

# 2

## Early Societies in Southwest Asia and the Indo-European Migrations



### The Quest for Order

Mesopotamia: “The Land between the Rivers”  
 The Course of Empire  
 The Later Mesopotamian Empires

### The Formation of a Complex Society and Sophisticated Cultural Traditions

Economic Specialization and Trade  
 The Emergence of a Stratified Patriarchal Society  
 The Development of Written Cultural Traditions

### The Broader Influence of Mesopotamian Society

Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews  
 The Phoenicians

### The Indo-European Migrations

Indo-European Origins  
 Indo-European Expansion and Its Effects

**By far the best-known individual** of ancient Mesopotamian society was a man named Gilgamesh. According to historical sources, Gilgamesh was the fifth king of the city of Uruk. He ruled about 2750 B.C.E.—for a period of 126 years, according to one semilegendary source—and he led his community in its conflicts with Kish, a nearby city that was the principal rival of Uruk. Historical sources record little additional detail about Gilgamesh’s life and deeds.

But Gilgamesh was a figure of Mesopotamian mythology and folklore as well as history. He was the subject of numerous poems and legends, and Mesopotamian bards made him the central figure in a cycle of stories known collectively as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As a figure of legend, Gilgamesh became the greatest hero figure of ancient Mesopotamia. According to the stories, the gods granted Gilgamesh a perfect body and endowed him with superhuman strength and courage. He was “the man to whom all things were known,” a supremely wise individual who “saw mysteries and knew secret things.” The legends declare that he constructed the massive city walls of Uruk as well as several of the city’s magnificent temples to Mesopotamian deities.

The stories that make up the *Epic of Gilgamesh* recount the adventures of this hero and his cherished friend Enkidu as they sought fame. They killed an evil monster, rescued Uruk from a ravaging bull, and matched wits with the gods. In spite of their heroic deeds, Enkidu offended the gods and fell under a sentence of death. His loss profoundly affected Gilgamesh, who sought for some means to cheat death and gain eternal life. He eventually found a magical plant that had the power to confer immortality, but a serpent stole the plant and carried it away, forcing Gilgamesh to recognize that death is the ultimate fate of all human beings. Thus, while focusing on the activities of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the stories explored themes of friendship, loyalty, ambition, fear of death, and longing for immortality. In doing so they reflected the interests and concerns of the complex, urban-based society that had recently emerged in Mesopotamia.

Productive agricultural economies supported the development of the world’s first complex societies, in which sizable numbers of people lived in cities and extended their political, social, economic, and cultural influence over large regions. The earliest urban societies so far known emerged during the early fourth millennium B.C.E. in southwest Asia, particularly in Mesopotamia.

As people congregated in cities, they needed to find ways to resolve disputes—sometimes between residents within individual settlements, other times between whole settlements themselves—that inevitably arose as individual and group interests conflicted. In search of

**OPPOSITE:** The Royal Standard of Ur, a painting dating from about 2700 B.C.E., depicts scenes from daily life in the Sumerian city-state of Ur.

order, settled agricultural peoples recognized political authorities and built states throughout Mesopotamia. The establishment of states encouraged the creation of empires, as some states sought to extend their power and enhance their security by imposing their rule on neighboring lands.

Apart from stimulating the establishment of states, urban society in Mesopotamia also promoted the emergence of social classes, thus giving rise to increasingly complex social and economic structures. Cities fostered specialized labor, and the resulting efficient production of high-quality goods in turn stimulated trade. Furthermore, early Mesopotamia also developed distinctive cultural traditions as Mesopotamians invented a system of writing and supported organized religions.

Mesopotamian and other peoples regularly interacted with one another. Mesopotamian prosperity attracted numerous migrants, such as the ancient Hebrews, who settled in the region's cities and adopted Mesopotamian ways. Merchants such as the Phoenicians, who also embraced Mesopotamian society, built extensive maritime trade networks that linked southwest Asia with lands throughout the Mediterranean basin. Some Indo-European peoples also had direct dealings with their Mesopotamian contemporaries, with effects crucial for both Indo-European and Mesopotamian societies. Other Indo-European peoples never heard of Mesopotamia, but they employed Mesopotamian inventions such as wheels and metallurgy when undertaking extensive migrations that profoundly influenced historical development throughout much of Eurasia from western Europe to India and beyond. Even in the earliest days of city life, the world was the site of frequent and intense interaction between peoples of different societies.

## The Quest for Order

During the fourth millennium B.C.E., human population increased rapidly in Mesopotamia. Inhabitants had few precedents to guide them in the organization of a large-scale society. At most they inherited a few techniques for keeping order in the small agricultural villages of neolithic times. By experimentation and adaptation, however, they created states and governmental machinery that brought political and social order to their territories. Moreover, effective political and military organization enabled them to build regional empires and extend their authority to neighboring peoples.

### *Mesopotamia: “The Land between the Rivers”*

The place-name *Mesopotamia* comes from two Greek words meaning “the land between the rivers,” and it refers specifically to the fertile valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq. Mesopotamia receives little rainfall, but the Tigris and Euphrates brought large volumes of freshwater to the region. Early cultivators realized that by tapping these rivers, building reservoirs, and digging canals, they could irrigate fields of barley, wheat, and peas. Small-scale irrigation began in Mesopotamia soon after 6000 B.C.E.

*Sumer*

Artificial irrigation led to increased food supplies, which in turn supported a rapidly increasing human population and attracted migrants from other regions. Human numbers grew especially fast in the land of Sumer in the southern half of Mesopotamia. It is possible that the people known as the Sumerians already inhabited this land in the sixth millennium B.C.E., but it is perhaps more likely that they were later migrants attracted to the region by its agricultural potential. In either case, by about 5000 B.C.E. the Sumerians were constructing elaborate irrigation networks that helped them realize abundant agricultural harvests. By 3000 B.C.E. the population of Sumer approached



**Map 2.1 Early Mesopotamia, 3000–2000 B.C.E.** Note the locations of Mesopotamian cities in relation to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In what ways were the rivers important for Mesopotamian society?

one hundred thousand—an unprecedented concentration of people in ancient times—and the Sumerians were the dominant people of Mesopotamia.

While supporting a growing population, the wealth of Sumer also attracted migrants from other regions. Most of the new arrivals were Semitic peoples—so called because they spoke tongues in the Semitic family of languages, including Akkadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Phoenician. (Semitic languages spoken in the world today include Arabic and Hebrew, and African peoples speak many other languages related to Semitic tongues.) Semitic peoples were nomadic herders who went to Mesopotamia from the Arabian and Syrian deserts to the south and west. They often intermarried with the Sumerians, and they largely adapted to Sumerian ways.

Beginning around 4000 B.C.E., as human numbers increased in southern Mesopotamia, the Sumerians built the world's first cities. These cities differed markedly from the neolithic villages that preceded them. Unlike the earlier settlements, the Sumerian cities were centers of political and military authority, and their jurisdiction extended into the surrounding regions. Moreover, bustling marketplaces that drew buyers and sellers from near and far turned the cities into economic centers as well. The cities also served as cultural centers where priests maintained organized religions and scribes developed traditions of writing and formal education.

For almost a millennium, from 3200 to 2350 B.C.E., a dozen Sumerian cities—Eridu, Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Kish, and others—dominated public affairs in Mesopotamia. These cities all experienced internal and external pressures that prompted them to establish states—formal governmental institutions that wielded authority throughout their territories. Internally, the cities needed to maintain order and ensure that inhabitants cooperated on community projects. With their expanding populations, the cities also needed to prevent conflicts between urban residents from escalating into serious civic disorder. Moreover, because agriculture was crucial to the welfare of urban residents, the cities all became city-states: they not only controlled public life within the city walls but also extended their authority to neighboring territories and oversaw affairs in surrounding agricultural regions.

### *Semitic Migrants*

### *Sumerian City-States*



**The massive temple of the moon god Nanna-Suen (sometimes known as Sin) dominated the Sumerian city of Ur. Constructing temples of this size required a huge investment of resources and thousands of laborers.**

While preserving the peace, government authorities also organized work on projects of value to the entire community. Palaces, temples, and defensive walls dominated all the Sumerian cities, and all were the work of laborers recruited and coordinated by government authorities such as Gilgamesh, whom legendary accounts credit with the building of city walls and temples at Uruk. Particularly impressive were the ziggurats—distinctive stepped pyramids that housed temples and altars to the principal local deity. In the city of Uruk, a massive ziggurat and temple complex went up about 3200 B.C.E. to honor the fertility goddess Inanna. Scholars have calculated that its construction required the services of fifteen hundred laborers working ten hours per day for five years.

Even more important than buildings were the irrigation systems that supported productive agriculture and urban society. As their population grew, the Sumerians expanded their networks of reservoirs and canals. The construction, maintenance, and repair of the irrigation systems required the labor of untold thousands of workers. Only recognized government authorities had the standing to draft workers for this difficult labor and order them to participate in such large-scale projects. Even when the irrigation systems functioned perfectly, recognized authority was still necessary to ensure equitable distribution of water and to resolve disputes.

In addition to their internal pressures, the Sumerian cities also faced external problems. The wealth stored in Sumerian cities attracted the interest of peoples outside the cities. Mesopotamia is a mostly flat land with few natural geographic barriers. It was a simple matter for raiders to attack the Sumerian cities and take their wealth. The cities

responded to that threat by building defensive walls and organizing military forces. The need to recruit, train, equip, maintain, and deploy military forces created another demand for recognized authority.

The earliest Sumerian governments were probably assemblies of prominent men who made decisions on behalf of the whole community. When crises arose, assemblies yielded their power to individuals who possessed full authority during the period of emergency. These individual rulers gradually usurped the authority of the assemblies and established themselves as monarchs. By about 3000 B.C.E. all Sumerian cities had kings who claimed absolute authority within their realms. In fact, however, the kings generally ruled in cooperation with local nobles, who came mostly from the ranks of military leaders who had displayed special valor in battle. By 2500 B.C.E. city-states dominated public life in Sumer, and city-states such as Assur and Nineveh had also begun to emerge in northern Mesopotamia.

### *Sumerian Kings*

### *The Course of Empire*

Once they had organized effective states, Mesopotamians ventured beyond the boundaries of their societies. As early as 2800 B.C.E., conflicts between city-states often led to war, as aggrieved or ambitious kings sought to punish or conquer their neighbors. Sumerian accounts indicate that the king of Kish, a city-state located just east of Babylon, extended his rule to much of southern Mesopotamia after 2800 B.C.E., for example, and Sumerian poems praised King Gilgamesh for later liberating Uruk from Kish's control. In efforts to move beyond constant conflicts, a series of conquerors worked to establish order on a scale larger than the city-state by building empires that supervised the affairs of numerous subject cities and peoples. After 2350 B.C.E. Mesopotamia fell under the control of several powerful regional empires.

These regional empires emerged as Semitic peoples such as the Akkadians and the Babylonians of northern Mesopotamia began to overshadow the Sumerians. The creator of empire in Mesopotamia was Sargon of Akkad, a city near Kish and Babylon whose precise location has so far eluded archaeologists. A talented administrator and brilliant warrior, Sargon (2370–2315 B.C.E.) began his career as a minister to the king of Kish. About 2334 B.C.E. he organized a coup against the king, recruited an army, and went on the offensive against the Sumerian city-states. He conquered the cities one by one, destroyed their defensive walls, and placed them under his governors and administrators. As Sargon's conquests mounted, his armies grew larger and more professional, and no single city-state could withstand his forces.

Sargon's empire represented a historical experiment, as the conqueror worked to devise ways and means to hold his possessions together. He relied heavily on his personal presence to maintain stability throughout his realm. For much of his reign, he traveled with armies, which sometimes numbered more than five thousand, from one Mesopotamian city to another. The resulting experience was quite

### *Sargon of Akkad*



**Bronze bust of a Mesopotamian king often thought to represent Sargon of Akkad. The sculpture dates to about 2350 B.C.E. and reflects high levels of expertise in the working of bronze.**



**Map 2.2 Mesopotamian empires, 1800–600 B.C.E.** Mesopotamian empires facilitated interactions between peoples from different societies. Consider the various land, river, and sea routes by which peoples of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt were able to communicate with one another in the second and first millennia B.C.E.

unpleasant for the cities he visited, because their populations had to provide food, lodging, and financial support whenever Sargon and his forces descended upon them. That inconvenience naturally generated considerable resentment of the conqueror and frequently sparked local rebellions. In a never-ending search for funds to support his army and his government, Sargon also seized control of trade routes and supplies of natural resources such as silver, tin, and cedar wood. By controlling and taxing trade, Sargon obtained financial resources to maintain his military juggernaut and transform his capital of Akkad into the wealthiest and most powerful city in the world. At the high point of his reign, his empire embraced all of Mesopotamia, and his armies had ventured as far afield as the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

For several generations Sargon's successors maintained his empire. Gradually, though, it weakened, partly because of chronic rebellion in city-states that resented imperial rule, partly also because of invasions by peoples hoping to seize a portion of Mesopotamia's fabulous wealth. By about 2150 B.C.E. Sargon's empire had collapsed altogether. Yet the memory of his deeds, recorded in legends and histories as well as in his works of propaganda, inspired later conquerors to follow his example.

### *Hammurabi and the Babylonian Empire*

Most prominent of the later conquerors was the Babylonian Hammurabi (reigned 1792–1750 B.C.E.), who styled himself “king of the four quarters of the world.” The

Babylonian empire dominated Mesopotamia until about 1600 B.C.E. Hammurabi improved on Sargon's administrative techniques by relying on centralized bureaucratic rule and regular taxation. Instead of traveling from city to city with an army both large and hungry, Hammurabi and his successors ruled from Babylon (located near modern Baghdad) and stationed deputies in the territories they controlled. Instead of confiscating supplies and other wealth in the unfortunate regions their armies visited, Hammurabi and later rulers instituted less ruinous but more regular taxes collected by their officials. By these means Hammurabi developed a more efficient and predictable government than his predecessors and also spread its costs more evenly over the population.

Hammurabi also sought to maintain his empire by providing it with a code of law. Sumerian rulers had promulgated laws perhaps as early as 2500 B.C.E., and Hammurabi borrowed liberally from his predecessors in compiling the most extensive and most complete Mesopotamian law code. In the prologue to his laws, Hammurabi proclaimed that the gods had chosen him "to promote the welfare of the people, . . . to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil, [so] that the strong might not oppress the weak, to rise like the sun over the people, and to light up the land." Hammurabi's laws established high standards of behavior and stern punishments for violators. They prescribed death penalties for murder, theft, fraud, false accusations, sheltering of runaway slaves, failure to obey royal orders, adultery, and incest. Civil laws regulated prices, wages, commercial dealings, marital relationships, and the conditions of slavery.

The code relied heavily on the principle of *lex talionis*, the "law of retaliation," whereby offenders suffered punishments resembling their violations. But the code also took account of social standing when applying this principle. It provided, for example, that a noble who destroyed the eye or broke the bone of another noble would have his own eye destroyed or bone broken, but if a noble destroyed the eye or broke the bone of a commoner, the noble merely paid a fine in silver. Local judges did not always follow the prescriptions of Hammurabi's code: indeed, they frequently relied on their own judgment when

### *Hammurabi's Laws*



**This handsome basalt stele shows Hammurabi receiving his royal authority from the sun god, Shamash. Some four thousand lines of Hammurabi's laws are inscribed below.**

*lex talionis* (lehks tah-lee-oh-nihs)



deciding cases that came before them. Nevertheless, Hammurabi's laws established a set of common standards that lent some degree of cultural unity to the far-flung Babylonian empire.

Despite Hammurabi's administrative efficiencies and impressive law code, the wealth of the Babylonian empire attracted invaders, particularly the Hittites, who had built a powerful empire in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), and about 1595 B.C.E. the Babylonian empire crumbled before Hittite assaults. For several centuries after the fall of Babylon, southwest Asia was a land of considerable turmoil, as regional states competed for power and position while migrants and invaders struggled to establish footholds for themselves in Mesopotamia and neighboring regions.

### *The Later Mesopotamian Empires*

Imperial rule returned to Mesopotamia with the Assyrians, a hardy people from northern Mesopotamia who had built a compact state in the Tigris River valley during the nineteenth century B.C.E. Taking advantage of their location on trade routes running both north-south and east-west, the Assyrians built flourishing cities at Assur and Nineveh. They built a powerful and intimidating army by organizing their forces into standardized units and placing them under the command of professional officers. The Assyrians appointed these officers because of merit, skill, and bravery rather than noble birth or family connections. They supplemented infantry with cavalry forces and light, swift, horse-drawn chariots, which they borrowed from the Hittites. These chariots were devastating instruments of war that allowed archers to attack their enemies from rapidly moving platforms. Waves of Assyrian chariots stormed their opponents with a combination of high speed and withering firepower that unnerved the opponents and

left them vulnerable to the Assyrian infantry and cavalry forces.

After the collapse of the Babylonian empire, the Assyrian state was one among many jockeying for power and position in northern Mesopotamia. After about 1300 B.C.E. Assyrians gradually extended their authority to much of southwest Asia. They made use of recently invented iron weapons to strengthen their army, which sometimes numbered upward of fifty thousand troops who pushed relentlessly in all directions. At its high point, during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., the Assyrian empire embraced not only Mesopotamia but also Syria, Palestine, much of Anatolia, and most of Egypt. King Assurbanipal, whose long reign (668–627 B.C.E.)

#### *The Assyrian Empire*



**An alabaster relief sculpture from the eighth century B.C.E. depicts Assyrian forces besieging a city and dispatching defeated enemy soldiers. Assyrian royal palaces commonly featured similar wall reliefs celebrating victories of the Assyrian armies.**

coincided with the high tide of Assyrian domination, went so far as to style himself not only “king of Assyria” but also, grandiosely, “king of the universe.”

Like most other Mesopotamian peoples, the Assyrians relied on the administrative techniques pioneered by their Babylonian predecessors, and they followed laws much like those enshrined in the code of Hammurabi. They also preserved a great deal of Mesopotamian literature in huge libraries maintained at their large and lavish courts. At his magnificent royal palace in Nineveh, for example, King Assurbanipal maintained a vast library that included thousands of literary scholarly texts as well as diplomatic correspondence and administrative records. Indeed, Assurbanipal’s library preserved most of the Mesopotamian literature that has survived to the present day, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The Assyrian empire brought wealth, comfort, and sophistication to the Assyrian heartland, particularly the cities of Assur and Nineveh, but elsewhere Assyrian domination was extremely unpopular. Assyrian rulers faced intermittent rebellion by subjects in one part or another of their empire, the very size of which presented enormous administrative challenges. Ultimately, a combination of internal unrest and external assault brought their empire down in 612 B.C.E.

For half a century, from 600 to 550 B.C.E., Babylon once again dominated Mesopotamia during the New Babylonian empire, sometimes called the Chaldean empire. King Nebuchadnezzar (reigned 605–562 B.C.E.) lavished wealth and resources on his capital city. Babylon occupied some 850 hectares (more than 2,100 acres), and the city’s defensive walls were reportedly so thick that a four-horse chariot could turn around on top of them. Within the walls there were enormous palaces and 1,179 temples, some of them faced with gold and decorated with thousands of statues. When one of the king’s wives longed for flowering shrubs from her mountain homeland, Nebuchadnezzar had them planted in terraces above the city walls, and the hanging gardens of Babylon have symbolized the city’s luxuriousness ever since.

By that time, however, peoples beyond Mesopotamia had acquired advanced weapons and experimented with techniques of administering large territories. By the mid-sixth century B.C.E., Mesopotamians largely lost control of their affairs, as foreign conquerors absorbed them into their empires.

*Nebuchadnezzar  
and the New  
Babylonian Empire*

## The Formation of a Complex Society and Sophisticated Cultural Traditions

With the emergence of cities and the congregation of dense populations in urban spaces, specialized labor proliferated. The Mesopotamian economy became increasingly diverse, and trade linked the region with distant peoples. Clearly defined social classes emerged, as small groups of people concentrated wealth and power in their hands, and Mesopotamia developed into a patriarchal society that vested authority largely in adult males. While building a complex society, Mesopotamians also allocated some of their resources to individuals who worked to develop sophisticated cultural traditions. They invented systems of writing that enabled them to record information for future retrieval. Writing soon became a foundation for education, science, literature, and religious reflection.

### *Economic Specialization and Trade*

When large numbers of people began to congregate in cities and work at tasks other than agriculture, they vastly expanded the stock of human skills. Craftsmen refined techniques inherited from earlier generations and experimented with new ways of doing

things. Pottery, textile manufacture, woodworking, leather production, brick making, stonecutting, and masonry all became distinct occupations in the world's earliest cities.

### *Bronze Metallurgy*

Metallurgical innovations ranked among the most important developments that came about because of specialized labor. Already in neolithic times, craftsmen had fashioned copper into tools and jewelry. In pure form, however, copper is too soft for use as an effective weapon or as a tool for heavy work. About 4000 B.C.E. Mesopotamian metalworkers discovered that if they alloyed copper with tin, they could make much harder and stronger implements. Experimentation with copper metallurgy thus led to the invention of bronze. Because both copper and tin were relatively rare and hence expensive, most people could not afford bronze implements. But bronze had an immediate impact on military affairs, as craftsmen turned out swords, spears, axes, shields, and armor made of the recently invented metal. Over a longer period, bronze also had an impact on agriculture. Mesopotamian farmers began to use bronze knives and bronze-tipped plows instead of tools made of bone, wood, stone, or obsidian.

### *Iron Metallurgy*

After about 1000 B.C.E. Mesopotamian craftsmen began to manufacture effective tools and weapons with iron as well as bronze. Experimentation with iron metallurgy began as early as the fourth millennium B.C.E., but early efforts resulted in products that were too brittle for heavy-duty uses. About 1300 B.C.E. craftsmen from Hittite society in Anatolia (discussed later in this chapter) developed techniques of forging exceptionally strong iron tools and weapons. Iron metallurgy soon spread throughout Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and other regions as well, and Assyrian conquerors made particularly effective use of iron weapons in building their empire. Because iron deposits are much cheaper and more widely available than copper and tin, the ingredients of bronze, iron quickly became the metal of choice for weapons and tools.

### *The Wheel*

While some craftsmen refined the techniques of bronze and iron metallurgy, others devised efficient means of transportation based on wheeled vehicles and sailing ships, both of which facilitated long-distance trade. The first use of wheels probably took place about 3500 B.C.E., and Sumerians were building wheeled carts by 3000 B.C.E. Wheeled carts and wagons enabled people to haul heavy loads of bulk goods—such as grain, bricks, or metal ores—over much longer distances than human porters or draft animals could manage. The wheel rapidly diffused from Sumer to neighboring lands, and within a few centuries it had become a standard means of overland transportation.

### *Shipbuilding*

Sumerians also experimented with technologies of maritime transportation. By 3500 B.C.E. they had built watercraft that allowed them to venture into the Persian Gulf and beyond. By 2300 B.C.E. they were trading regularly with merchants of Harappan society in the Indus River valley of northern India (discussed in chapter 4), which they reached by sailing through the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Until about 1750 B.C.E. Sumerian merchants shipped woolen textiles, leather goods, sesame oil, and jewelry to India in exchange for copper, ivory, pearls, and semiprecious stones. During the time of the Babylonian empire, Mesopotamians traded extensively with peoples in all directions: they imported silver from Anatolia, cedarwood from Lebanon, copper from Arabia, gold from Egypt, tin from Persia, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, and semiprecious stones from northern India.

### *Trade Networks*

Archaeological excavations have shed bright light on one Mesopotamian trade network in particular. During the early second millennium B.C.E., Assyrian merchants traveled regularly by donkey caravan some 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) from their home of Assur in northern Mesopotamia to Kanesh (modern Kültepe) in Anatolia. Surviving correspondence shows that during the forty-five years from 1810 to 1765 B.C.E. merchants transported at least eighty tons of tin and one hundred thousand textiles from Assur and returned from Kanesh with no less than ten tons of silver. The correspon-



**A silver model of a boat discovered in a royal tomb at Ur throws light on Sumerian transportation of grain and other goods on the rivers, canals, and marshes of southern Mesopotamia about 2700 B.C.E.**

dence also shows that the merchants and their families operated a well-organized business. Merchants' wives and children manufactured textiles in Assur and sent them to their menfolk who lived in trading colonies at Kanesh. The merchants responded with orders for textiles in the styles desired at Kanesh.

### *The Emergence of a Stratified Patriarchal Society*

Agriculture enabled human groups to accumulate wealth, and clear distinctions between the more and less wealthy appeared already in neolithic villages such as Jericho and Çatal Hüyük. With increasingly specialized labor and long-distance trade, however, cities provided many more opportunities for the accumulation of wealth. Social distinctions in Mesopotamia became much more sharply defined than those of neolithic villages.

In early Mesopotamia the ruling classes consisted of kings and nobles who won their positions because of their valor and success as warriors. Community members originally elected their kings, but royal status soon became hereditary, as kings arranged for their sons to succeed them. Nobles were mostly members of royal families and other close supporters of the kings.

The early kings of the Sumerian cities made such a deep impression on their contemporaries that legends portrayed them as offspring of the gods. According to many legends, for example, Gilgamesh of Uruk, the son of a goddess and a king, was two-thirds divine and one-third human. Some legends recognized him as a full-fledged god. Large-scale construction projects ordered by the kings and the lavish decoration of capital cities also reflected the high status of the Mesopotamian ruling classes. All the Mesopotamian cities boasted massive city walls and imposing public buildings.

Closely allied with the ruling elites were priests and priestesses, many of whom were younger relatives of the rulers. The principal role of the priestly elites was to intervene with the gods to ensure good fortune for their communities. In exchange for those

#### *Social Classes*

#### *Temple Communities*



**Gypsum carving of an elderly couple from the city of Nippur about 2500 B.C.E.**

services, priests and priestesses lived in temple communities and received offerings of food, drink, and clothing from city inhabitants. Temples also generated income from vast tracts of land that they owned and large workshops that they maintained. One temple community near the city of Lagash employed six thousand textile workers between 2150 and 2100 B.C.E. Other temple communities cultivated grains, herded sheep and goats, and manufactured leather, wood, metal, and stone goods. Because of their wealth, temples provided comfortable livings for their inhabitants, and they also served the needs of the larger community. Temples functioned as banks where individuals could store wealth, and they helped underwrite trading ventures to distant lands. They also helped those in need by taking in orphans, supplying grain in times of famine, and providing ransoms for community members captured in battle.

Apart from the ruling and priestly elites, Mesopotamian society included less privileged classes of free commoners, dependent clients, and slaves. Free commoners mostly worked as peasant cultivators in the countryside on land owned by their families, although some also worked in the cities as builders, craftsmen, or professionals, such as physicians or engineers. Dependent clients had fewer options than free commoners because they possessed no property. Dependent clients usually worked as agricultural laborers on estates owned by others, including the king, nobles, or priestly communities, and they owed a portion of their production to the landowners. Free commoners and dependent clients all paid taxes—usually in the form of surplus agricultural production—that supported the ruling classes, military forces, and temple communities. In addition, when conscripted by ruling authorities, free commoners and dependent clients also provided labor services for large-scale construction projects involving roads, city walls, irrigation systems, temples, and public buildings.

### *Slaves*

Slaves came from three main sources: prisoners of war, convicted criminals, and heavily indebted individuals who sold themselves into slavery to satisfy their obligations. Some slaves worked as agricultural laborers on the estates of nobles or temple communities, but most were domestic servants in wealthy households. Many masters granted slaves their freedom, often with a financial gift, after several years of good service. Slaves with accommodating masters sometimes even engaged in small-scale trade and earned enough money to purchase their freedom.

### *Patriarchal Society*

While recognizing differences of rank, wealth, and social status, Mesopotamians also built a patriarchal society that vested authority over public and private affairs in adult men. Within their households men decided the work that family members would perform and made marriage arrangements for their children as well as any others who came under their authority. Men also dominated public life. Men ruled as kings, and decisions about policies and public affairs rested almost entirely in men's hands.

Hammurabi's laws throw considerable light on sex and gender relations in ancient Mesopotamia. The laws recognized men as heads of their households and entrusted all major family decisions to their judgment. Men even had the power to sell their wives and children into slavery to satisfy their debts. In the interests of protecting the reputations of husbands and the legitimacy of offspring, the laws prescribed death by drowning as the punishment for adulterous wives, as well as for their partners, while permitting men to engage in consensual sexual relations with concubines, slaves, or prostitutes without penalty.

### *Women's Roles*

In spite of their subordinate legal status, women made their influence felt in Mesopotamian society. At ruling courts women sometimes advised kings and their governments. A few women wielded great power as high priestesses who managed the enormous estates belonging to their temples. Others obtained a formal education and worked as scribes—literate individuals who prepared administrative and legal documents for governments and private parties. Women also pursued careers as midwives, shopkeepers, brewers, bakers, tavern keepers, and textile manufacturers.

## Sources from the Past

### Hammurabi's Laws on Family Relationships

*By the time of Hammurabi, Mesopotamian marriages had come to represent important business and economic relationships between families. Hammurabi's laws reflect a concern to ensure the legitimacy of children and to protect the economic interests of both marital partners and their families. While placing women under the authority of their fathers and husbands, the laws also protected women against unreasonable treatment by their husbands or other men.*

128: If a seignior acquired a wife, but did not draw up the contracts for her, that woman is no wife.

129: If the wife of a seignior has been caught while lying [i.e., having sexual relations] with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject.

130: If a seignior bound the (betrothed) wife of a(nother) seignior, who had no intercourse with a male and was still living in her father's house, and he has lain in her bosom and they have caught him, that seignior shall be put to death, while that woman shall go free.

131: If a seignior's wife was accused by her husband, but she was not caught while lying with another man, she shall make affirmation by god and return to her house. . . .

138: If a seignior wishes to divorce his wife who did not bear him children, he shall give her money to the full amount of her marriage-price [money or goods that the husband paid to the bride's family in exchange for the right to marry her] and he shall also make good to her the dowry [money or goods that the bride brought to the marriage] which she brought from her father's house and then he may divorce her.

139: If there was no marriage-price, he shall give her one mina of silver as the divorce-settlement.

140: If he is a peasant, he shall give her one-third mina of silver.

141: If a seignior's wife, who was living in the house of the seignior, has made up her mind to leave in order that she may engage in business, thus neglecting her house (and) humiliating her husband, they shall prove it against her; and if her husband has then decided on her divorce, he may divorce her, with nothing to be given her as her divorce-settlement upon her departure. If her husband has not decided on her divorce, her husband may marry another woman, with the former woman living in the house of her husband like a maidservant.

142: If a woman so hated her husband that she has declared, "You may not have me," her record shall be investigated at her city council, and if she was careful and was not at fault, even though her husband has been going out and disparaging her greatly, that woman, without incurring any blame at all, may take her dowry and go off to her father's house.

143: If she was not careful, but was a gadabout, thus neglecting her house (and) humiliating her husband, they shall throw that woman into the water.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Discuss the extent to which Hammurabi's various provisions on family relationships protected the interests of different groups—husbands, wives, and the family itself.

SOURCE: James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 171–72.

During the second millennium B.C.E., Mesopotamian men progressively tightened their control over the social and sexual behavior of women. To protect family fortunes and guarantee the legitimacy of heirs, Mesopotamians insisted on the virginity of brides at marriage, and they forbade casual socializing between married women and men outside their family. By 1500 B.C.E. and probably even earlier, married women in Mesopotamian cities had begun to wear veils when they ventured beyond their own households to discourage the attention of men from other families. This concern to control women's social and sexual behavior spread throughout much of southwest Asia and the Mediterranean basin, where it reinforced patriarchal social structures.

*Cuneiform Writing*

**Cuneiform tablet from Ur dating from 2900 to 2600 B.C.E. It records deliveries of barley to a temple.**

used graphic symbols to represent sounds, syllables, and ideas as well as physical objects. By combining pictographs and other symbols, the Sumerians created a powerful writing system.

When writing, a Sumerian scribe used a stylus fashioned from a reed to impress symbols on wet clay. Because the stylus left lines and wedge-shaped marks, Sumerian writing is known as *cuneiform*, a term that comes from two Latin words meaning “wedge-shaped.” When dried in the sun or baked in an oven, the clay hardened and preserved a permanent record of the scribe’s message. Many examples of early Sumerian writing survive to the present day. Babylonians, Assyrians, and other peoples later adapted the Sumerians’ script to their languages, and the tradition of cuneiform writing continued for more than three thousand years. Although it entered a period of decline in the fourth century B.C.E. after the arrival of Greek alphabetic script, in which each written symbol represents a distinct, individual sound, scribes continued to produce cuneiform documents into the early centuries C.E.

*Education*

Most education in ancient times was vocational instruction designed to train individuals to work in specific trades and crafts. Yet Mesopotamians also established formal schools, since it required a great deal of time and concentrated effort to learn cuneiform writing. Most of those who learned to read and write became scribes or government officials. A few pursued their studies further and became priests, physicians, or professionals such as engineers and architects. Formal education was by no means common, but already by 3000 B.C.E., literacy was essential to the smooth functioning of Mesopotamian society.

Though originally invented for purposes of keeping records, writing clearly had potential that went far beyond the purely practical matter of storing information. Mesopotamians relied on writing to communicate complex ideas about the world, the gods, human beings, and their relationships with one another. Indeed, writing made possible the emergence of a distinctive cultural tradition that shaped Mesopotamian values for almost three thousand years.

## *The Development of Written Cultural Traditions*

The world’s earliest known writing came from Mesopotamia. Sumerians invented a system of writing about the middle of the fourth millennium B.C.E. to keep track of commercial transactions and tax collections. They first experimented with pictographs representing animals, agricultural products, and trade items—such as sheep, oxen, wheat, barley, pots, and fish—that figured prominently in tax and commercial transactions. By 3100 B.C.E. conventional signs representing specific words had spread throughout Mesopotamia.

A writing system that depends on pictures is useful for purposes such as keeping records, but it is a cumbersome way to communicate abstract ideas. Beginning about 2900 B.C.E. the Sumerians developed a more flexible system of writing that

Literacy led to a rapid expansion of knowledge. Mesopotamian scholars devoted themselves to the study of astronomy and mathematics—both important sciences for agricultural societies. Knowledge of astronomy helped them prepare accurate calendars, which in turn enabled them to chart the rhythms of the seasons and determine the appropriate times for planting and harvesting crops. They used their mathematical skills to survey agricultural lands and allocate them to the proper owners or tenants. Some Mesopotamian conventions persist to the present day: Mesopotamian scientists divided the year into twelve months, for example, and they divided the hours of the day into sixty minutes, each composed of sixty seconds.

Mesopotamians also used writing to communicate abstract ideas, investigate intellectual problems, and reflect on human beings and their place in the world. Best known of the reflective literature from Mesopotamia is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Parts of this work came from the Sumerian city-states, but the whole epic, as known today, was the work of compilers who lived after 2000 B.C.E. during the days of the Babylonian empire. In recounting the experiences of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the epic explored themes of friendship, relations between humans and the gods, and especially the meaning of life and death. The stories of Gilgamesh and Enkidu resonated so widely that for some two thousand years—from the time of the Sumerian city-states to the fall of the Assyrian empire—they were the principal vehicles for Mesopotamian reflections on moral issues.

### *Astronomy and Mathematics*



### *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

**A wall relief from an Assyrian palace of the eighth century B.C.E. depicts Gilgamesh as a heroic figure holding a lion.**



## The Broader Influence of Mesopotamian Society

While building cities and regional states, Mesopotamians deeply influenced the development and experiences of peoples living far beyond Mesopotamia. Often their wealth and power attracted the attention of neighboring peoples. Sometimes Mesopotamians projected their power to foreign lands and imposed their ways by force. Occasionally migrants left Mesopotamia and carried their inherited traditions to new lands. Mesopotamian influence did not completely transform other peoples and turn them into carbon copies of Mesopotamians. On the contrary, other peoples adopted Mesopotamian ways selectively and adapted them to their needs and interests. Yet the broader impact of Mesopotamian society shows that, even in early times, complex agricultural societies organized around cities had strong potential to influence the development of distant human communities.

### *Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews*

The best-known cases of early Mesopotamian influence involved Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews, who preserved memories of their historical experiences in an extensive collection of sacred writings. Hebrews were speakers of the ancient Hebrew language. Israelites formed a branch of Hebrews who settled in Palestine (modern-day Israel) after 1200 B.C.E. Jews descended from southern Israelites who inhabited the kingdom of Judah. For more than two thousand years, Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews interacted constantly with Mesopotamians and other peoples as well, with profound consequences for the development of their societies.

#### *The Early Hebrews*

The earliest Hebrews were pastoral nomads who inhabited lands between Mesopotamia and Egypt during the second millennium B.C.E. As Mesopotamia prospered, some Hebrews settled in the region's cities. According to the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament of the Christian Bible), the Hebrew patriarch Abraham came from the Sumerian city of Ur, but he migrated to northern Mesopotamia about 1850 B.C.E., perhaps because of disorder in Sumer. Abraham's descendants continued to recognize many of the deities, values, and customs common to Mesopotamian peoples. Hebrew law, for example, borrowed the principle of *lex talionis* from Hammurabi's code. The Hebrews also told the story of a devastating flood that had destroyed all early human society. Their account was a variation on similar flood stories related from the earliest days of Sumerian society. One early version of the story made its way into the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Hebrews altered the story and adapted it to their own interests and purposes, but their familiarity with the flood story shows that they participated fully in the larger society of Mesopotamia.

#### *Migrations and Settlement in Palestine*

The Hebrew scriptures do not offer reliable historical accounts of early times, but they present memories and interpretations of Hebrew experience from the perspectives of later religious leaders who collected oral reports and edited them into a body of writings after 800 B.C.E. According to those scriptures, some Hebrews migrated to Egypt during the eighteenth century B.C.E. About 1300 B.C.E., however, this branch of the Hebrews departed under the leadership of Moses and went to Palestine. Organized into a loose federation of twelve tribes, these Hebrews, known as the Israelites, fought bitterly with other inhabitants of Palestine and carved out a territory for themselves. Eventually the Israelites abandoned their inherited tribal structure in favor of a Mesopotamian-style monarchy that brought the twelve tribes under unified rule. During the reigns of King David (1000–970 B.C.E.) and King Solomon (970–930 B.C.E.),



**Map 2.3** Israel and Phoenicia, 1500–600 B.C.E. Note the location of Israel and Phoenicia with respect to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean Sea. How might geographical location have influenced communications and exchanges between Israel, Phoenicia, and other lands of the region?

Israelites dominated the territory between Syria and the Sinai peninsula. They built an elaborate and cosmopolitan capital city at Jerusalem and entered into diplomatic and commercial relations with Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Arabian peoples.

The Hebrew scriptures also teach that after the time of Moses, the religious beliefs of the Israelites developed along increasingly distinctive lines. The early Hebrews had recognized many of the same gods as their Mesopotamian neighbors: they believed that nature spirits inhabited trees, rocks, and mountains, for example, and they honored various deities as patrons or protectors of their clans. Moses, however, embraced monotheism: he taught that there was only one god, known as Yahweh, who was a supremely powerful deity, the creator and sustainer of the world. All other gods, including the various Mesopotamian deities, were impostors—figments of the human imagination rather than true and powerful gods. When the kings of the Israelites established their capital at Jerusalem, they did not build a ziggurat, which they associated with false Mesopotamian gods but, rather, a magnificent, lavishly decorated temple in honor of Yahweh.

Although he was the omnipotent creator of the universe, Yahweh was also a personal god. He expected his followers to worship him alone, and he demanded that they observe high moral and ethical standards. In the Ten Commandments, a set of religious and ethical principles that Moses announced to the Israelites, Yahweh warned his followers against destructive and antisocial behaviors such as lying, theft, adultery, and murder. A detailed and elaborate legal code prepared after Moses's death instructed the Israelites further to provide relief and protection for widows, orphans, slaves, and the poor. Between about 800 and 400 B.C.E., the Israelites' religious leaders compiled their teachings in a set of holy scriptures known as the Torah (Hebrew for "doctrine"

*Moses and  
Monotheism*

Yahweh (YAH-way)

or “teaching”), which laid down Yahweh’s laws and outlined his role in creating the world and guiding human affairs. The Torah taught that Yahweh would reward individuals who obeyed his will and punish those who did not. It also taught that Yahweh would reward or punish the whole community collectively, according to its observance of his commandments.

Historical and archaeological records tell a less colorful story than the account preserved in the Hebrew scriptures. Historical and archaeological evidence shows that Israelites maintained communities in the hills of central Palestine after 1200 B.C.E. and that they formed several small kingdoms in the region after 1000 B.C.E. There are signs of intermittent conflicts with neighboring peoples, but there is no indication that Israelites conquered all of Palestine. On the contrary, they interacted and sometimes intermarried with other peoples of the region. Like their neighbors, they learned to use iron to fabricate weapons and tools. They even honored some of the deities of other Palestinian peoples: the Hebrew scriptures are full of indications that the Israelites worshiped gods other than Yahweh. The recognition of Yahweh as the only true god emerged about the eighth century B.C.E. rather than in the early days of the Hebrews’ history.

### *Assyrian and Babylonian Conquests*

The Israelites placed increasing emphasis on devotion to Yahweh as they experienced a series of political and military setbacks. Following King Solomon’s reign, tribal tensions led to the division of the community into a large kingdom of Israel in the north and a smaller kingdom of Judah in the land known as Judea to the south. During the ninth century B.C.E. the kingdom of Israel came under pressure of the expanding Assyrian empire and even had to pay tribute to Assyrian rulers. In 722 B.C.E. Assyrian forces conquered the northern kingdom and deported many of its inhabitants to other regions. Most of these exiles assimilated into other communities and lost their identity as Israelites. The kingdom of Judah retained its independence only temporarily: founders of the New Babylonian empire toppled the Assyrians, then looked south, conquered the kingdom of Judah, and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Again, the conquerors forced many residents into exile. Unlike their cousins to the north, however, most of these Israelites maintained their religious identity, and many of the deportees eventually returned to Judea, where they became known as Jews.

Ironically, perhaps, the Israelites’ devotion to Yahweh intensified during this era of turmoil. Between the ninth and sixth centuries B.C.E., a series of prophets urged the Israelites to rededicate themselves to their faith and obey Yahweh’s commandments. These prophets were moral and social critics who blasted their compatriots for their materialism, their neglect of the needy, and their abominable interest in the fertility gods and nature deities worshiped by neighboring peoples. The prophets warned the Israelites that unless they mended their ways, Yahweh would punish them by sending conquerors to humiliate and enslave them. Many Israelites took the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests as proof that the prophets accurately represented Yahweh’s mind and will.

### *The Early Jewish Community*

The exiles who returned to Judea after the Babylonian conquest did not abandon hope for a state of their own, and indeed they organized several small Jewish states as tributaries to the great empires that dominated southwest Asia after the sixth century B.C.E. But the returnees also built a distinctive religious community based on their conviction that they had a special relationship with Yahweh, their devotion to Yahweh’s teachings as expressed in the Torah, and their concern for justice and righteousness. These elements enabled the Jews to maintain a strong sense of identity as a people distinct from Mesopotamians and others, even as they participated fully in the development of a larger complex society in southwest Asia. Over the longer term, Jewish monotheism, scriptures, and moral concerns also profoundly influenced the development of Christianity and Islam.



An Assyrian relief sculpture depicts King Jehu of Israel paying tribute to King Shalmaneser III of Assyria about the middle of the ninth century B.C.E.

### *The Phoenicians*

North of the Israelites' kingdom in Palestine, the Phoenicians occupied a narrow coastal plain between the Mediterranean Sea and the Lebanon Mountains. They spoke a Semitic language, referring to themselves as Canaanites and their land as Canaan. (The term *Phoenician* comes from early Greek references.)

Ancestors of the Phoenicians migrated to the Mediterranean coast and built their first settlements sometime after 3000 B.C.E. They did not establish a unified monarchy but rather organized a series of independent city-states ruled by local kings. The major cities—Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, and Byblos—had considerable influence over their smaller neighbors, and during the tenth century B.C.E. Tyre dominated southern Phoenicia. Generally speaking, however, the Phoenicians showed more interest in pursuing commercial opportunities than in state building or military expansion. Indeed, Phoenician cities were often subject to imperial rule from Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Though not a numerous or militarily powerful people, the Phoenicians influenced societies throughout the Mediterranean basin because of their maritime trade and communication networks. Their meager lands did not permit development of a large agricultural society, so after about 2500 B.C.E. the Phoenicians turned increasingly to industry and trade. They traded overland with Mesopotamian and other peoples, and they provided much of the cedar timber, furnishings, and decorative items that went into the Israelites' temple in Jerusalem. Soon the Phoenicians ventured onto the seas and engaged also in maritime trade. They imported food and raw materials in exchange for high-quality metal goods, textiles, pottery, glass, and works of art that they

*The Early  
Phoenicians*

*Phoenician Trade  
Networks*

**A relief sculpture from an Assyrian palace depicts Phoenician ships transporting cedar logs, both by towing them and by hauling them on top of the boats.**



produced for export. They enjoyed a special reputation for brilliant red and purple textiles colored with dyes extracted from several species of mollusc that were common in waters near Phoenicia. They also supplied Mesopotamians and Egyptians with cedar logs from the Lebanon Mountains for construction and shipbuilding.

The Phoenicians were excellent sailors, and they built the best ships of their times. Between 1200 and 800 B.C.E., they dominated Mediterranean trade. They established commercial colonies in Rhodes, Cyprus, Sicily, Sardinia, Spain, and north Africa. They sailed far and wide in search of raw materials such as copper and tin, which they used to make bronze, as well as more exotic items such as ivory and semiprecious stones, which they fashioned into works of decorative art. Their quest for raw materials took them well beyond the Mediterranean: Phoenician merchant ships visited the Canary Islands, coastal ports in Portugal and France, and even the distant British Isles, and adventurous Phoenician mariners made exploratory voyages to the Azores Islands and down the west coast of Africa as far as the Gulf of Guinea.

Like the Hebrews, the Phoenicians largely adapted Mesopotamian cultural traditions to their own needs. Their gods, for example, mostly came from Mesopotamia. The Phoenicians' most prominent female deity was Astarte, a fertility goddess known in Babylon and Assyria as Ishtar. Like the Mesopotamians, the Phoenicians associated other deities with mountains, the sky, lightning, and other natural phenomena. Yet the Phoenicians did not blindly follow Mesopotamian examples: each city built temples to its favored deities and devised rituals and ceremonies to honor them.

### *Alphabetic Writing*

The Phoenicians' tradition of writing also illustrates their creative adaptation of Mesopotamian practices to their own needs. For a millennium or more, they relied on cuneiform writing to preserve information, and they compiled a vast collection of religious, historical, and literary writings. (Most Phoenician writing has perished, although some fragments have survived.) After 2000 B.C.E. Syrian, Phoenician, and other peoples began experimenting with simpler alternatives to cuneiform. By 1500 B.C.E.

## Sources from the Past

### Israelites' Relations with Neighboring Peoples

*When Solomon succeeded David as king of the Israelites, he inherited a state at peace with neighboring peoples, and he was able to construct a temple to Yahweh. To do so, however, he needed to establish trade relations with neighboring peoples, since the Israelites did not have the raw materials or construction skills to build a large and magnificent temple. Thus he dealt with Hiram, king of the Phoenician city of Tyre, who provided timber and construction workers and also helped Solomon obtain gold, precious stones, and decorative items for the temple.*

And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon, for he had heard that they had anointed him king in the room of his father, for Hiram was ever a lover of David. And Solomon sent to Hiram, saying, "Thou knowest how David my father could not build a house [temple] in the name of the Lord his God because of the wars which were about him on every side, until the Lord put [his enemies] under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God hath given me rest on every side, so that there is neither adversary nor evil occurring. And behold, I plan to build a house in the name of the Lord my God. . . . Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon, and my servants shall be with thy servants, and unto thee will I give hire for thy servants according to all that thou shalt appoint, for thou knowest that there is not among us any that has skill to hew timber like the Sidonians [Phoenicians]." . . .

And Hiram sent to Solomon, saying, "I have considered the things which thou sent to me for, and I will do all thy desire concerning timber of cedar, and concerning timber of fir. My servants shall bring them down from Lebanon unto the sea, and I will convey them by sea in floats unto the place that thou shalt appoint me, and will cause them to be discharged there, and thou shalt receive them, and thou shalt accomplish my desire, in giving food for my household." So Hiram gave Solomon cedar trees and fir trees according to all his desire. And Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand measures of wheat for food for his household, and twenty measures of pure oil. Thus gave Solomon to Hiram year

by year. And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him, and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and they two made a league together.

And king Solomon raised a levy out of all Israel, and the levy was thirty thousand men. And he sent them to Lebanon, ten thousand a month in turns. A month they were in Lebanon, and two months at home. . . . And the king commanded, and they brought great stones, costly stones, and hewed stones, to lay the foundation of the house. And Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders did hew them, and the stonemasons. So they prepared timber and stones to build the house. . . .

And king Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-geber [a port on the Gulf of Aqaba]. And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir [probably southern Arabia or Ethiopia], and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to king Solomon. . . .

And the navy of Hiram, that brought gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir great plenty of almug trees and precious stones. And the king made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

In what ways does the Hebrew scriptural discussion of Solomon's temple portray the Israelites as participants in a larger world of diplomatic, commercial, and cultural interaction?

SOURCE: 1 Kings 5:1–18, 9:26–28, 10:11–12 (Authorized Version). (Translation slightly modified.)

Phoenician scribes had devised an early alphabetic script consisting of twenty-two symbols representing consonants—the Phoenician alphabet had no symbols for vowels. Learning twenty-two letters and building words with them was much easier than memorizing the hundreds of symbols employed in cuneiform. Because alphabetic writing required much less investment in education than did cuneiform writing, more people were able to become literate than ever before.

Alphabetic writing spread widely as the Phoenicians traveled and traded throughout the Mediterranean basin. About the ninth century B.C.E., for example, Greeks

**Phoenician, Greek,  
Hebrew, and Roman  
letters.**

NORTH SEMITIC			GREEK		ETRUSCAN	LATIN	
EARLY PHOENICIAN	EARLY HEBREW	PHOENICIAN	EARLY	CLASSICAL	EARLY	EARLY	CLASSICAL
𐤀	כ	𐤁	Α	Α	Α	Α	Α
𐤂	ג	𐤂	Β	Β	Β		Β
𐤃	ד	𐤃	Γ	Γ	Γ		С
𐤄	ה	𐤄	Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ

modified the Phoenician alphabet and added symbols representing vowels. Romans later adapted the Greek alphabet to their language and passed it along to their cultural heirs in Europe. In later centuries alphabetic writing spread to central Asia, south Asia, southeast Asia, and ultimately throughout most of the world.

## The Indo-European Migrations

After 3000 B.C.E. Mesopotamia was a prosperous, productive region where peoples from many different communities mixed and mingled. But Mesopotamia was only one region in a much larger world of interaction and exchange. Mesopotamians and their neighbors all dealt frequently with peoples from regions far beyond southwest Asia. Among the most influential of these peoples in the third and second millennia B.C.E. were those who spoke various Indo-European languages. Their migrations throughout much of Eurasia profoundly influenced historical development in both southwest Asia and the larger world as well.

### *Indo-European Origins*

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, linguists noticed that many languages of Europe, southwest Asia, and India featured remarkable similarities in vocabulary and grammatical structure. Ancient languages displaying these similarities included Sanskrit (the sacred language of ancient India), Old Persian, Greek, and Latin. Modern descendants of these languages include Hindi and other languages of northern India, Farsi (the language of modern Iran), and most European languages, excepting only a few, such as Basque, Finnish, and Hungarian. Because of the geographic regions where these tongues are found, scholars refer to them as Indo-European languages. Major subgroups of the Indo-European family of languages include Indo-Iranian, Greek, Balto-Slavic, Germanic, Italic, and Celtic. English belongs to the Germanic subgroup of the Indo-European family of languages.

After noticing linguistic similarities, scholars sought a way to explain the close relationship between the Indo-European languages. It was inconceivable that speakers of all these languages independently adopted similar vocabularies and grammatical structures. The only persuasive explanation for the high degree of linguistic coincidence was that speakers of Indo-European languages were all descendants of ancestors who spoke a common tongue and migrated from their original homeland. As migrants established separate communities and lost touch with one another, their languages evolved along different lines, adding new words and expressing ideas in different ways. Yet they retained the basic grammatical structure of their original

*Indo-European  
Languages*

**Similarities in Vocabulary Indicating Close Relationships  
between Select Indo-European Languages**

<i>English</i>	<i>German</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Greek</i>	<i>Latin</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i>
father	vater	padre	pater	pater	pitar
one	ein	uno	hen	unus	ekam
fire	feuer	fuego	pyr	ignis	agnis
field	feld	campo	agros	ager	ajras
sun	sonne	sol	helios	sol	surya
king	könig	rey	basileus	rex	raja
god	gott	dios	theos	deus	devas

speech, and they also kept much of their ancestors' vocabulary, even though they often adopted different pronunciations (and consequently different spellings) of the words they inherited from the earliest Indo-European language.

The original homeland of Indo-European speakers was probably the steppe region of modern-day Ukraine and southern Russia, the region just north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The earliest Indo-European speakers built their society there between about 4500 and 2500 B.C.E. They lived mostly by herding cattle, sheep, and goats, while cultivating barley and millet at least in small quantities. They also hunted horses, which flourished in the vast grasslands of the Eurasian steppe stretching from Hungary in the west to Mongolia in the east.

Because they had observed horses closely and learned the animals' behavioral patterns, Indo-European speakers were able to domesticate horses about 4000 B.C.E. They probably used horses originally as a source of food, but they also began to ride them soon after domesticating them. By 3000 B.C.E. Sumerian knowledge of bronze metallurgy and wheels had spread north to the Indo-European homeland, and soon thereafter Indo-European speakers devised ways to hitch horses to carts, wagons, and chariots. The earliest Indo-European language had words not only for cattle, sheep, goats, and horses, but also for wheels, axles, shafts, harnesses, hubs, and linchpins—all of the latter learned from Mesopotamian examples.

The possession of domesticated horses vastly magnified the power of Indo-European speakers. Once they had domesticated horses, Indo-European speakers were able to exploit the grasslands of southern Russia, where they relied on horses and wheeled vehicles for transport and on cattle and sheep for meat, milk, leather, and wool. Horses also enabled them to develop transportation technologies that were much faster and more efficient than alternatives that relied on cattle, donkey, or human power. Furthermore, because of their strength and speed, horses provided Indo-European speakers with a tremendous military advantage over peoples they encountered. It is perhaps significant that many groups of Indo-European speakers considered themselves superior to other peoples: the terms *Aryan*, *Iran*, and *Eire* (the official name of the modern Republic of Ireland) all derive from the Indo-European word *aryo*, meaning “nobleman” or “lord.”

### *Indo-European Expansion and Its Effects*

Horses also provided Indo-European speakers with a means of expanding far beyond their original homeland. As they flourished in southern Russia, Indo-European speakers experienced a population explosion, which prompted some of them to move into the sparsely inhabited eastern steppe or even beyond the grasslands altogether. The earliest

*The Indo-European  
Homeland*

*Horses*

*The Nature of  
Indo-European  
Migrations*



Indo-European society began to break up about 3000 B.C.E., as migrants took their horses and other animals and made their way to new lands. Intermittent migrations of Indo-European peoples continued until about 1000 C.E. Like early movements of other peoples, these were not mass migrations so much as gradual and incremental processes that resulted in the spread of Indo-European languages and ethnic communities, as small groups of people established settlements in new lands, which then became foundations for further expansion.

### *The Hittites*

Some of the most influential Indo-European migrants in ancient times were the Hittites. About 1900 B.C.E. the Hittites migrated to the central plain of Anatolia, where they imposed their language and rule on the region's inhabitants. During the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries B.C.E., they built a powerful kingdom and established close relations with Mesopotamian peoples. They traded with Babylonians and Assyrians, adapted cuneiform writing to their Indo-European language, and accepted many Mesopotamian deities into their pantheon. In 1595 B.C.E. the Hittites toppled the mighty Babylonian empire, and for several centuries thereafter they were the dominant power in southwest Asia. Between 1450 and 1200 B.C.E., their authority extended to eastern Anatolia, northern Mesopotamia, and Syria down to Phoenicia. After 1200 B.C.E. the unified Hittite state dissolved, as waves of invaders attacked societies throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. Nevertheless, a Hittite identity survived, along with the Hittite language, throughout the era of the Assyrian empire and beyond.

### *War Chariots*

The Hittites were responsible for two technological innovations—the construction of light, horse-drawn war chariots and the refinement of iron metallurgy—that greatly strengthened their society and influenced other peoples throughout much of the ancient world. Sumerian armies had sometimes used heavy chariots with solid wooden wheels, but they were so slow and cumbersome that they had limited military value. About 2000 B.C.E. Hittites fitted chariots with recently invented spoked wheels, which were much lighter and more maneuverable than Sumerian wheels. The Hittites' speedy chariots were crucial in their campaign to establish a state in Anatolia. Following the Hittites' example, Mesopotamians soon added chariot teams to their armies, and Assyrians made especially effective use of chariots in building their empire. Indeed, chariot warfare was so effective—and its techniques spread so widely—that charioteers became the elite strike forces in armies throughout much of the ancient world from Rome to China.

### *Iron Metallurgy*

After about 1300 B.C.E. the Hittites also refined the technology of iron metallurgy, which enabled them to produce effective weapons cheaply and in large quantities. Other peoples had tried casting iron into molds, but cast iron was too brittle for use as tools or weapons. Hittite craftsmen discovered that by heating iron in a bed of charcoal, then hammering it into the desired shape, they could forge strong, durable implements. Hittite methods of iron production diffused rapidly—especially after the collapse of their kingdom in 1200 B.C.E. and the subsequent dispersal of Hittite craftsmen—and eventually spread throughout all of Eurasia. (Peoples of sub-Saharan Africa independently invented iron metallurgy.) Hittites were not the original inventors either of horse-drawn chariots or of iron metallurgy: in both cases they built on Mesopotamian precedents. But in both cases they clearly improved on existing technologies and introduced innovations that other peoples readily adopted.

### *Indo-European Migrations to the East*

While the Hittites were building a state in Anatolia, other Indo-European speakers migrated from the steppe to different regions. Some went east into central Asia, venturing as far as the Tarim Basin (now western China) by 2000 B.C.E. Stunning evidence of these migrations came to light recently when archaeologists excavated burials of individuals with European features in China's Xinjiang province. Because of the region's extremely dry atmosphere, the remains of some deceased individuals are so well pre-



**Map 2.4** Indo-European migrations, 3000–1000 B.C.E.

Consider the vast distances over which Indo-European migrants established communities. Would it have been possible for speakers of Indo-European languages to spread so widely without the aid of domesticated horses?

*Indo-European Migrations to the West*

served that their fair skin, light hair, and brightly colored garments are still clearly visible. Descendants of these migrants survived in central Asia and spoke Indo-European languages until well after 1000 C.E., but most of them were later absorbed into societies of Turkish-speaking peoples.

Meanwhile, other Indo-European migrants moved west. One wave of migration took Indo-European speakers into Greece after 2200 B.C.E., with their descendants moving into central Italy by 1000 B.C.E. Another migratory wave established an Indo-European presence farther to the west. By 2300 B.C.E. some Indo-European speakers had made their way from southern Russia into central Europe (modern Germany and Austria), by 1200 B.C.E. to western Europe (modern France), and shortly thereafter to the British Isles, the Baltic region, and the Iberian peninsula. These migrants depended on a pastoral and agricultural economy: none of them built cities or organized large states. For most of the first millennium B.C.E., however, Indo-European Celtic peoples largely dominated Europe north of the Mediterranean, speaking related languages and honoring similar deities throughout the region. They recognized three principal social groups: a military ruling elite, a small group of priests, and a large class of commoners. Most of the commoners tended herds and cultivated crops, but some also worked as miners, craftsmen, or producers of metal goods. Even without large states, Celtic peoples traded copper, tin, and handicrafts throughout much of Europe.

Yet another, later wave of migrations established an Indo-European presence in Iran and India. About 1500 B.C.E. the Medes and Persians migrated into the Iranian plateau, while the Aryans began filtering into northern India. Like the Indo-European Celts in Europe, the Medes, Persians, and Aryans herded animals, cultivated grains, and divided themselves into classes of rulers, priests, and commoners. Unlike the Celts, though, the Medes, Persians, and Aryans soon built powerful states (discussed in later chapters) on the basis of their horse-based military technologies and later their possession also of iron weapons.

*Indo-European Migrations to the South*

**B**uilding on neolithic foundations, Mesopotamian peoples constructed societies much more complex, powerful, and influential than those of their predecessors. Through their city-states, kingdoms, and regional empires, Mesopotamians created formal institutions of government that extended the authority of ruling elites to all corners of their states, and they occasionally mobilized forces that projected their power to distant lands. They generated several distinct social classes. Specialized labor fueled productive economies and encouraged the establishment of long-distance trade networks. They devised systems of writing, which enabled them to develop sophisticated cultural traditions. They deeply influenced other peoples, such as the Hebrews and the Phoenicians, throughout southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean basin. They had frequent dealings also with Indo-European peoples. Although Indo-European society emerged far to the north of Mesopotamia, speakers of Indo-European languages migrated widely and established societies throughout much of Eurasia. Sometimes they drew inspiration from Mesopotamian practices, and sometimes they developed new practices that influenced Mesopotamians and others as well. Thus, already in remote antiquity, the various peoples of the world profoundly influenced one another through cross-cultural interaction and exchange.

C H R O N O L O G Y	
3200–2350 B.C.E.	Era of Sumerian dominance in Mesopotamia
3000 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.	Era of Indo-European migrations
2350–1600 B.C.E.	Era of Babylonian dominance in Mesopotamia
2334–2315 B.C.E.	Reign of Sargon of Akkad
1792–1750 B.C.E.	Reign of Hammurabi
1700–1200 B.C.E.	Era of Hittite dominance in Anatolia
1000–612 B.C.E.	Era of Assyrian dominance in Mesopotamia
1000–970 B.C.E.	Reign of Israelite King David
970–930 B.C.E.	Reign of Israelite King Solomon
722 B.C.E.	Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel
605–562 B.C.E.	Reign of Nebuchadnezzar
600–550 B.C.E.	New Babylonian empire
586 B.C.E.	New Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah

## FOR FURTHER READING

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