

## Theme 2. Civilizations of the Ancient East (3 000–600 BCE)

### From Stone Age to the Ages of metal: culture, thought and religion

During **the Neolithic**, technological aptitude improved. Tools invented during the Paleolithic became more refined, and new ones appeared. The crafts of **pottery and weaving** spread more widely.

In several places during the 3000s B.C.E., the invention of the **wheel**, by permitting the construction of carts, wheelbarrows, and chariots, revolutionized transport and war.

Tools like **hoes** and the **plough** increased labour efficiency and agricultural productivity.

Near the end of the Neolithic, several societies learned the techniques of **metallurgy** (extracting metal from raw ore) and **metalsmithing** (shaping metal into tools). Metallurgy on a large scale began in the Middle East and China between 4000 and 3000 B.C.E. In both places, smiths **mixed copper and tin to create the alloy bronze**, a strong and versatile material for tool making.

As metallurgy spread, both via cultural diffusion and independent innovation, the Neolithic era gave way to the **Bronze Age (ca. 3500–1200 B.C.E.)**.

With the **development of iron**, a metal of even greater strength and usefulness, the Bronze Age came to a close.

Another innovation associated with the transition to civilization is **writing**. Ancient societies developed rich oral traditions, but the written word enabled people to keep records and pass on learning and information more effectively than before. Perhaps the earliest form of writing was developed in the Middle East, by the Sumerians, between 3500 and 3000 B.C.E. (wedge-shaped characters were pressed into clay tablets), followed by the Egyptians at about 3000 B.C.E., the Indus River people around 2200 B.C.E., and the Chinese before 2000 B.C.E. A handful of cultures, including the Incas, reached a civilized state without the benefit of a written script, but this happened rarely.

In the Andes, no form of writing emerged until after Spain's conquest of the Incas in the 1500s C.E. Instead, a form of recordkeeping arose there known as **quipu**, or "**talking knots**," by which information was represented by knots tied in strings, with extra meaning added by various colour combinations.

The first literary works appeared during this period. Among the world's oldest is **Mesopotamia's Gilgamesh Epic**, compiled around 1800 B.C.E., but based on

Sumerian poems dating back to before 2000 B.C.E. The epic is a fictionalized account of a real king from the city-state of Uruk. An oppressor of his people, Gilgamesh is sent by the gods on a series of quests to atone for his wrongdoing. He searches for the secret of immortality and eventually gains wisdom.

**The Egyptian Book of the Dead** describes the judgment of souls after death and advises readers on how to ensure a happy afterlife. This involves not just good behaviour but the proper mummification and entombment of one's remains.

**India's Rig Veda**, a collection of Vedic hymns composed in Sanskrit between 1700 and 1100 B.C.E., is one of the earliest Hindu sacred texts.

From the early Greeks, at around 850 B.C.E., come the **Homeric epics, the Iliad and Odyssey**. The first is a fictionalized account of the Trojan War (ca. 1250 B.C.E.), complete with roles for the Greek gods, while the second describes the adventures of the warrior Odysseus as he returns home from the war.

**Religious practices grew more elaborate.** Shamanism, the faith favoured by most hunter-foragers, appealed less to the settled societies of the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. Ancestor veneration remained common, and agriculturalists turned also to **polytheism, the worship of many gods**, often organized into complex, formalized pantheons (the Sumerian-Babylonian and Egyptian gods of the Middle East, the Olympian deities worshipped by the Greeks (and borrowed by the Romans), the Vedic gods of ancient India, and the "celestial bureaucracy" venerated in China). **Permanent sites of worship and ritual** were erected, such as burial mounds, megaliths (standing stones, including England's famous Stonehenge, dating to the 3000s), shrines, and temples.

In the Middle East the Hebrews, that emerged around 2000 BCE, produced the **first major monotheistic religion, Judaism**. According to Judaic tradition, the Hebrews, in the time of Abraham, entered into a covenant as the chosen people of the god Jehovah. The Hebrews migrated to Egypt around 1700 B.C.E., were enslaved, and then escaped under the leadership of Moses around 1300 to 1200 B.C.E.—the exodus celebrated during the Passover holiday. Moses led the Hebrews to the "promised land" of Canaan (present-day Israel) and is said to have handed down the **Ten Commandments** and the **Torah** ("teaching"), the first five books of the **Tanakh**, or **Hebrew scripture**. Around 1000 BCE the Jewish got their homeland in Israel, but later were expelled from there by the neighbouring peoples in 500 years. The formalization of Judaism itself would not be complete until the 500s and 400s B.C.E.

Of the other new religions appearing during this era, the most influential were **Vedism**, the precursor to Hinduism; Vedism, a polytheistic faith, is thought to have been brought to India by Indo-European invaders around 1500 B.C.E. The oldest and best-known of its scriptures is the **Rig Veda**. Vedism set into place a rigid caste system later adopted by Hinduism. At the top were priest-scholars called

brahmins, followed by warriors and political rulers, then traders, peasants, and artisans, and finally the lower classes, including servants and labourers. Vedism taught that all creatures possessed a soul that yearned to be reunited with the World Soul (Brahman). After about 700 B.C.E. the brahmins' authority was challenged by new ideas that eventually gave birth to Hinduism and Buddhism.

The origins of **Zoroastrianism** are difficult to uncover, with the birthdate of its founder, Zoroaster, ranging from 1700 to 500 B.C.E. Most believed that Zoroaster lived around 1000 B.C.E., probably in eastern Iran. Zoroastrian scripture, the **Avesta**, was compiled over many centuries, and the religion emerged as a major faith in Persia by the 500s B.C.E.. Like the Hebrew religion, Zoroastrianism was monotheistic, venerating a single god: Ahura Mazda, the world's creator and "wise lord." The good deeds of worshippers were said to assist Ahura Mazda in his cosmic struggle against the evil spirit of chaos, Ahriman. An end time of judgment was predicted, with an afterlife promised to those found worthy. Although it is kept alive today by only a few followers—the Parsi sect in parts of Iran, Pakistan, and India—Zoroastrianism influenced much of the Middle East for centuries, and many of its core elements are thought to have found their way into Judaic and Christian doctrines as they evolved.

From earliest times, humans produced art and culture both for individual enjoyment and for social purposes. Civilized societies created works of greater complexity and sophistication. **Much of the ancient world's art and architecture served political purposes**—impressing populations and foreign visitors with the grandeur of the ruling elite—or religious ones. Most prominent were works of monumental architecture, which required enormous expenditures of resources and labour. Motivations for these **mammoth projects** include religion, defence, entertainment, and the public display of political power. Examples from this era include tombs like the **Egyptian pyramids**, temples such as **Mesopotamia's ziggurats** and the **platformed mounds built by the Olmecs**, and the **palace of Babylon**. They also include **city walls, paved streets and roads, and sewage and water systems like the ones found in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa**. All cities are the product of urban planning, although some are laid out more carefully than others.

### **The first agrarian civilizations**

The first civilizations are considered to have formed around 5,500 to 5,000 years ago.

Still, most agree that civilized societies (in contrast to barbaric or primitive) have certain basic features in common, including most if not all of the following:

An economic system

A government

A social system

A moral or ethical belief system

An intellectual tradition

A reasonably high level of technological aptitude

### **Core/ foundational civilizations and the first states**

Between 3500 and 2000 B.C.E., river systems in the Middle East, India, and China gave birth to the world's **oldest civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River valley, and Shang China.**

These, along with **the Olmecs and the Chavín**, two civilizations that arose in the Americas between 1200 and 850 B.C.E., are considered core, or foundational, civilizations.

The first states and empires (states that expand by means of military conquest) had their origins in these **core/foundational civilizations.**

Some people, though having no developed states, performed the role of connectors between civilizations. For example such ones were **Nubia** (to the south of Egypt) since 3000 to 1500 (the time when it was conquered by Egypt) BCE connected through trade Egypt with sub-Saharan Africa.

In the Mediterranean, the bull-worshipping **Minoan civilization** took shape on the island of Crete between 2000 and 1450 B.C.E., influencing the Greeks who later emerged nearby. More directly ancestral to the Greeks were **the Mycenaeans**, who reached their peak between 1600 and 1200 B.C.E. and fought the real-life version of the Trojan War (ca. 1250 B.C.E.) immortalized in the Homeric epics (the Iliad and the Odyssey). **Greek culture** grew more cohesive between the 1100s and the 500s B.C.E.

In Italy, **the city of Rome** is traditionally said to have been founded in 753 B.C.E.

Also worth noting are **the Phoenicians**, a maritime culture that traded and colonized widely throughout the Mediterranean between 1550 and 300 B.C.E. Their main legacy is the **alphabet**, a written script in which each sign represents a sound rather than a concept or object, and which was adopted in modified form by the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. The **alphabet** represented sounds, not concepts, and allowed the formation of any word from a small set of easily memorized symbols.

### **Migrating pastoralists**

Even if they did not form civilizations, migrating pastoralists influenced those who did. These include **the Indo-Europeans**, thought to have spread throughout Eurasia from Central Asia during the 1000s B.C.E. **One Indo-European group, the Aryans**, is considered by many to have played a foundational role in Indian prehistory by invading from the north around 1500 B.C.E.

It was around 1500 B.C.E. that **Bantu herders** began their long migrations from the Niger River basin throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Egypt was conquered by **the Hyksos people** during the 1600s B.C.E., and China's Shang and Zhou dynasties were constantly threatened by **steppe nomads from Central Asia**.

Such pressures typically caused settled civilizations to become more effective at building walls and other defences, and also to adopt new military techniques like horseback warfare, chariot warfare, and the use of bows and arrows. Conflicts between cities gave rise to increasingly professional armies and the art of siege warfare.

## **SOCIETY, TRADE, AND ECONOMICS**

All societies exhibit some form of **class distinction**, according to which people are defined by wealth, ancestry, or occupation. Such distinctions are minor in hunter-forager societies and somewhat more noticeable among pastoralists, but far more important in agricultural and settled societies characterized by **specialization of labour**. Specialized occupations in early societies include **warriors, priests, artisans, merchants, and record-keepers**.

The most common form of government in ancient civilizations, and throughout most of history, was **monarchy**, or rule by a single person. In premodern eras, monarchs were often said to rule by divine will or even to embody a deity. Most monarchs governed with the assistance of a **small elite class** (generally referred to as the **nobility or aristocracy**).

Also prominent in the ancient world was **oligarchy**, or rule by the few, in which aristocratic elites wield power without a monarch.

A government dominated by a religious elite is known as a **theocracy**.

Certain roles, such as political, military, and religious leadership, are more powerful or more valued than others, causing the phenomenon of **social stratification**. A culture's system of ranking social classes is known as a **hierarchy**, and each culture has its own way of deciding how difficult it is for an individual to move from one class to another (the concept of social mobility).

In earlier periods of history, status was almost always **hereditary**, and **religion often played a role in justifying hierarchies**. Elite classes were quite small, and social stratification tended to be rigid.

Especially strict hierarchies, in which movement between classes is all but impossible, are known as **caste systems**.

**Elite classes typically enjoyed legal and financial advantages**, such as more lenient treatment before the law and immunity from taxation.

In most parts of the world since the rise of agricultural and urban cultures, leadership roles, as well as important social functions, have been dominated mainly by men, **making these societies patriarchal**. **Matriarchal societies** are extremely rare (if any).

At the bottom of any hierarchy are those whose labour is coerced. **Slavery**, the most common form of forced labour, was widespread until recent times and still exists in some parts of the world. In ancient times, people fell into slavery in many ways. Some were prisoners of war or captives taken in raids. Many were owned and traded privately, others belonged to the state. **Debt slavery** and **indentured servitude** put people to work for owners who had paid money or taxes they owed. In some societies, **slave status was hereditary**. Slaves might perform hard labour, such as mining, construction, or agricultural fieldwork, or they might be used for household tasks. The severity of their treatment and the degree to which they had legal protections varied from place to place.

**Serfdom**, an institution similar to slavery, compelled peasants to labour for the owners of the land they lived on.

**Prison (or convict) labour**, which often involved especially backbreaking tasks, was utilized in many societies.

**The exchange of goods and services, or trade**, took place on an individual basis (**barter**), but also **on local, regional, and transregional levels**. Within societies, trade led to the formation of marketplaces and strengthened contacts among villages, cities, and rural communities. Connections created by regional and transregional trade spread ideas, beliefs, and technologies over great distances. Trade motivated the development of effective means of water transport and overland transport, including caravans. Until the invention of railroads and modern highways, **water transport remained easier than land transport**. Key transregional routes enabled Egyptian-Mesopotamian trade and, along the Nile, Egyptian-Nubian trade. The Mediterranean supported a large network among the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East. Boats connected the Middle East with the Indian Ocean basin, where commerce, including Mesopotamian-Indus trade, flourished among many peoples.