River Valley Civilizations

The earliest civilizations formed in river valleys, where rich soils encouraged high agricultural yields. That productivity, and the resulting surpluses, played an important role in the development of complex societies. Some 5,000 years after farmers first cultivated the soil of the Fertile Crescent, the region gave birth to the world’s first civilization in Mesopotamia. From there, trade contacts may have spread the concept of civilization to Egypt and the Indus River Valley. As with agriculture, China appears to have developed its first river valley civilization independently.

Mesopotamian Civilization

Around 3500 B.C.E., the world’s first civilization arose in Mesopotamia. This region was located in the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent. Through this region flow two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Mesopotamia means “the land between the rivers.”

Some 2,000 years earlier, farmers from the foothills of the Zagros Mountains began moving into the river valley. Little rain fell in the valley, but its soils were fertile. By diverting river water through canals to their fields, the farmers found that they could grow far more crops than they had been able to in the hills. Those crops included wheat, barley, and date palms. Use of the plow, animal power, and wheeled carts added to their success.

Photograph: Sumerian cities centered around temples. This is an artist’s interpretation of what the temple in the Sumerian city of Uruk may have looked like around 3000 B.C.E.

By 3000 B.C.E., several city-states [city-state: a political unit consisting of an independent city and the lands surrounding it] had appeared in southern Mesopotamia in a region known as Sumer. These independent urban centers dominated the surrounding farmland and pasturelands.

Sumer’s cities had formed around temples. The temple became the central agency that ran the city’s affairs. Priest-kings and their officials managed the economy. The grain that farmers produced went into temple storehouses, from which it was redistributed to the people. The temple kept a portion of the crops to finance the building and maintenance of canals, temples, and city walls. Surplus crops also paid for weapons. The city-states of Sumer regularly fought one another over land and water.

The Sumerians invented a writing system known as cuneiform. Its picture-symbols were pressed into soft clay tablets using a tool that made a wedge-shaped mark. Cuneiform means “wedge-shaped.” Sumerian officials first used cuneiform as a way to keep track of grain, animals, tools, workers, and much more. Later tablets recorded land sales, poetry, and descriptions of battlefield victories. Even after Sumer itself faded away, cuneiform continued to spread throughout Mesopotamia, as did Sumerian culture.

Southern Mesopotamians produced lots of clay, grain, and wool but not much else. They traded with other parts of the Fertile Crescent region for hardwood, stone, copper, gold, and semi-precious stones. They also engaged in interregional [interregional: involving or linking two or more regions] exchange to acquire luxury goods from places as distant as western Anatolia and the Indus River Valley. The main principles of civilization may have traveled along these and other trade routes, likely reaching Egypt in the mid-to-late 3000s B.C.E.
This Egyptian stone carving depicts Hapi, the god of the Nile River. He wears a crown of lotus flowers. Ancient Egypt depended on the Nile River to provide water for agriculture. Here the figure of Hapi is surrounded by hieroglyphics, the system of writing developed by the ancient Egyptians.

Egyptian Civilization  Egypt, a desert country, has been called “the gift of the Nile.” The Nile River flows south to north, arising in the highlands of eastern Africa and emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. In Neolithic times and beyond, the Nile overflowed its banks each summer. The floodwaters deposited fertile silt onto the adjoining lands. Sometime after 5000 B.C.E, agriculture appeared in the Nile Valley, imported from the Fertile Crescent. Egyptian farmers grew the cereal grains barley and wheat, as well as flax, a plant whose fibers they wove into linen. They irrigated their crops from natural basins that retained some of the annual floodwaters. Farmers also raised cattle, goats, sheep, and pigs.

Increased production of food led to dramatic gains in population. By the late 3000s B.C.E., some farm villages had expanded into cities. Egyptian cities, unlike those in Sumer, did not become independent states, each with its own king. The main cities formed in the delta region, known as Lower Egypt, where the Nile split into branches that each emptied into the sea.

In the rest of this ancient land, known as Upper Egypt, several large bands of people competed for power. Around 3100 B.C.E., a leader named Menes took control of Upper Egypt and then conquered Lower Egypt, uniting the country for the first time. King Menes thus launched Egypt’s first dynasty. A dynasty [dynasty: a series of rulers who come from the same family] is a series of rulers who come from the same family.

By the time of Menes, priests had developed their own writing system, called hieroglyphics. Hieroglyph means “sacred carving.” Scribes, specialists in the art of writing, used hieroglyphics to keep records and to communicate information. They carved the hieroglyphs on the stone walls of temples and tombs as well as on metal, wood, and clay. But they also wrote them with brush and ink on a paper-like material called papyrus, made from reeds.

Later Egyptian kings were commonly called pharaohs. The pharaoh was an absolute monarch [absolute monarch: a hereditary ruler whose power is unlimited] —a ruler whose power is unlimited. By tradition, the pharaoh owned all of Egypt’s land. As a result, through his palace officials—many of whom were scribes—he managed the economy as well as the government.
These massive stone pyramids were constructed at Giza in Egypt in the mid-2000s B.C.E. They were built using forced labor under the direction of the pharaohs, who were absolute monarchs.

Farmers paid part of their crops as taxes to officials. That surplus grain was then redistributed to non-farmers, with a portion reserved to pay for public-works projects. The government could also levy taxes in the form of forced labor in order to carry out those projects. For example, it recruited villagers and artisans to help build the massive stone pyramids of Giza in the mid-2000s B.C.E.

**Indus Valley Civilization**  Sometime after 3000 B.C.E., in what is now Pakistan, a new civilization developed in and near the valley of the Indus River. The river arose in the high mountains of the Himalayas and flowed south through semiarid plains to the Arabian Sea, a part of the Indian Ocean. When it flooded each summer, the river deposited a layer of fertile silt that made for easy tilling of the soil.

That soil attracted farmers, who built villages and, in time, cities. The Indus River’s floodplain extended far from the river. Because of extensive floodplain, the Indus Valley civilization spread over a larger area than that of Mesopotamia or Egypt. The Indus often flooded deeply, so farmers built their settlements on high ground and surrounded them with barriers of stone or earth. They planted wheat and barley when the floodwaters receded. At some point they also began growing cotton. Some historians think that in the dry season they kept their crops watered through a network of irrigation canals. Farmers also domesticated cattle and other animals, likely including elephants.

The Indus Valley culture developed a writing system, but scholars have had little success decoding it. For this reason, they know much less about the ancient Indus River region than they do about Mesopotamia or Egypt. Their descriptions of the civilization are based largely on their studies of the ruins of Indus Valley cities and other settlements.
The studies reveal that the Indus Valley civilization was home to around 100 villages and several walled cities. Two large cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, dominated the region.

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro reflected the organization and complexity that is a key sign of a civilization. Each consisted of two sections—an elevated citadel, or fortress, and a lower residential area. Both were surrounded by walls. In the citadel, members of the ruling class likely conducted their political business and carried out religious rituals. In the residential city below, the people lived in brick houses linked by an orderly arrangement of streets. The finer homes had wells for water and bathrooms that drained into the city’s main sewer system.

Within the lower city lived shopkeepers, merchants, scribes, and artisans. The artisans manufactured a variety of goods, including metal ornaments and weapons, fine ceramics, and cotton cloth. Woven cotton textiles and beads of semi-precious stone both served as popular goods for export. Indus Valley trade goods flowed northwest over the mountains to Iran and later also by boat across the Arabian Sea and through the Persian Gulf to Mesopotamia.

**Chinese Civilization** Two major river systems dominate China. Both flow generally west to east but in a weaving pattern that follows the contours of the landscape. The Huang He (huang heh), or Yellow River, is in the north. The Chang Jiang (chahng jyahng), or Yangtze River, is in the south. Chinese civilization arose in the valleys of both of these rivers at about the same time.

Early farmers were attracted to the fertile yellow soil, known as loess (less), that blankets the broad plain of the Yellow River. Yellow silt clouds the river, giving it its name. Farmers in the valley grew millet, a cereal grain, using dry farming rather than irrigation. To make up for lack of rain, they planted drought-resistant millet and learned ways to conserve soil moisture.

The agricultural settlements that appeared in the valley grew in population and complexity. By around 2000 B.C.E., several of them reflected key characteristics of civilization. Within large centers surrounded by defensive walls, artisans specialized in the making of ceramic pottery and the carving of jade, a semiprecious stone. They also worked copper and, later, bronze. Societies evolved a hierarchy, with a privileged minority at the top whose members could afford luxury goods obtained through long-distance trade.

The Shang (shahng) Dynasty came to power in the Yellow River Valley around 1600 B.C.E. The Shang may simply be one of several early Chinese civilizations. But it is China’s first historical state. That is, the Shang were the first to record their dynasty's history using a formal writing system.
This tortoise shell oracle bone dates from the Shang dynasty in China. The writing on surviving oracle bones is an important source historians have about ancient China.

Their writing, or script, consisted of pictograms that stood for objects and ideas. That script appeared on bronze vessels, silk, and strips of bamboo linked with thread. It also appeared on what were called oracle bones. These cattle bones and tortoise shells served a special purpose. Shang diviners—persons who use magic to predict the future—first posed a question and then applied heat to the bones, causing cracks to form. The diviner then interpreted the cracks, with the goal of predicting the future.

A typical question concerned the health of the king or the success of warfare, hunting, or crops. On each oracle bone, they wrote the date and the question and, sometimes, the interpretation. Thus oracle bones comprise an important source of historical information about ancient China.

Civilization arose in a similar way to the south, in the Yangtze River Valley. Walled cities with hierarchical societies developed within an agricultural setting. However, farmers in this warmer and wetter region of China cultivated rice rather than millet, and they diverted water from the rivers as needed to irrigate their crops.

Chinese scholars refer to the several complex states that formed along the Yangtze as the Changjiang civilization. A key city in this civilization was Sanxingdui. In workshops outside the massive walls of this city, artisans crafted a variety of objects from clay, jade, ivory, turquoise, and bronze. The bronzes are particularly impressive. One, a statue of a man wearing a crown, stands more than 8 feet tall. Another, a sculpted tree with leaves, buds, and fruit—and a bird perched on each branch—rises 13 feet into the air.