the production of food, rather than being at the mercy of what sustenance the terrain might offer at any given moment.

CHRONOLOGY

Events of Early Mesopotamian History

Agricultural Revolution	ca. 8000–6000 B.C.
Development of Agriculture in Mesopotamia	ca. 5500 B.C.
State and Urban Revolution	ca. 3300–3100 B.C.
The Akkadian Empire of Sargon	2334–2230 B.C.
Imperial Ur	2112–2004 B.C.

Domestication can be defined as a primitive form of genetic engineering in which certain plants and animals are brought under human control, their objectionable characteristics eliminated, their favorable ones enhanced, and in the case of animals, inducing them to reproduce in captivity. If wild animals cannot be induced to breed in captivity, they cannot be domesticated. Modern domesticated cattle, sheep, and pigs, for example, look only remotely like their lean, mean, and

fast-moving ancestors. Domestication is best viewed as the creation of an artificial environment in which the chosen plants or animals come to exist exclusively. Left alone, domesticated species—plants or animals—either die or revert to their original wild forms. Because herds, farms, orchards, and gardens are permanent, static entities once they came into being, the old hunting-gathering forms of social organization had to be replaced.

Accumulation of Goods

Hunter-gatherers place a low value on possessions and a high value on mobility. Always on the move, they carry only a few tools and weapons with them. Agriculture reverses this way of life. It cannot be practiced without a commitment to permanence and the accumulation of large amounts of material goods. Homes, villages, and storage facilities must be constructed; fields cleared, divided, and fenced; herds built up and maintained; and tools fabricated. Constant effort is required to maintain all of these. Once settled, farmers may not move again for generations. Pastoralists are equally committed to their flocks and herds but move regularly as grazing needs and the availability of water dictate.

For practical purposes, hunting-gathering bands always remained small, in the range of thirty to fifty people. Larger groups would have been difficult to sustain in most environments; smaller groups could not reproduce themselves. Agriculture, by contrast, knew no limits as far as population growth was concerned. Thus, where hunting-gathering bands restricted their numbers, agricultural communities tended to expand them. Children could be put to work in the fields or gardens at an early age, and at harvest time that was essential to maximize the number of people who could be mobilized. Overpopulation was solved by emigrating and opening up new land for cultivation. By about 6000 B.C., villages with populations in the thousands were common throughout the Middle East.

Counting the Costs of the Agricultural Revolution

The growth of population and the accumulation of material goods changed the way human beings lived. Under hunting-gathering conditions, a rough egalitarianism prevailed: No one had (or needed) more than anyone else. What was the

point of accumulating things that could not be carried from place to place during long nomadic treks? In the settled conditions of agriculture, however, this was not the case. Now there was a reason to expand one's possessions, whether farm or flock. Wealth was its own self-evident justification. Material goods could be accumulated, enjoyed during one's lifetime, and then passed on to the next generation. Work took on new meaning. Indeed it was at this time that idea of work entered human economic and social practice as a kind of necessary and quantifiable commodity. With the advent of the Agricultural Revolution, inequality became, for the first time, an aspect of the human condition because not every individual, household, or community could be equally successful in the quest for material possessions. Where they could, the more successful individuals and communities coerced the less successful ones to labor and toil for them.

INEQUALITY AND GENDER The new way of life had a powerful impact on **gender relations**. With the introduction of agriculture, the role and status of women changed. It is estimated, for instance, that in some present-day hunting-gathering groups, women contribute more than 70 percent of the daily food supply and as a result have higher status than their female counterparts in agrarian societies. In hunting-gathering bands, children are usually spaced at three- to four-year intervals (by means of late weaning), whereas in agricultural societies women have frequent pregnancies and spend more time caring for small children. In addition, men dominate agriculture wherever it involves the use of the plow and herding. As their roles changed and as they lost the ability to contribute directly to the economic well-being of the community, the status of women declined.

THE PUBLIC REALM Another factor contributing to this decline was the emergence of a form of public life. In hunting-gathering bands hierarchy was minimized and authority rested in the hands of the most trusted and able members of the community, as well as the elders. Everyone knew everyone else, and the older members of the community mediated disputes. This changed with the development of large villages, where more formal and less personal methods of administering justice and maintaining order became necessary. The power of coercion and patriarchal control went hand in hand: Men easily assumed the new roles of judges, which complemented their responsibility for defending villages from outside marauders and policing the more unruly members of their own community. The realm of justice, administration, and warfare was defined as an arena of public concern under male control in opposition to, and superior to, the private realm of the family and the household, to which women, children, servants, and, for the first time, slaves were assigned. This distinction between public and private realms is a key to understanding ancient society.

The Agricultural Revolution had thoroughly mixed results. It is usually regarded as a great leap forward for humankind, as indeed it is if we focus only on its ability to provide large food surpluses and to create new and more varied jobs for men. In other respects, though, it posed challenges in terms of cooperation and the ownership of goods that have never been adequately resolved.

Why Do We Toil? The Curse of Work Explained

The blessings of agriculture were immense. On the one hand, the invention of agriculture freed humans from the vagaries and dangers of the hunting-gathering way of life. But as much as the Agricultural Revolution freed humans from one set of life's challenges, it enslaved them to another—namely, the necessity of unremitting toil. Once abandoned, the freedom of the hunting-gathering life style was gone forever. Fields and herds could never be neglected. There could be no holiday from farm work, and drudgery became the normal way of life for most people.

Naturally, we have no direct records of what the earliest agriculturalists made of this rewarding—but hard—New World. We do, however, have what later generations of Mesopotamians thought of their plight. Both the Atrahasis myth and the Babylonian story of creation, the *Enuma Elish*, provide explanations of how the necessity of work came about. The short answer was that it was the fault of the gods. The Atrahasis myth goes as follows.

After years of cultivating the earth “and digging out the canals and taming the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at the behest of the superior gods,” the lower echelon gods who actually did the work revolted. They went on strike and destroyed their tools. This brought about a crisis because without food, the gods could not function and would gradually fade away and take the cosmos with them. The clever god Enki offered a solution. He suggested to his fellow deities that tools be created to do the work of food production. But for tools to be capable of farming they would have to be both living and intelligent. That was a dilemma. How were normally inanimate

tools to be made alive and be capable of thought? The solution was to sacrifice one god so that his blood—identified as his life—could be used to vivify otherwise inanimate tools. In due course humans were fabricated by the birth goddess Belitili from the blood of the god Geshtu-e and clay of the earth. Thus the burden of agricultural labor was transferred from the gods to humans whose sole purpose in existence was to enable the gods to live lives of leisure and maintain the order of the cosmos against chaos.

From the human perspective, this tale answered the perennial question of what are humans for? The Mesopotamian answer, simply, was for work—except, of course, for the tiny handful of elite rulers who lived somewhat like gods. Another Middle Eastern product, the Hebrew Bible, offered a different explanation. As described in the book of *Genesis*, work became toilsome and necessary because of human pride, rebellion and disobedience to God.

Much later and much more prosaically, the Greek philosopher Aristotle skipped altogether the cosmic question of why work had become the lot of humanity and approached the issue from a technological-labor perspective. There could be no escape from work until robots (Aristotle used the word *automata*) have relieved us of the burden. At the beginning of the *Politics* in addressing the perennial problem of human labor, he says: “If shuttles wove and picks played harps all by themselves... there would be no need of workers or slaves” (1253b–1254a). In other words, until the Age of Robots, humans will have to toil—some of course, a lot more than others. Still, Aristotle offered hope.

WEALTH, WAR AND SLAVERY Apart from lowering of the status of women, the agricultural way of life created new stresses for everyone. Herds and farms had to be maintained. New sources of friction arose over boundary lines, possessions, and the equitable distribution of goods and responsibilities. Relations between

men and women and between children and their parents changed. New relations between haves and have-nots, masters and servants, owners and non-owners, freemen and slaves came into being. Warfare became a much more serious business than it had been. There was now something worth fighting over beyond mere disputes about hunting territory: valuable booty in the form of movable goods and people who could be put to work for their new masters, as well as herds and farms that could be appropriated, with their previous owners enslaved.

The End of Hunting-Gathering

It is undoubtedly true that plain superiority in force and numbers allowed agriculturalists to overwhelm hunting-gathering peoples everywhere in the world. It was not a peaceful process. Even when not in direct confrontation, agriculturalists always encroached aggressively on the territories of hunter-gatherers. The problems that arose from rapid population growth were solved as surplus population moved into the territories of hunter-gatherers. In all the sustained confrontations between agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers, the latter have always lost. Today, what was once the only way of life for the human race is practiced by a tiny and ever-shrinking percentage of people in the most inaccessible parts of the globe. In the great sweep of human history, the only two other events that can be compared to the Agricultural Revolution in terms of their effects on human relations are the State and Urban Revolution (to be considered next) and the Industrial Revolution—the age in which we live.

The State and Urban Revolution

About the middle of the sixth millennium B.C. (ca. 5500 B.C.), groups of settlers driven by a mixture of enterprise and pressure from a growing population made their way down to the plains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and took up residence in the more promising riverbank environments. In the marshy south, fish and wildfowl contributed to the diet of the settlers, and in the central steppe area, sheep, cattle, and goats were raised. Having brought with them the grains they had cultivated in the northern hills and valleys, the settlers quickly found that barley could tolerate the somewhat more salty farmlands of the south, and wheat did better in the north. There was a catch, however: Both crops required drainage and irrigation.

Mastery of Irrigation

Initial irrigation efforts occurred on a small scale, but it was soon learned that the volume of grain from the irrigated patches of farmland was disproportionate to the amount of land irrigated and a lot more than had been produced by means of dry-farming techniques in the surrounding hill country. The settlers also found that date palms flourished along the irrigation ditches and riverbanks and provided a high-calorie source of food that was easily stored. Through the transfer and adaptation to a potentially richer area of techniques and crops that had proved successful elsewhere, the foundation for a truly self-sustained agricultural economy was established in southern Mesopotamia between 5000 and 3000 B.C.

Archaeological sources demonstrate that during the fourth millennium (4000–3000 B.C.), many widespread, uniformly distributed agricultural settlements in southern Mesopotamia practiced small-scale irrigation and mixed food production with food gathering. The development of a flourishing economy stimulated trade both within Mesopotamia and with lands as far away as India. Religious centers grew up at strategic sites and served as ceremonial hubs for surrounded towns and villages. Around 3000 B.C., **Uruk** expanded and, drawing population from the surrounding communities, became a true city with a population of approximately 50,000 people. This pattern of rural incorporation was repeated again and again throughout southern Mesopotamia, and then spread west toward Syria and north into Elam.

Why Cities?

Urbanization was not brought about solely by the need for concentrating resources for irrigation, although the advantages of large-scale organization for such purposes must have been clear by this time. The growth of population, the resulting need for greater productivity, ecological factors, and trade would all have contributed, though it is hard to identify anyone of them as the primary cause. An important, if not essential, role was played by the centers of common worship scattered throughout Mesopotamia. These focal points of community life, with their temples and priesthoods, must have been attractive places for craftsmen and traders to settle, and their presence in turn attracted the local landowners and farmers. Thus the temples became centers of economic as well as religious activities. The need for a place of refuge might have been a final factor that drew the population from the scattered towns and villages to the city center. Thick walls, adequate supplies of food, and a large population would have been effective in deterring potential aggressors, whereas small or poorly defended villages or towns would have been tempting targets.

A New Form of Society

Coming soon after the Agricultural Revolution, the State and Urban Revolution introduced yet another set of social relations and released new floods of human energy. Because the form of the state that first emerged in Mesopotamia was the independent, self-sufficient city with its attached rural territory, the term **city-state** was coined to describe the phenomenon. However, it was also possible for the state to evolve with little or no urbanization. Early Egypt is a good example of this latter kind of development.

In the city-state, kin and tribal loyalties are, by definition, subordinated and replaced by political ties. This new form of organization is something much more than just a large town. Political ties are human relations of an entirely new kind; indeed, it is their existence that makes possible all further forms of human development. Population size is not the only factor. An agricultural town might have a large population and still not qualify as a city-state. What makes a city-state different from an agricultural town is the synergy created by its people interacting with each other on the basis of **political relationships** rather than traditional blood ties.

Concentration of population, diversity, and complexity of organization characterize states and city-states. These features encourage the specialization of craft and the stimulation of new ideas, arts, and technologies. Thus even a small Mesopotamian city-state had the capacity to outperform entire groups of villages or agricultural towns whose collective population was much larger. This was true of the production of food and other goods, the education of its inhabitants, and the capacity for defense or conquest.

The Costs and Benefits of Urbanization

The price paid for the new way of life came in the form of weakened family and kin relations and the unequal stratification of society into privileged and less-privileged classes. Justice in the city-state was administered on the basis of impersonal law, and the government assumed a monopoly of power to wage war, punish criminals, and execute any other policy it established. Family and clan heads lost their special power to rule their own kin. Private wars and vendettas between individuals or groups of individuals were outlawed. Religious rituals that previously had been practiced exclusively by clans could now be shared by everyone, clan members or not. In gender relations, the state reinforced the changes that the introduction of agriculture had brought about between males and females.

WHO BENEFITED? The public realm of politics, administration, management, religion, warfare, and economics was enormously expanded, and men were the principal beneficiaries. This was especially true in societies such as those of Mesopotamia, where warfare was a regular part of life. New areas of human endeavor, such as art and monumental architecture, came into being. The invention of writing opened the possibility of careers in a dozen new fields, which were almost exclusively restricted to males. Women benefited from generally rising standards of living, better food supplies, and the more stimulating life of the city. Expanded trade networks brought luxury goods and contact with the outside world. Religion, as always, offered its own special sphere of activities that were solely female. In general, however, women's exclusion from the most significant parts of the public realm meant their restriction to the less-privileged private world.

FACILITATING WARFARE Because a city-state had significant numbers of specialized craftspeople, it was able to produce and store huge quantities of weapons of all kinds. Its bureaucrats could keep track of supplies of metal and other materials needed in warfare. These officials could also find, draft, and equip large numbers of soldiers and then supply them even at a distance from home. When new technologies such as chariots and cavalry were introduced, it was again the cities that had the wealth and resources to obtain them in large numbers. Kings and their officers provided specialized leadership in combat. In addition, the city itself, together with its temples, gods, religious festivals, and homes, provided an identity and a sense of belonging for its inhabitants. The city-state replaced the family or the tribe as something worth fighting for, and propaganda and ideology soon emerged to take advantage of this innovation. Loyalty to the abstract idea of citizenship replaced loyalty to more concrete ties of kin and blood.

2. EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY: THE SUMERIAN PERIOD (3100–2000 B.C.)

History Begins at Sumer

Around 3100 B.C., at the same time that the city-state emerged, Mesopotamia passed another threshold: It went from prehistory to history. For the first time we learn the names of some of the men and women involved in these revolutionary changes and of the places where they lived. All the earliest names of people, such as the Sumerian Uanna-Adapa (better known in its Hebrew form, Adam), are legendary—the inventions of later writers—but the earliest cities mentioned, such as Eridu, Sippar, and Shuruppak, are places familiar in later times.

Languages and Ethnicities

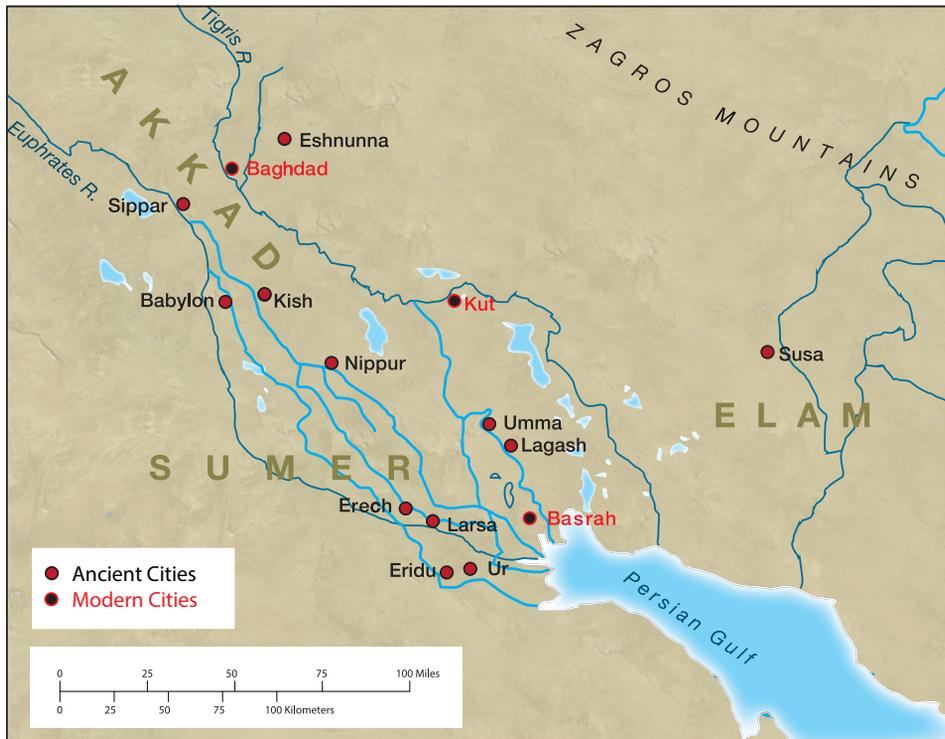
Little is known about the principal linguistic and ethnic groups of Mesopotamia at the time of the State and Urban Revolution. The northern and middle Euphrates region was inhabited by people who spoke a **Semitic** language called **Akkadian** (better known as its dialects, Babylonian and Assyrian); in the south the language groups were Sumerian and Elamite. Neither of the latter is related to any known language group, although it is generally assumed that they were probably at one time more widespread than the present records indicate. We do not know where any of these people originated. All of them emerge into the sudden light of history with their languages and cultures wholly formed.

It is possible that the Sumerians, the creators of urban society, were not native to the region. Despite the difference in language among the three major ethnic groups, Sumerians, Elamites, and Semites, they soon became culturally indistinguishable from one another. All of them adopted some form of the Sumerian city-state and adapted the Sumerian technique of writing to their own languages. They fought among themselves with about equal ferocity, their capacity to do so having been immensely enhanced by their successful urbanization.

Unity or Independence?

From the beginning, Mesopotamia fluctuated between times of unification, when one or another city succeeded in dominating some or all of the others, and times of fragmentation, when the individual city-states went their own anarchic ways. At an early date the city of **Kish** gave some kind of unity to the states of Sumer, and the title *King of Kish* became synonymous with *King of Sumer*. Another city, Nippur, provided the religious sanction for Sumerian overlordship, and in times of extraordinary danger the leaders of the cities assembled there to elect one of their number to the kingship. Eventually, the endorsement of the priesthood of Nippur became an essential part of the legitimation process and was eagerly sought by would-be contenders for the overlordship of Sumer.

LAGASH VS. UMMMA Although the unity of the cities under the leadership of one of their number represents one aspect of Mesopotamian political life, another, more common characteristic was the struggle of the cities among themselves over



Sumer: The Heartland of Cities

The map shows some of the most important cities of the land of Sumer. On the flat, crowded alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia, many of the cities were in sight of each other. The light blue lines indicate dried-up river beds.

boundaries and irrigation water. We know, for example, of the quarrels around 2500 B.C. between **Lagash** and its neighbor **Umma** over a stretch of territory that lay between them. We learn first that “the *ensi* [governor] of Umma, at the command of his god, raided and devoured the Gu-edin, the irrigated land, the field beloved of Ningirsu [the god of Lagash].”¹

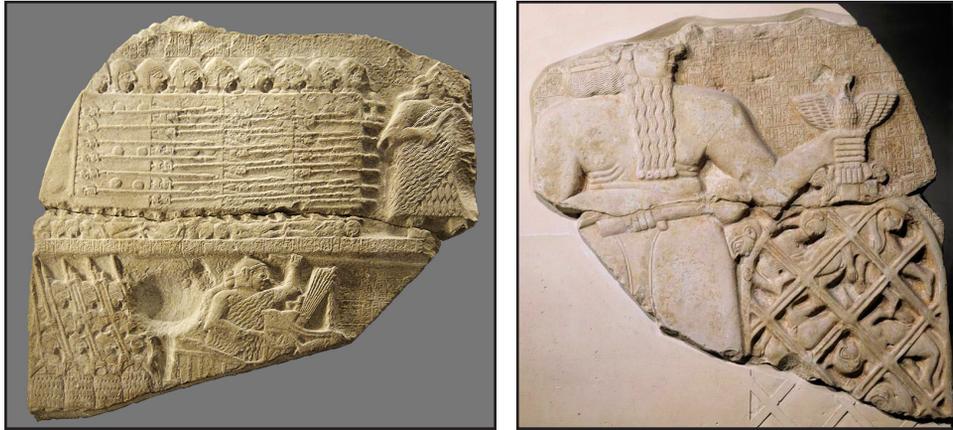
The **phalanx** of Lagash, however, led by its *ensi* Eannatum, attacked the invaders and “heaped up piles of bodies on the plain.”² A century or so later the tables were reversed when Lugalzaggesi of Umma sacked Lagash, and an unknown author wrote the following lament over the ruined city:

The men of Umma have set fire to the temple Antasurra [in Lagash], they have carried away the silver and the precious stones.... They have shed blood in the temple of E-engur, of the goddess Nanshe.³

¹Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966) p. 131. George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

²Ibid.

³From Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 322–323.



Eannatum leads the army of Lagash into battle (left) assisted by the god Ningirsu (right), who holds a net symbolically containing the enemies of his city.

Despite this setback, Lagash recovered, and two centuries later its leader, Gudea, was dedicating huge temples, extending the city's irrigation network, and fostering long distance trade. Yet two hundred years after that, Lagash was embroiled with Larsa, another Sumerian city, and temporarily came under its control.

Sargon: The World's First Emperor

This kind of endless warfare exhausted Sumerian energies and periodically gave outsiders an opportunity to meddle in Sumerian affairs. Around 2350 B.C. Sargon, the powerful Akkadian ruler of Agade in the middle Euphrates region, seized his opportunity and conquered Sumer, declaring himself king of Kish, Uruk, and Ur. He went on to build an empire—the world's first—that stretched from Syria to the Persian Gulf. For a brief time, the fiercely independent city-states of Mesopotamia were forced to stop their quarreling and accept the overlordship of Sargon, his family, and his appointees.

Sargon's empire lasted through the long and vigorous reign of his grandson, **Naram-Sin**, but then sank slowly into anarchy, aptly described by the words of the Sumerian List of Kings: "Who was king? Who was not king!" Various enemies, among them the Amorites of the Syrian desert fringes, the peoples of the Zagros Mountains, and the seething cities of Sumer, had a hand in its downfall. After its collapse, **Ebla** in Syria, the "Akkad of the North," which had been sacked by Naram-Sin, recovered and held sway over northern Mesopotamia, while in the south the individual city-states once more became independent.

Ur-Nammu

Between the fall of Sargon's empire and the rise of Babylon under Hammurabi four hundred or so years later, Sumer had a brief revival, the so-called "renaissance of Ur III" (ca. 2100–2000 B.C.). Under the vigorous leadership of Ur-Nammu, temples were rebuilt, and Ur's **ziggurat**, a pyramidal mud-brick tower, was erected. Over-

Enheduanna: The World's First Author

When Sargon conquered Sumer he was faced with a major problem in reconciling Sumerian-speaking southerners and their Akkadian-speaking conquerors. His approach was to try to fuse the two cultures by identifying Akkadian and Sumerian gods with each other and by appointing members of his own family to religious positions in Sumerian temples.

One of these appointees was his daughter, Enheduanna, whom he made high priestess of both An, the god of heaven, at Uruk, and of Nanna, the moon god, at Ur. Her portrait, as well as two long, well-crafted cycles of hymns that she

wrote, survive, thus making her the world's first-known literary figure. In the hymns the Sumerian goddess Inanna is syncretized (identified) with her Akkadian counterpart, the goddess Ishtar. So successful was Enheduanna in smoothing over the differences between north and south that the king of Sumer continued to appoint his daughter to the position of high priestess of Ur and Uruk long after Sargon's dynasty disappeared. Sometimes these priestesses outlived even their own dynasties and became the legitimating link between one dynasty and the next.

seas trade expanded, and irrigation was improved. One of Ur-Nammu's greatest achievements was the publication of a code of laws intended to systematize and make public the customary rules by which cases were decided. This late flourishing of Sumer under Ur's leadership was the last major effort of the Sumerians as an independent people. Continuing pressure from the Amorites and from Elam gradually weakened Ur, and the city was finally captured and sacked, probably by the Elamites.

Worldviews: Ancient and Modern

In dealing with any of the societies of the ancient world, but especially those in their early phases, it is important to recognize that the viewpoints of these peoples are radically different from our own. This is not simply because they lived long ago and did not possess industrial and scientific know-how, but also because they started out with different assumptions about the world and the place of human beings in it.

Public vs. Private Realms

Most modern Western societies are made up of conglomerations of competing (and sometimes cooperating) public, semipublic, and private bodies, such as business corporations, unions, churches, government agencies, schools, clubs, and private societies of all kinds. The term **civil society** is given to this kind of society. Private life is highly developed, and most citizens, except those who choose a life in politics or government, have little to do with the public realm. Life in modern industrialized countries revolves around jobs, families, social acquaintances, and private organizations to which people belong. Self-expressive individualism is at least officially encouraged. One of the highest compliments we can bestow on people is to say that they think for themselves.

The Sack of Ur

Father Nanna [the chief god of Ur], that city into ruins was made.... Its walls were breached; the people groan; In its lofty gates, where they were wont to promenade. dead bodies were lying about; In its boulevards. where the feasts were celebrated. scattered they lay.... In its places, where the festivities of the land took place, the people lay in heaps.... Ur—its weak

and its strong—perished through hunger.... O Nanna, Ur has been destroyed. its people have been dispersed.

From "A Sumerian Lamentation," trans. S. N. Kramer in James B. Pritchard. ed., *Ancient Middle Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. with Supplement. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 459–460.

The Community Supreme

To understand most ancient societies, however, we must reverse many of these assumptions. Outside the family, little or no difference or separation existed between public and private realms. Society and the state practically coincided. All the institutions of society—family, government, religion, and economic and cultural spheres—were integrated with one another. The community, not the individual, was supreme. People were supposed to fit in, not to be individualistic. There were no private codes of morality or independent lifestyles. However, there was one exception: Individualism could express itself in the choice of one's personal gods. Because the religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt were polytheistic, a great variety of cults were available for every need, every occasion, and every taste. Each household had its own protective deities. There was no single set of religious doctrines and related moral rules to which a person had to adhere as they later did in monotheistic religions.

Religion and Society

In the Mesopotamian worldview, the cities and their inhabitants, together with their domestic animals and even the land itself, belonged to the gods; specifically, they belonged to the god or goddess of each particular city. Reversing modern assumptions, individual men and women were thought to exist for the sake of the gods, not for their own self-fulfillment.

According to the Mesopotamian creation myth, the gods had become tired of working for a living and thus had created human beings to take their place. In this way, although they had solved the problem of work, the gods came to depend on humans to supply them with their food, drink, clothing, and shelter. The inhabitants of Mesopotamian cities were not merely engaged in the secular, humdrum tasks of making a living or raising a family. As servants of the gods, they also participated in a much larger drama in which the gods themselves were the principal actors: the job of making the universe work.

For Mesopotamians, the universe—the **cosmos**—was seen as an orderly whole. However, it had not started out that way, and there was no guarantee that it would remain orderly. It was always possible that it would slip back into its original

form, and then both gods and humans would disappear into the watery, inert chaos of the world's origins.

AKKADIAN COSMOLOGY According to the Akkadian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish* ("When on High"), at the beginning the universe consisted of an undifferentiated, watery mass with two basic elements: the fresh waters (the male principle), known as **Apsu**, and the salt waters (the female principle), known as **Tiamat**. From these two original deities all the other gods were born. The gods were so rowdy that their parents decided to destroy them. When the gods got wind of this plan, they were horrified, but they took heart when one of their number, the god of intelligence and wisdom, **Ea**, succeeded in putting their father, Apsu, into a trance and then killing him. Ea next constructed his dwelling on top of the monstrous remains of Apsu, which thus became earth. Understandably, Tiamat was disturbed by her spouse's destruction and rounded up the forces of chaos to continue the war with her upstart children. The gods were again dismayed, but this time they found a champion in the storm god **Marduk**. After a titanic struggle, Marduk defeated Tiamat and used part of her body to form the sky, then went on to create the rest of the universe, including the human race.

CHAOS OR ORDER? Despite the gods' apparent victory, there was no guarantee that the **forces of chaos** might not recover their strength and overturn the orderly creation of the gods. Gods and humans alike were involved in the perpetual struggle to restrain the powers of chaos, and they each had their own role to play in this dramatic battle. The responsibility of the dwellers of Mesopotamian cities was to provide the gods with everything they needed to run the world. Without this support, the gods could not perform their essential tasks; it was an awesome responsibility for the people of Mesopotamia. At least in early times, it had the effect of inspiring them to superhuman undertakings.

FESTIVALS The role of the city and its inhabitants in the maintenance of the cosmos was brought home with great force at the time of the major festivals. Most of these were associated in some way with the agricultural cycle of the year. They were enacted to keep the natural world functioning properly. Mesopotamians did not view the world as a natural system functioning on its own, independent of human agency, but as something that had to be activated by their personal intervention. The fertility cycle, for instance, could be made to function only by means of a religious ritual in which a marriage between the *ensi*, or king of the city, and the priestess of Inanna took place. Similarly, each year when the flooding Tigris and Euphrates rivers threatened to bring back the primeval watery chaos, the victorious battle of the gods was reenacted in ritual form, and the triumph of gods and humans over chaos was ensured for another year. Given these attitudes, the importance of the temple in Mesopotamian life can easily be appreciated.

Essential Institutions: The Temple and the Palace

The sustaining institutions of the city-states of Mesopotamia and surrounding regions were their temple and palace organizations. Chronologically temples

emerged first at places the local inhabitants believed had been made sacred by an intervention of the gods—an unusual spring or strike of lightning or a peculiar geographical feature. Here people from nearby settlements would gather for common worship and for such social purposes as the settlement of disputes, the making of alliances or the arranging of marriages. Inevitably traders found their way to these religious centers to provide for more general material needs of the worshippers. Practicality dictated that permanent institutions would arise to facilitate and regulate the worship of the gods and provide for the orderly exchange of goods and social services. Here shrines were first erected and then temples. In time they were staffed by permanent priesthoods who accepted offerings from the worshippers on behalf of the gods and then redistributed them to the community. It is significant that in all of the cities of Mesopotamia, shrines or temples were, archaeologically, the earliest monumental buildings to be erected. Kings who protected these sacred sites and their institutions soon followed, their coercive power being legitimized by their association with the gods and their roles as defenders of the temples against internal and external aggression. Palaces as distinct architectural features of cities first make their appearance archaeologically around 2500 B.C., quite a bit later than their temple complexes.

Temples

The most imposing structures of the ancient city-states of Mesopotamia were their temple complexes. These varied in size, shape, and function. The main god or goddess of the city had the largest temples and were believed to live there with his or her family and relatives. Scattered throughout the various regions of the city were neighborhood chapels consisting of a small, open courtyard and a pedestal for a statue of the god or goddess.

Some temples were built on top of high mud brick towers called ziggurats. At **Ur**, for instance, the ziggurat of Ur-Nammu's time was over 70 feet tall and had a base of 150 by 200 feet. It was composed of three separate stories connected by ramps of stairs and was sealed by an 8-foot thick layer of baked bricks set in bitumen. To give its huge bulk a sense of lightness, its lines were slightly curved, a technique later used by the Greeks in the building of the famous temple of Athena at Athens, the Parthenon. Ziggurats were regarded by Mesopotamians as staircases between heaven and earth, the connecting link between gods and humans. The people of Israel, who knew these structures well, took a different view and mocked them in the story of the **Tower of Babel** as symbols of human arrogance.

Other types of temples were built on level ground, usually surrounded by a number of spacious courtyards, each one opening into the other. These courtyards were lined with rooms that served as lodgings for the priests and temple workers, schools, libraries, workshops, and storehouses. All day long the courtyards were full of people coming and going, men and women bringing their offerings to the gods, merchants supplying the worshippers, drovers with their animals, idlers gossiping in the shade, temple attendants coming and going. Some of the temples were huge. At Uruk the building dubbed the Limestone Temple by its excavators measured over 350 by 100 feet and was built on a base of limestone brought from a quarry forty miles away. The temple at Adab dedicated to the mother goddess

Nintu had seven magnificent entrances with impressive names such as *Lofty Gate* and *Door of Refreshing Shade*.

CARING FOR THE GODS The temple buildings themselves were divided into three rooms by partitions or curtains, one behind the other. These rooms had doors of precious wood and ceilings and walls paneled with sweet-smelling cedar. Lions, bulls, and griffins guarded the entrances. In the innermost room was the statue of the god or goddess surrounded by votive offerings, pots of flowers, and incense burners. In the room immediately preceding the god's was an altar or table for offerings and meals, along with a large basin for sacred washings. Daily, to the sound of music, hymns, and prayers, the god was washed, clothed, perfumed, fed, and entertained by minstrels and dancers. In clouds of incense, meals of bread, cakes, fruit, and honey were set before the deity, along with offerings of beer, wine, and water. Animals were slaughtered, and portions of the sacrificial meat were burned in his or her honor. Leftovers were consumed by the priests and temple personnel. On feast days the statues of the deities were taken in solemn procession through the courtyard or the streets of the city accompanied by singing and dancing.

PRIESTS AND PRIESTESSES Large numbers of priests were involved in the daily worship of the god or goddess. Some of them had highly specialized jobs, such as those who recited incantations, interpreted dreams, or anointed the statues of the deities. Others were singers or musicians. Women played important roles. As in the case of **Enheduanna**, the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, the high priestess was often of royal blood. Other priestesses, *naditu* ("barren" or "fallow"), could marry but were not allowed to have children while they remained attached to the temple. The oddity of not being allowed to bear children while being married was handled by allowing the *naditu* to obtain a second wife for her husband. This second wife acted as child bearer for him and as servant for the first wife.

Palaces

The other essential institution of the Mesopotamian city-state was the palace. As population and prosperity increased, the cities became less vulnerable to the old threats of natural disaster and starvation but more exposed to destruction at human hands. Accumulated wealth could be looted, the population enslaved, and the canal system destroyed or taken over. The cities, accordingly, sought for more and more effective defensive (and offensive) measures. The principal of these was the kingship. From about 2600 B.C. onward, kings became central to the organization of the cities and not just ad hoc war leaders chosen for a particular campaign. The maintenance of the army and of the city fortifications was institutionalized and put under the control of the king.

The king's administration was modeled on that of the temple and imitated its protocol. Like the god, the king was surrounded by his servants. Often located in the same area and surrounded by the same thick protecting walls, palace and temple together came to form a kind of sacred city within the city proper.

Many of the palaces were beautifully laid out and handsomely decorated. The palace at **Mari** in northern Mesopotamia is considered one of the gems of Middle Eastern architecture. It covered seven acres and had over three hundred well-

planned rooms and sunny courtyards paved with gypsum. The walls were decorated with paintings. The audience room where the king received ambassadors and the throne room where he held court formed the heart of the palace. Other parts of the building were used for lodging the garrison, guests, scribes, and other attendants of the king. There were also chapels for the king's private devotions and schoolrooms for training palace personnel. Other sections of the palace were given over to workshops, armories, archives, kitchens, and storerooms. Bathrooms had floors sealed with bitumen, and efficient clay pipes provided excellent drainage; when the palace was excavated 3,500 years after its destruction, the plumbing was found to be still working.

ESSENTIAL SCRIBES Among the most important functionaries of the temples and palaces were the scribes, whose exclusive understanding of the complicated **cuneiform** (wedge-shaped) script made them key figures in the administration of the city. Incoming taxes and tribute were recorded along with the yields of the temple and palace possessions. The amount of inventory and the disbursement of goods from storage were recorded, for it was as distribution and regulatory agencies that these two key institutions performed their most important functions.

Thousands of contracts, payrolls, vouchers, labels, wills, marriages, deeds of property, and lists of inventories have survived. Some of the correspondence of the kings with fellow monarchs, provincial governors, and army chiefs has also endured. The letters admonish, order, request information, threaten, and boast. Canals are ordered dug or cleared, troops are mobilized, goods (usually arms or food) or the return of an escaped prisoner are requested, crimes are reported, and strange events that might reveal the will of the gods are noted, along with the details of pragmatic marriage and property arrangements.

Mesopotamian Society

Although Mesopotamians believed that the city and its inhabitants belonged to the gods, this was not meant to be taken in the literal sense that the god, through the temple, owned all the land of the state. In early times especially, the temples were undoubtedly among the largest landholders, but even then the nobility, as well as ordinary free citizens, owned large amounts of land.

In Sumerian times (ca. 3000–2000 B.C.) It is estimated that about half the population consisted of commoners or free citizens. Of lesser status than the free citizenry were the dependents, or clients, of the nobility and the temples, who did not own land and worked, often as tenants, for the nobles and priests. At the bottom of the social pyramid were the slaves, who never seem to have been very numerous at any time during Mesopotamian history. The household was the basic social and economic unit of society as it has been throughout human history. Its importance in Sumerian life is to be seen in the identification of temples with the households of the gods and the palaces of the kings as "Big Houses." As the heads of households, the kings were viewed as the managers or stewards of the household's personnel and possessions, and the city itself was the household of its patron deity writ large.

The Origins of Writing in Mesopotamia

Clay tokens in the form of cones, spheres, disks, and cylinders were used from about 8000 B.C. in the Middle East to store and transmit economic data. Four thousand years later these simple tokens began to be replaced by new types that had a much larger repertoire of shapes such as triangles, ovoids, rectangles, and parabolooids. Each token had a specific meaning. For example, the cone and sphere represented separate measures of grain, while the ovoid stood for a jar of oil, and a disk with an incised cross meant a sheep.

Simple as this system of accounting was, it represented a major breakthrough in the technology of communication. Tokens had the advantage of moving beyond verbal communication to translating concrete information (e.g., numbers of animals) into abstract symbols that could be manipulated and transmitted. Information could be separated from the items being counted, stored, and referred to independently of the individual counter's all too fallible memory.

Tokens were probably originally kept in jars, but after 3350 B.C. they began to be enclosed in cylindrical or spherical clay envelopes. The envelopes in turn were stamped by the sender with symbols indicating the number of tokens in the envelope and what they represented.

Thus, for example, five markings on an envelope indicated that it contained five tokens. These markings also indicated the shapes of the tokens contained in the envelopes. A crucial transition was thus made from simple tokens to symbols representing the tokens. One envelope from Susa, for example, contained three disks and three cylinders, which were symbolized on the envelope by three circular and three long markings that could be read as "33 animals" (sheep?). Three-dimensional tokens could now be expressed in two-dimensional signs. The next logical stage soon followed: The tokens were omitted, and the envelopes became clay tablets bearing impressed signs. The signs on the tablets were the same as those used on the envelopes. From impressed signs the Sumerians moved on to signs incised with a stylus. The earliest signs were pictographic, but by the end of the fourth millennium the signs took on a phonetic value.

Probably without realizing it, the accountants who launched the new method of inscribed markings on clay envelopes had invented writing. About 200 of these envelopes have been found in Mesopotamia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. Some 80 are still intact. About 240 of the earliest impressed tablets have also been found.

Slavery

The Mesopotamian social system was not based on caste, but it is safe to assume that most people born into a particular status or occupation remained in it for the rest of their lives. However, catastrophe or—less likely—extraordinary good luck could change a person's status overnight. Because warfare was constant, enslavement for noble and commoner alike was always possible. Economic hard times could have the same result because it was legal for a father to sell his wife and children into slavery for up to three years; he could even sell himself. Conversely, the status of a slave was not immutable. A slave could work to escape from bondage by setting aside income earned while a slave, and it was always possible to be freed through a gesture of generosity or kindness by one's owner. Slaves also had a number of rights. They could own property, engage in business activities, and

even give evidence in court—more than women could do in most modern societies until recent times. If a freeman took a slave as his mistress and had children by her, she could not be sold, and on his death she and her children were automatically free. If a freewoman married a slave, her children were born free. Hence the gulf between slave and free was not as great as it was to be in other societies, especially because the stigma of race was not present to perpetuate the memory of people having once belonged to an enslaved class.

Women's Legal Rights

Women had important legal rights. They could own property and slaves, engage in business, and appear in court as witnesses. Marriage was monogamous, although in practice a man could have a concubine, especially if his wife was not able to bear children. Parents or elders of the clan usually arranged marriages. Betrothal was recognized when the groom presented his father-in-law with a gift of money, which was lost if he broke off the engagement. Upon marriage the bride assumed possession of these gifts and of the dowry given to her by her own family. The dowry was regarded as inalienable—that is, it could not be sold or given away by her, and on her death it went to her children; if she had no children, the dowry reverted to her father's family. In case of divorce, which was easy for a man to obtain but difficult for a woman, the dowry went with the wife. In a husband's absence, the wife could administer his estate; if he died, she inherited the same share in his estate as her children. She could marry again at will and still keep her original dowry. How closely the actual life experiences of ordinary Mesopotamians tracked these norms is unfortunately impossible to determine. Our evidence for non-elite people in just about any period of history before modern times, unfortunately, is slight. However, that such norms existed as we seen manifested in Mesopotamian law codes is impressive.

Daily Life

The excavated houses of Ur give a good idea of how ordinary Mesopotamians lived. Made of mud brick, the houses often shared common walls. Their doors opened onto narrow, winding streets. Yet the blank exterior walls, with their single small doorways and uninteresting appearance, gave little idea of the comfort, quiet, and privacy that existed within. The thick mud-brick walls gave insulation from the heat of the summer, the cold of the winter, and the noise of the city. Rooms were arranged around a bright, open courtyard where most of the cooking and family living took place. Sometimes the structure had a second story or a small attached garden, but generally space in the city was at a premium. Walls were usually painted white, and floors were covered with a layer of hard gypsum.

FOOD Mesopotamian food was plain but plentiful. Barley was the staple of the south, wheat of the north. Vegetables, cheese, and fish were always available, and most meals would have been accompanied by milk or beer. Mesopotamians were especially fond of the latter. Because a good deal of land was devoted to herding, Mesopotamians probably ate more meat than many other ancient peoples. Figs and dates or a thick, sweet treacle made from dates or grapes were typical desserts.

EDUCATION: FORMAL AND INFORMAL Children were under the complete control of their parents and could be disinherited or, as we have seen, sold into slavery for a period of time. In normal situations, however, children were cherished and loved. Childhood education was largely informal. Children learned from being members of a family and observing its older members at work. Most of all, they learned from belonging to the vibrant communities that were the cities of Mesopotamia. Crowded, narrow streets, marketplaces covered with awnings, and busy, sun-filled plazas around the great temples were all within walking distance of everyone's house. Traders from distant lands brought their wares to the cities, and visitors and travelers were at hand at all times. The cities themselves were constantly abuzz with activities of one kind or another. Assemblies of citizens were consulted on major issues throughout a good portion of the history of Mesopotamia, and perhaps a major trial or some other public business was underway. Great festivals to the gods were held on a regular basis and the meat of sacrifices offered to the gods was shared among the worshippers present. War and preparations for war were common, and building activities were perpetual. If the inhabitants tired of the city, they could always explore the local countryside with its grain fields, date-palm groves and intricate network of canals and ditches.

SCHOOLS In addition to the informal education that took place in the streets of the cities, schools prepared promising students (or at least those whose parents could afford the fees) for a career in the temple or palace bureaucracy or one of the many professions. Many years were spent memorizing the thousands of tiny wedge-shaped signs of **cuneiform** and becoming familiar with the methods of administration used in the temples and palaces. For specific professions such as medicine, engineering, business, and accounting, specialized vocabularies were learned. Because so much of Mesopotamian life revolved around irrigation and farming, specialists were needed who could do the surveying required to establish claims of ownership and help keep disputes out of court. Even genuine research was undertaken, with schools serving as libraries and depositories for records, technical manuals, and literary works of all kinds.

Moral Values and the Afterlife

In early Mesopotamian society, primary emphasis was placed on the virtue of obedience to the gods and subservience to the needs of the community. An orderly world was not possible without firm authority. The ideal society was described as follows:

Days when one man is not insolent to another, when a son reveres his
father,
Days when respect is shown in the land, when the lowly honor the
great.⁴

⁴H. Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1949), pp. 212–213. Originally published as *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946). By permission of the University of Chicago Press.

The Ideals of Mesopotamian Law

In peace the kings of Mesopotamia were supposed to be the upholders of justice and the protectors of the weak and poor against the rich and powerful. This ideal is expressed in the epilogue of the law code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon (ca. 1792–1750 B.C.), part of which appears here. Hammurabi's code, although more systematic than any known prior collection, was by no means the first publication of laws for Mesopotamia, although it probably was the first region-wide promulgation. The existence of such an accessible source of law undercut the influence of local authorities, for by providing individuals with knowledge of the law, Hammurabi empowered them to seek justice on their own behalf.

That the strong might not oppress the weak, and that they should give justice to the orphan and the widow I have inscribed my words upon my monument and established them in the presence of my statue, "King of Justice," in Babylon....

These are the just laws which Hammurabi, the wise king, established and by which he gave the land stable support and good government.... Let any oppressed man, who has a case, come before my image, "King of Justice." Let him read the inscription on my monument! Let him give heed to my weighty words! And may

my monument enlighten him as to his case and may he understand his case! May he set his heart at ease! And let him exclaim: "Hammurabi indeed is a ruler who is like a real father to his people."...

In the days that are yet to come, for all future time, may the king who is in the land observe the words of justice which I have written upon my monument! May he not alter the judgments of the land which I have pronounced, or the decisions of the country which I have rendered. May he not efface my statutes! If that man have wisdom, if he wish to give his land government, let him give attention to the words which I have written upon my monument! And may this monument enlighten him as to procedure and administration, the judgments which I have pronounced, and the decisions which I have rendered for the land! Let him justly rule the Black-Head people [the traditional name for the Sumerians]. Let him pronounce judgments for them and render for them decisions! Let him root out the wicked and the evildoer from the land! Let him promote the welfare of his people!

*Source: Based on *The Code of Hammurabi*, trans. Robert F. Harper (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904), pp. 99–103.*

Although survival in a hostile environment dominated the concerns of these early years, in time Mesopotamians began to look beyond the restrictive ties of their communities, and at the beginning of the second millennium (ca. 2000 B.C.) the needs of the individual—desires, fears, guilt, and sufferings—began to be heard for the first time. Complaints and petitions were not directed to the gods on high but to the individual's own personal god, who might, if sufficiently pressed, do something to help.

A SUMERIAN JOB One such complaint from the period has survived in literary form, by an author sometimes known as the Sumerian Job. In this tale a just, wealthy, and benevolent man is struck down suddenly with sickness and misfor-

tune of all kinds. Even so, he says he will continue to praise his god and will keep lamenting until he is heard:

My god, the day shines bright over the land, for me the day is black....
Tears, lament, anguish, and depression are lodged within me,
Suffering overwhelms me like one chosen for nothing but tears,
Malignant sickness bathes my body.
How long will you neglect me, leave me unprotected?⁵

The afflicted man goes on to say that although he realizes the blame for his misfortunes rests on him, he asks that his hidden faults be revealed so that he may seek forgiveness for them.

GILGAMESH AND THE AFTERLIFE For Mesopotamians the afterworld was a dreary and cheerless place, ruled by a fearsome hierarchy of demons. At best it was a dismal reflection of life on Earth. No one was exempted from it, not even the heroes who struggled to avoid being dragged down into it. Of these the best known was Gilgamesh, one of the early rulers of Uruk, about whom developed a cycle of tales that ultimately came to make up the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, probably the finest product of Middle Eastern literature outside the Hebrew scriptures.

In one of the early versions of this epic, the hero, Gilgamesh, is saddened by the thought of death brought home to him by the sight of “dead bodies floating in the river’s waters,” and he determines to make a name for himself before his own death:

I peered over the wall, Saw the dead bodies floating in the river’s
waters, As for me, I too will be served thus, verily it is so!
Man, the tallest, cannot reach to heaven, Man, the widest, cannot
cover the earth....
I would enter the “land,” would set up my name,
In its places where the names have been raised up, I would raise up
my name,
In its places where the names have not been raised up, I would
raise up the names of the gods.⁶

In a later version Gilgamesh next sets off in quest of adventure with his companion **Enkidu** and a number of volunteers, and after crossing high mountains they vanquish a great monster. However, Enkidu is slain by the gods for an act of impiety, and in broken-hearted grief Gilgamesh leaves the city and the kingship and wanders in the steppe clothed in animal skins:

“My friend, my younger brother— who with me in the foothills
hunted wild ass, and panther in the plains;

⁵Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*, p.128.

⁶Ibid., p. 193.

Enkidu my friend... who with me could do all...
 Now—what sleep is this that seized you?
 You have grown dark and cannot hear me.”
 He did not raise his eyes.
 [Gilgamesh] touched his heart; it was not beating.
 Then he covered his friend, as if he were a bride...
 His voice roared out—a lion...
 Again and again he turned towards his friend, tearing his hair and
 scattering the tufts, stripping and flinging down the finery off
 his body.⁷

In the hope of avoiding a fate similar to that of Enkidu, Gilgamesh sets off to visit the immortal **Utnapishtim**. On the way he is given this piece of advice:

Gilgamesh, whither are you wandering?
 Life, which you look for, you will never find.
 For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and
 life withheld in their own hands. Gilgamesh, fill your belly—
 day and night make merry, let days be full of joy, dance and
 make music day and night.⁸

Finally, Utnapishtim reconciles him to his mortality, although Gilgamesh has other adventures before he returns home. This magnificent poem, which deals with such eternal human problems as sickness, old age, death, fame, and the craving for the unattainable, can be considered a metaphor for Mesopotamia’s own heroic struggle to resist decay and leave a name for itself among the peoples of Earth.

3. THE EGYPTIAN ALTERNATIVE: THE OLD KINGDOM (C.A. 2700–2200 B.C.)

Egypt had considerably more potential for unification than its great northern neighbor, Mesopotamia. Early in its history unity was achieved and maintained for millennia—though not without occasional relapses into anarchy—under the rule of a god-king, the **pharaoh**.

Ecology and Unity

The Nile was an important factor in this early achievement of national unity, for it provided a first-class means of transportation up and downstream. A steady northern wind propelled ships sailing against the current, and traffic moving in the opposite direction had the assistance of the flow of the river itself. Outside the delta the habitable land of Egypt does not extend more than fifteen miles on either

⁷Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* p. 225.

⁸Ibid., p. 226.

side of the Nile, and often much less, so military control of the river could be easily translated into control of Egypt itself.

Beyond the advantages of good communication, Egypt was lucky to have defensible frontiers. To the east and west, fearsome deserts offered protection and reduced potential invasion routes to two easily defended passageways, the **Gaza Strip** to the northeast and the route from Libya through **El Alamein** in the west. Although Egypt's southern border with Nubia (the Sudan) was sometimes troublesome, no threat came from equatorial Africa, thanks to a vast, impenetrable marsh known as the Sudd, in the southern part of the Sudan.

Egypt: The Gift of the Nile

Egypt was also blessed in other respects. The natural environment of the Nile valley made the practice of agriculture much less demanding than it was in Mesopotamia. Annually, the Nile flooded the river valley from desert wall to desert wall to a depth of three to four feet, leaving behind a fertile layer of mud as it receded. The flooding began in early June, and by October the river had returned to its normal channel, just in time for the winter planting of cereal crops—the reverse of the situation in Mesopotamia. Because the water table remained high, no irrigation was necessary. Salinization was not a threat, as the flood waters were sufficient to leach out any salts left by the rapid evaporation of surface water.

FLOOD BASIN IRRIGATION Another piece of good fortune for Egypt was the existence of naturally occurring flood basins. Periodically over the centuries, the Nile had changed its course, leaving behind banks of mud roughly paralleling the river. These natural levees could be turned into reservoirs by damming their ends and trapping the water of the flood between them after they had reached their maximum. These **flood basins** could then be tapped for water for second crops or drained later in the year and planted.

This environment of naturally occurring flood basins was found in both Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Little technical expertise was required to exploit it. Only at critical moments was there any need for concerted community efforts. By contrast, in Mesopotamia, maintenance of the much more sophisticated radial irrigation system called for much higher standards of technical and managerial competence and greater community involvement. When the population of Egypt expanded, however, and more land was needed to support it, the manipulation of the flood basins could be critical to survival. Simply by guaranteeing stable public order, a regional elite could build considerable political power. There was no need for direct involvement in managing irrigation by central authorities and control of agriculture in Egypt always remained a local affair.

A combination of technical expertise in managing irrigation of this kind along with control of trade goods seems to have led to the emergence of the state in Egypt. At first the communities of Upper Egypt competed among themselves for dominance—a great struggle perhaps reflected in the myth of the battle between the brothers Osiris and Seth. The region around Abydos finally emerged supreme and brought all of Upper Egypt under its control. Next came the conquest of the north through a combination of diplomacy, war, and dynastic marriages. By

around 3100 B.C. all of Egypt had been securely and, as it turned out, permanently unified. The final architect of Egyptian unity was the pharaoh Narmer, or Menes, as he is known traditionally.

The new kings built their capital at the strategic site of Memphis, just south of the delta, and over the next several centuries consolidated their rule. Probably no other dynasty in history has been so successful in creating an effective yet apparently timeless form of government. For thousands of years Egyptian pharaohs were able to convey to their subjects a sense of permanence and eternity while constantly adjusting the system to meet new needs. Yet the unifiers of Egypt and the kings of the first dynasties are shadowy figures known only by their names and fine, rectangular tombs. It was only during the period known as the Old Kingdom (ca. 2680–2180 B.C.) that the full glory of Egyptian unity and the techniques by which it had been achieved were revealed.

Pharaonic Power: Theocratic Totalitarianism

The challenge to the early pharaohs was how they were to maintain their rule over the vast land of Egypt. Pharaonic Egypt was over 750 miles from north to south, and in its early years it contained a wide diversity of peoples and cultures. Its natural inclination was toward fragmentation, not unity. A continuing subtheme of Egyptian history was the struggle between the central power of the kings and that of the local authorities in the provinces. Favorable factors, such as defensibility and good communication, have already been mentioned, but Egyptian unity and stability were not an accident of environment alone. They were instead created by the Egyptian people themselves, in particular by their gifted ruling class.

In many ways the Egyptian social and political system is even more alien to those found in western political traditions than the Mesopotamian system; indeed, it is the opposite of what we have come to regard as a desirable form of government. What worked for Egypt in ancient times was a benign, theocratic totalitarianism: a **dictatorship of a God-king**.

In Egyptian belief, the sun rose daily and traveled across the sky to the western horizon, where it entered the underworld during darkness. From there, after fighting off the forces of chaos and disorder, it emerged the following morning with renewed strength and repeated its daily passage through the sky. Similarly, the Nile was thought to pass through a cycle of birth and death. For months it was a quiet, muddy stream between fields burned brown by the hot sun. Then, miraculously, it gathered force and swelled until it overflowed its banks and spread a great mantle of water over the dry countryside. Gradually shrinking, it left a rich deposit of silt from which new crops sprang.

MA'AT: THE THEOLOGY OF PHARAONIC RULE The Egyptians believed that this orderly world had been brought into existence by the gods and fixed by them for all time in the first moment of its creation. There was no evolution, no development, just repetition. The interworking of its parts and the balance of its elements were described by the term *ma'at*, which can be translated as "truth," "balance," "harmony," "justice," and "order." The course of the stars, the sequence of day and night, and the passage of all things from life to death were part of this universal,



Egypt: The Gift of the Nile

Beginning at Aswan, the Nile runs about 1000 miles through Egypt before emptying into the Mediterranean. Until the completion of the Aswan High Dam in 1970 the Nile deposited some 10 million tons of silt annually throughout its length. Water and silt were the foundations of ancient Egypt's agricultural wealth and ultimately of its greatness.

unchanging *ma'at*. The cosmos did not advance or retreat or develop; it repeated itself in an eternal now. What lay outside this was exceptional, an aberration that had to be endured until the gods restored order.

Although the universe was created in this fashion, it was not an infallible mechanism in which the activity of the gods or humans was irrelevant. As in Mesopotamia, the gods were always victorious in the struggle to maintain order, but the struggle always had to be renewed. When it came to maintaining the *ma'at*

CHRONOLOGY

Events of Early Egyptian History

Egypt unified under the pharaohs	ca. 3100 B.C.
The Old Kingdom	ca. 2700–2200 B.C.
Great pyramids built	ca. 2600–2200 B.C.
Collapse of the central government (1st Intermediate Period)	ca. 2160–2055 B.C.
Revival of Egypt: the Middle Kingdom	ca. 2055–1650 B.C.

of Egypt, the gods delegated one of their number, **Horus**, the son of **Osiris**, to be the guarantor of its balance and harmony. His function was to ensure the continuing existence and activity of the gods on Earth by means of religious acts and to maintain the natural order, such as the flow of the Nile and the fertility of the soil. Horus' authority was neither political, nor social, nor economic, but cosmic. He did not rule by the consent of the governed, but by a decision of the gods.

The archetypal myth of Egypt was the succession of Osiris by his

son Horus. According to this myth, the reigning king, Osiris, was killed by his brother Seth and his body dismembered. Ultimately it was put together again by Osiris' faithful wife, **Isis**, and he became the Lord of the Dead, while his son Horus succeeded him as Lord of the Living. Pharaoh did not succeed pharaoh in linear, human succession as one king might succeed another. Instead, every living pharaoh was Horus and every dead one was Osiris. Alternatively—because for Egyptians one religious viewpoint complemented rather than replaced another—the king at death either went up to heaven to be united with **Re** (the Sun God), his father, or he was the Nile dying and coming to life. To ensure successful passage of the pharaoh to the next world, whether as Re or Osiris, it was necessary to guarantee the preservation of the pharaoh's physical remains by means of mummification and to supply all the essentials for the transition.

PHARAOH: THE SHEPHERD OF HIS PEOPLE Although the authority of the pharaoh was unchallengeable, it was not—at least theoretically—dictatorial. The pharaoh was charged by the gods with the care of Egypt, not as his private possession for own personal enjoyment but in accordance with the original act of creation. In the words of one of the pharaohs, Merikare, he was the “shepherd of his people... who spends the day caring for them.” One of the earliest of the kings' insignia was the shepherd's **crook**. The other was the threshing **flail**, a symbol of the king's mastery of cereal agriculture.

Ideally, the pharaoh was accessible to everyone, for **Egyptian justice** aimed not for a kind of Mesopotamian system of law administered according to known, universal codes of behavior but for a more flexible, personal system. The king alone was the source of all law and could adjust it according to the particular circumstances of the case being considered. Naturally, the pharaoh did not administer justice personally to the millions of Egyptians, but his delegates did so in the pharaoh's name, and as far as can be determined the ideology was taken seriously.

Pharaonic Power Demythologized

The optimistic, mythological view of the world fabricated by the pharaohs of the first two dynasties and perfected in the Old Kingdom had a very realistic foundation. From the beginning of Egyptian history the pharaohs avoided the most anarchic aspect of Mesopotamia: the multiplication of independent city-states. Cities of this type, protected by powerful walls, full of independent-minded citizens ruling themselves and trading with each other and with the outside world, were not allowed to develop once pharaonic power was established over a united Egypt. Egyptian cities were unwallled, administrative centers, serving the will of the pharaoh. Interestingly, one of the very earliest depictions of a pharaoh shows one tearing down the walls of a city.

Unlike Sargon or Hammurabi, the Egyptian pharaoh did not have to deal with dozens of city-states, each with its own established traditions, bureaucracy, and government system that could frustrate the decision making of the central authority. The pharaoh stood at the head of a powerful national bureaucracy that owed its allegiance in theory, and generally in practice, to the pharaoh alone and extended its influence to every corner of Egypt. Revolts during times of central government preeminence are virtually unknown. It was a different story when the power of the central administration weakened.

The institutions that came closest to Mesopotamian style city-states were local temples and their attached priesthoods. These institutions interacted with local elite families, sometimes cooperatively, sometimes competitively. Over time the temples tended to collect property and power and to strengthen the inherently local character of ancient Egypt's economy and society. In times of anarchy this guaranteed local stability but the tendency to enhance local power could also undermine national unity.

IRRIGATION, TRADE AND POLITICAL POWER The economic and commercial roles of the pharaohs also contributed to their tight control of the land. As the population of Egypt grew, so did its dependence on irrigation. From a technical viewpoint, this did not involve any major problems. Egypt was never overly densely populated and there was always plenty of available untilled land. As long as political disorder could be avoided, the system usually worked effectively. The pharaohs made this connection clear in their propaganda and emphasized their roles in opening new canals and expanding land under cultivation. Another tool in the hands of the pharaohs was their control of long-distance trade. Given Egypt's peculiar geography that was something well within their grasp.

In the ancient world, the possession of prestige goods—precious metals, brightly colored clothes, feathers, jewelry, and weapons—was a crucial element of status. The owners of these goods were seen as people of importance who had the power to do good or evil to their underlings. The pharaohs carefully guarded their **monopoly of prestige goods** and equally carefully doled them out as signs of royal favor. Conveniently, Egyptian burial customs, which dictated that the dead be buried with rich grave goods, meant there was always a need for new treasures to take their place. Thus the position of the pharaoh as the **key distributor** of pres-

tige goods remained intact from generation to generation. And as pyramid builders, the pharaohs also were the largest employers in the land.

PYRAMID POWER The pharaohs' manipulation of their own mortuary or burial system showed their genius in creating a national government to its fullest extent. Long before the people of the south became the rulers of Egypt, they had buried their dead kings in fine tombs filled with rich funeral offerings. During the Old Kingdom this practice was enlarged, and the tombs of the pharaohs grew more and more magnificent. In form they took the shape of large, rectangular brick buildings (*mastabas*) erected over central burial chambers. However, during the reign of King **Djoser** (ca. 2670 B.C.), **Imhotep**, the pharaoh's master builder, came up with a new and extraordinary burial monument: the step pyramid complex. This consisted of six of the old-style tombs squared and superimposed on each other to a height of over 200 feet, surrounded by a huge, walled courtyard containing a number of temples. All the buildings, including the pyramid, were of stone. Succeeding pharaohs continued to build step pyramids, and eventually the true pyramid with smooth sides evolved.

The Egyptian pyramids were not just burial places where the pharaoh's body was deposited and then forgotten. As was required by an essential tenet of Egyptian theology, worship of the dead pharaohs continued actively at all the pyramid complexes. Priests attended the temples, and whole villages of workers existed to maintain in good repair the pyramid and its accompanying buildings. Estates throughout Egypt were assigned to each pyramid complex to supply its financial and material needs. Over time the multiplication of pyramid complexes and the **pious foundations** or endowments needed to sustain them contributed to undermining the power of the central administration.

A COSMIC DRAMA In the context of the Egyptian view of the universe, the pyramids—of which some one hundred and eighteen are known—served as visible symbols of the pharaoh's divine rule of Egypt, unifying the land in a common, official religion that transcended all local religions. Just as in the Mesopotamian myth all Mesopotamians were engaged in some way in the cosmic drama of the gods, so too Egyptians believed they were involved with the pharaoh and the gods in the maintenance of their land. The burial of the pharaoh, as well as his passage from this world to the next, was not simply a private affair of importance only to the royal family and its retinue, but also an event of national significance. The **ritual cycle** by which the living pharaoh, the god Horus, became Osiris, Lord of the Underworld, guaranteed the survival of Egypt itself. By expressing this act in architectural form in the building of the pyramids, the pharaohs of the Old Kingdom stumbled on—or perhaps cunningly devised—a method of unifying all Egyptians in a single religion of **ancestor worship** in which the pyramids served as giant reliquaries. Even if the religious symbolism were to lose its force, the effect of the great looming mass of the pyramids along the skyline for a hundred miles west of Memphis could not be missed. Their existence guaranteed the legitimacy of the rule of the pharaohs and offered convincing proof of their power. The message could be read by peasant and nobleman alike: The pharaohs had supreme

power and no one else in the land possessed anything like it. They were indeed gods.

Temples, Rituals, and the Afterlife

Although the cult of the pharaoh occupied the most prominent place in the national religion, Egyptians also worshipped thousands of gods, goddesses, spirits, and sacred objects. Tolerant and conservative, they were reluctant to part with old rituals and deities. Although the country's size and cultural complexity contributed to the perpetuation of local gods, exchange was constant among them as the individual cults expanded, contracted, and blended with each other—or as happened sometimes—disappeared.

Animal gods abounded. **Seth**, the rival and murderer of Osiris, was depicted with a doglike body, long neck, upright tail, and squared ears. Horus appeared as a falcon and also as a falcon-headed man. The vulture goddess **Nekhbet** was the tutelary goddess of Upper Egypt, while her opposite in Lower Egypt was the cobra goddess **Wadjet**. **Hathor** had a human head but a cow's ears, horns, and body. Other gods, such as **Min**, **Ptah**, **Atum**, and **Amen**, by contrast, never appeared as animals and were always depicted in human form. A great mingling of divine personalities and traits occurred as the political fortunes or popularity of individual gods rose or fell. When **Narmer**, the unifier of Egypt, moved from Hierakonpolis to Memphis, the god of the latter city, Ptah, came into prominence, and at a later date Re of Heliopolis, not far from Memphis, rose to a position of dominance. The pharaoh, originally identified only with Horus, soon came to be identified also as the son of Re.

Eternal Temples

The cult of the gods was of such central importance to Egyptian life that it is understandable why the temples rose to such prominence. Built of stone, these monuments were created to last forever, and like the tombs of the pharaohs, they became part of the eternal landscape of Egypt.

Egyptian temples were laid out axially, with one room or courtyard leading to another, each one progressively removed from the outside world. Darkness increased room by room until finally the chapel of the cult image was reached. Here only specially designated priests could perform the daily round of liturgical acts that guaranteed the presence of the god in the cult image. These rituals,



A View of the Great Pyramid of Cheops

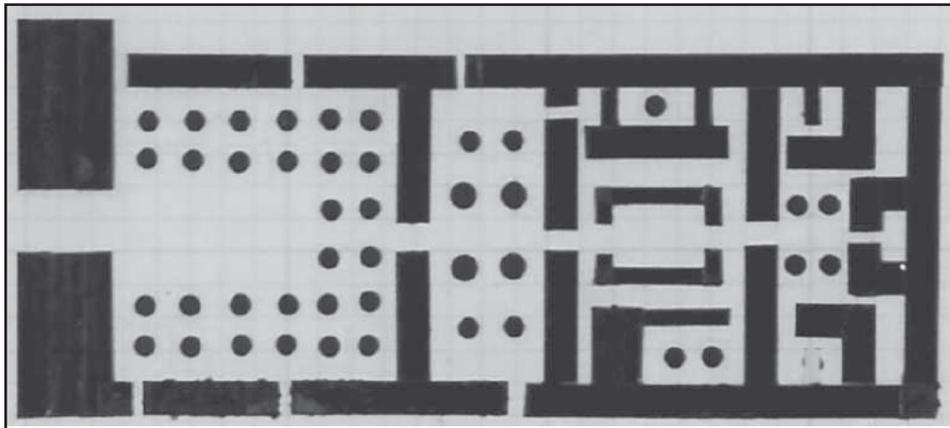
Although pillaged and stripped of its original smooth covering of limestone, the Great Pyramid still suggests something of the power and resources of its creator, the pharaoh Cheops (ca. 2600 B.C.).

performed in accordance with the movement of the sun across the heavens, maintained the temple in harmony with the rhythm of the cosmos and were essential to the continued presence of the gods. The rites began each morning with the opening of the sanctuary doors as the sun was rising. The cult statue was anointed, clothed, and fed, and at that moment it was believed that the god took possession of it. Twice more, at midday and in the evening, the god was fed and entertained. As the sun set, the god departed to join the sun, Re, in his nightly passage through the underworld.

The priests who performed these tasks were laymen who spent part of the year in the service of the temple and the remainder in their normal secular occupations. They were not the guardians of a divine revelation or a caste set aside to perform rituals or preach salvation to the unconverted. They had no ethical role to play, and no one would have thought to consult them on matters of morality. Their principal function was assisting the pharaoh in his most important function: the maintenance of the divine order of creation (*maat*). The priests' job was to see that the temple operated properly, a technical role requiring ritual cleanliness, not inner purity. Egyptian temples were **not synagogues, churches or mosques** where the faithful gathered for instruction, prayer or worship.

Immortality

In Egyptian belief, existence after death without some connection with the body was unthinkable. When a man died, his vital self, his *ka*, continued to exist in the tomb and was sustained by its contents. "Going to one's *ka*" was used as an expression for dying. Contracts were made and corporations formed to see that the dead were supplied with all the essentials they needed in the hereafter. Another aspect of the dead person also survived death: the *ba*—the individualized self or interior consciousness. Personified as a bird, the *ba* could escape the confines of the tomb



Ground plan of a typical Egyptian temple.

The statue of the god was kept in the final room which was approached through a series of connected rooms intended to create a sense of awe.

but required the corpse to retain its identity. A final aspect of the deceased was the *akh*, or Transfigured Spirit, whose abode was heaven. The *akh* was the deceased in transcendent form, without earthly ties, but unlike the *ba* the *akh* did not retain a connection to the body. The *akh* is the most spiritualized of the various concepts the Egyptians had of death.

It is odd that although we know a great deal about the concern of the Egyptians for the afterlife and the meticulous care they gave to preparing for it, we are not completely certain what they thought that life was like. For some it was simply a repetition in its most earthly form of their existence in this world, whereas for others it was a form of reintegration in the cosmic processes. In this latter belief, the souls of the dead became transfigured beings and joined the sun in its daily passage through the sky, or they became stars in the heavens: "Spirit to the sky, corpse into the earth!"⁹ For others, death was an escape from the troubles of life:

Death is before me today
Like a sick man's recovery,
Like going outdoors after confinement.
Death is before me today
Like a well-trodden way,
Like a man's coming home from warfare.
Death is before me today
Like the clearing of the sky,
As when a man discovers what he ignored.
Death is before me today
Like a man's longing to see his home
When he has spent many years in captivity.¹⁰

Art, Literature, and Society

Egyptian art was primarily sacred rather than secular. Tomb paintings and inscriptions served primarily religious and magical purposes and played an essential part in supplying the dead with all the essentials of life in the hereafter. They were neither decorative nor artistic in the contemporary sense of these words. Second, the state and its needs, especially in the early period, overwhelmed the personal and private side of Egyptian life.

Egypt's Eternal, Unchangeable Order

All the great monuments—the pyramids of the Old Kingdom and the temples of the empire period—reflected the power and majesty of the pharaoh and the gods, not of the individual. Egyptian art was intended to emphasize the unchangeable and the eternal, not the fleeting moment of the present. In sculpted reliefs the pha-

⁹H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 100.

¹⁰Miriam Lichtheim, trans., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 168. Reprinted by permission of the University of California Press.

raohs appear disproportionately large, dominating the figures of their enemies and their own officials. Great emphasis is placed on the ideal of the pharaonic order by the careful disposition of the pharaoh and his followers in clear, well-organized registers, whereas the pharaoh's enemies appear in front of him as stunned, chaotic masses. In unruffled calm the pharaoh triumphantly drives the rabble from the battlefield or stands before piles of prostrate bodies and discarded weapons. The message is simple: Egypt is a land cared for by a divine being whose word preserves the order of the land. Evil, by contrast, is a challenge from the demonic outside world that will, in due course, be checked by the might of the pharaoh.

Literature, especially in the early period, was mainly a matter of public rather than private expression. It had a practical purpose, serving primarily the needs of the state, religion, and the bureaucracy. Thus the tombs of the pharaohs were inscribed with spells and incantations, the so-called **pyramid texts**, to ensure the triumphant immortality of the god-kings. These magical charms, hymns, and prayers aimed to advance the king past obstacles he might encounter and protect him from danger. Later these texts were appropriated by the nobles and commoners who could afford to have them inscribed on their coffins in a kind of democratization of the hereafter.

The Wisdom of the Bureaucracy

The Egyptian scribal or bureaucratic system led to the development of a "how to get along in the organization" kind of literature known as **wisdom literature**. Typically it made suggestions on how to handle one's superiors and inferiors and how to prevent one's private life from getting in the way of one's career. One of the most famous wisdom writers, Ptah-hotep, urges the use of initiative and constant effort to get ahead. Eloquence is a useful accomplishment. "It is," according to Ptah-hotep, "a real craftsman who can speak in counsel, for speaking is more difficult than any other labor." A scribe should speak the truth, but not exceed it; he should not answer more than he is asked. A successful bureaucrat is always a good listener:

If you are the one to whom a petition is made, be calm as you listen.... Do not rebuff the petitioner before he has swept out his body or before he has said that for which he came. The petitioner likes attention to his words better than the fulfilling [of them].... It is not necessary that everything about which he has petitioned should come to pass, but a good hearing is soothing to the heart.

The scribe should look after his friends and dependents because "one never knows what may happen tomorrow." Greed is dangerous, an incurable disease that makes friends bitter, alienates one's superiors, creates bad relations with parents, and leads to divorce. A man should look after his wife: "Feed her belly, clothe her back." Some advice went beyond the pragmatic and emphasized moral values.¹¹

¹¹John A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 93.

Do not jeer at a blind man nor tease a dwarf,
 Neither interfere with the condition of a cripple;
 Do not taunt a man who is in the hand of God [an epileptic]
 Nor scowl at him if he errs.
 Man is clay and straw and
 God is his potter;
 He overthrows and he builds daily.¹²

The Mighty Acts of the Gods and Pharaohs

With the exception of love poetry, the hymns and poetry of Egypt concentrated on the celebration and proclamation of the greatness of the pharaohs and the gods. In endlessly repeated refrains, their mighty acts were reviewed without any attempt at developing a narrative account:

How great is the lord of his city:
 he is a canal that restrains the river's flood water!
 How great is the lord of his city:
 he is a cool room that lets a man sleep until dawn!
 How great is the lord of his city:
 he is a walled rampart of copper of Sinai!
 How great is the lord of his city:
 he is an overflowing shade, cool in summertime!
 How great is the lord of his city:
 he is a warm corner, dry in wintertime!¹³

The reason for this approach was not lack of inspiration but the intention of the ancient Egyptian poet, whose object was to evoke rather than analyze or narrate. The poet's aim was to instill in the audience a sense of the fidelity, magnificence, or power of the god or pharaoh, and the endless repetition of the writing had the effect of arousing awe or confidence or mystery, whichever was desired. Unlike the modern poet, who composes almost always for a reading public, this ancient counterpart wrote for public events such as rituals honoring the pharaoh, court liturgies and dramas, burials, processions, and victory celebrations. Dull facts were elevated into religious acts and became part of the ongoing cosmic liturgy, the very opposite of modern poetry, which dwells on subjective moods and feelings or individuals' reactions to the outside world.

Egypt to the End of the End of the Middle Kingdom

For almost a thousand years the pharaohs were able to keep tight control of Egypt. The administration was highly centralized, and provincial officials and elites had little independence. By the reign of Pepy II (2275–2185 B.C.), however, the influence

¹²W. K. Simpson, ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 262. © 1973 by Yale University Press.

¹³Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 199–200.

of the pharaoh was declining and some of his delegates and representatives were beginning to act like pharaohs themselves.

Loss of Central Control

Part of this loss of power by the central administration was caused by the need to maintain the numerous and economically unproductive pyramid complexes with their huge staffs and large endowments. Over the years, rewards to faithful and successful officials constituted another drain on the pharaohs' resources, and inner power struggles, about which we know little, also took their toll. Another factor that seems to have contributed to the decline was a succession of unusually low flood years that led to crop failure, famine, and public disorder. Recent studies have argued that, in general, optimal flooding of the Nile coincided with periods when central control of Egypt was strongest and the reverse, that low flooding correlated with political fragmentation.

If anything was calculated to strip away the myth of pharaonic absolutism, it was the failure to guarantee public order and an adequate food supply. By the end of the sixth dynasty (ca. 2180 B.C.), the centralized authority of Egypt had virtually evaporated, and all the land was in turmoil. Pyramids and tombs were looted, and the endowments for their support were swept away. Memphis ceased to function as the administrative center of the country, and the individual regions of Egypt were left to fend for themselves. At this point Egypt entered what is known as the first Intermediate Period (ca. 2180–2040 B.C.).

Some districts fared better than others during this time of chaos. In the north, the provincial rulers of **Herakleopolis** succeeded in maintaining order in their district and eventually even regained control of the rich delta area. Under the kings of Herakleopolis, Egyptian literature flourished, and for a brief moment a form of individualism emerged. Old standards, values, and even religious beliefs were challenged.

The Quest for Justice

In the *Story of the Eloquent Peasant*, which dates from this time, a farmer demands justice for himself from the king. The tale begins with the peasant going off to the market to sell his produce. On the way he is seized and beaten by a royal official for no apparent reason. The peasant complains to the official's superior, who is so impressed with the peasant's eloquent plea for justice that he informs the king and has the peasant's speech written down. In the end the peasant wins his case and is awarded compensation.

One of the kings of the First Intermediate period, Khety II (ca. 2100 B.C.), is credited with the composition of a book of instructions for his son, **Merikare**. Some of the book offers practical advice on subjects such as the protection of the frontiers and the suppression of revolts, but most of it talks about proper conduct and just dealing with one's peers. Merikare is advised by his father that he should protect the oppressed and the weak and that the gods prefer "the character of one just of heart than the sacrificial ox of one who does mischief."

During this period, access to immortality was democratized as well. In the Old Kingdom immortality had been restricted to the pharaoh, his closest family mem-

bers, and officials, but it was now assumed that it was available to anyone who could afford the appropriate burial ritual and magic spells. It was even suggested that immortality might depend on proper behavior in life and not just on properly performed rituals. The deceased was sometimes depicted in judgment before Re, the sun god, in a judicial process known as the *counting of character*, in which Re measured and compared the individual's virtues and faults.

The Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 B.C.)

While the kings of Herakleopolis were supporting this unusual liberalization of thought, another powerful dynasty was establishing itself in the obscure town of Thebes in the south. The Thebans eventually felt strong enough to challenge the Herakleopolitan kings and, after some skirmishing, defeated them and reunited all of Egypt. With the emergence of this new dynasty (the eleventh dynasty), Egypt entered a new period of its history, the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1780 B.C.).

Although natives of Thebes, the new monarchs moved their capital north to a more strategically located place, It-tawy, just south of Memphis. Large sections of the **Fayum** area were brought under cultivation, and power was once more concentrated in the hands of the central administration. **Nubia** in the south, an important source of gold, was reconquered, and the copper and turquoise mines of Sinai were opened once more. Egyptian influence was felt in Palestine and Lebanon.

For administrative convenience Egypt was divided into three large geographical regions, and the territories of the individual provinces—the nomes of Egypt—were carefully surveyed and demarcated. The god Amen, “The Hidden,” came into prominence, and, grafted onto the sun god, Re, he became “**Amen-Re**, King of the Gods.” The understanding of kingship itself changed. The remote, inaccessible god-king of the Old Kingdom evolved to become the Good Shepherd or Herdsman of his people.

The End of Egypt's Isolation

The Middle Kingdom did not have the fabulous good fortune of the Old Kingdom, however. The eleventh dynasty was succeeded in due course by the powerful kings of the twelfth, but after two centuries, for unknown reasons, the succession failed. The next dynasty was a weak one. It found itself unable to stop a serious economic decline, and the kingship changed hands rapidly. As the power of the pharaohs again faded, the officials of the palace and bureaucracy came to the fore. Among them were a surprising number of immigrants from western Asia bearing the names of a Semitic-speaking people, the **Amorites**. For the first time in history, the outside world was about to intrude on Egypt's blissful isolation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What challenges did salinization pose for Mesopotamians and how was it solved?
2. In what way was domestication an early form of genetic engineering?
3. What changes in society did the Agricultural Revolution bring with it? Have these challenges been met in subsequent history?

4. What factors led to the development of cities? Who benefited and who lost?
5. Besides size, what were the essential differences between a city and an agricultural town or village?
6. Mesopotamia fluctuated between two forms of polity. What were they and were the challenges ever met?
7. Mesopotamian world views differed vastly from those held by modern peoples. Discuss in terms of society and religion.
8. Which two institutions dominated Mesopotamian life? How did they interact with each other?
9. What was the ideology of justice propounded by Hammurabi in his code of laws?
10. The Nile played an important role in the early unification of Egypt. Why was this and why did not the Tigris and Euphrates rivers play a similar role in Mesopotamia?
11. What was the ideology of pharaonic power? What were its realities?
12. What was the archetypal myth of Egyptian religion?
13. Compare and contrast the different approaches to government followed by Mesopotamians and Egyptians.
14. What was the "Wisdom of the Egyptian Bureaucracy?" What kinds of human behavior did this "wisdom" recommend?