

THE FIRST STATES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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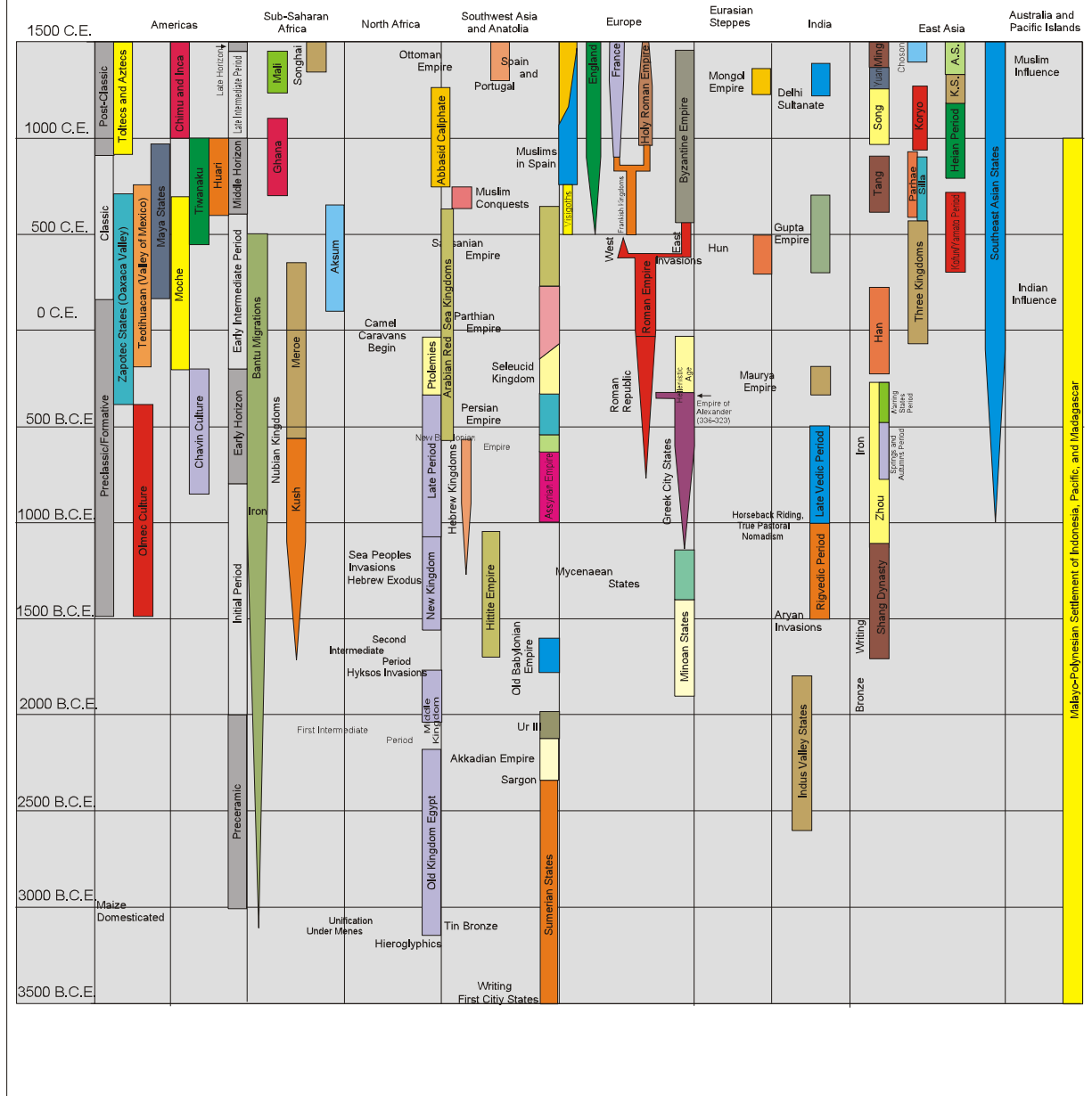
The New World

Mesoamerica in the Formative Period

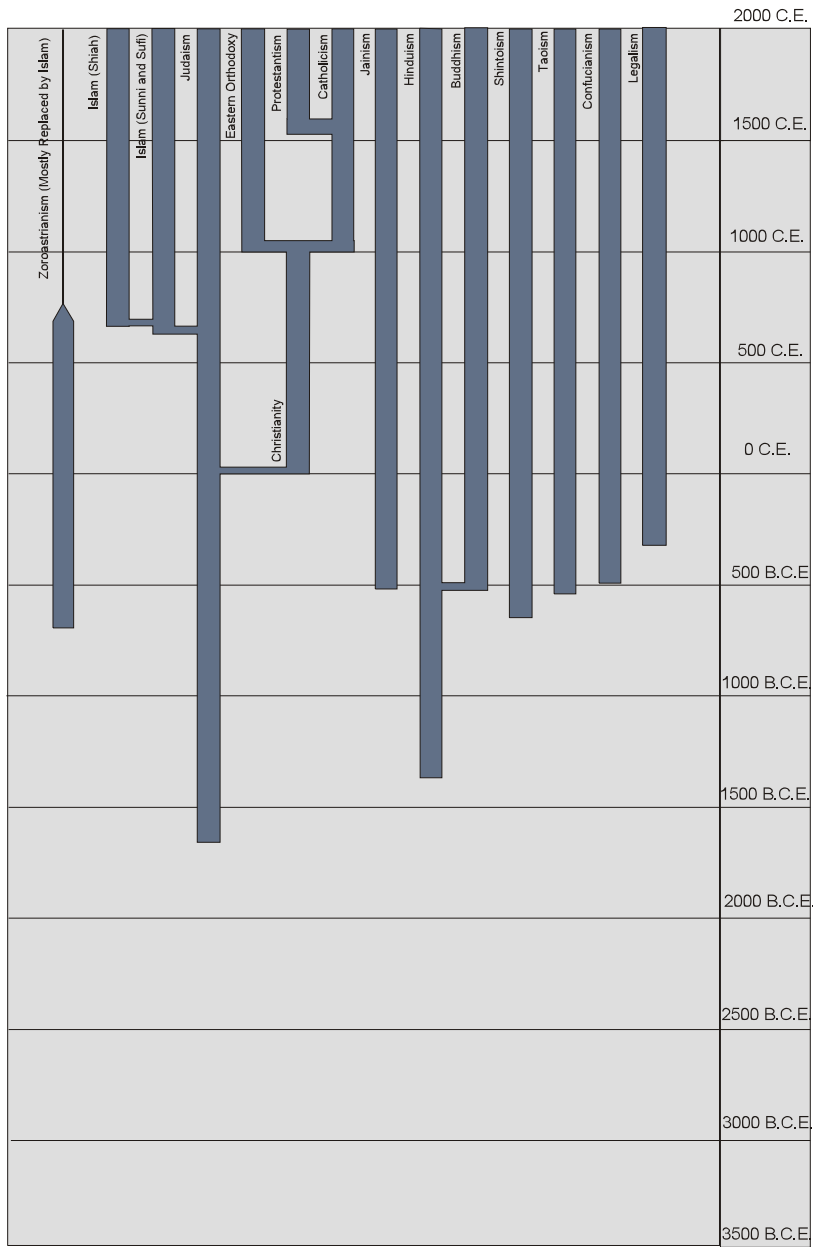
Early Andean Societies

FIGURE .1 (Refer to this timeline for the next three chapters)

Major States and Empires (to 1500 CE)



Major Organized Religions and Systems of Belief (to Present Day)



BESIDE THE WATERS: THE FIRST STATES

The world's first states, as we just saw in the last chapter, arose between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In fact, all of the first states in the Old World emerged in fertile river valleys. These states arose independently in four places, as shown in Figure .2: the Tigris-Euphrates valley, the Nile valley, the Indus valley, and the Huanghe (Yellow) river valley. The Sumerians were the first to organize themselves into states (city-states at first) around 3500 BCE. Soon after 3000 BCE the Egyptians formed states along the Nile, while a mysterious people called the Harappans formed states along the Indus. These three areas had long been loosely bound together by exchanges of goods, domesticated crops and animals, and ideas. These trade links became more organized and permanent after the first states arose, thus linking western Asia and North Africa into a coherent sphere of mutual influence. The Yellow river societies of China, on the other hand, developed mostly in isolation, coalescing into states around 1700 BCE. Some other states to the west, such as those of the Minoans or Phoenicians, predate the Chinese states. But these were modeled on the first river valley states, so they cannot be considered founding states. China arose independently, so it can.

BETWEEN THE RIVERS: SUMER

As we have seen, the first cities in the world emerged in southern Mesopotamia by around 3500 BCE. Written records, which appeared soon afterward, indicate that the inhabitants of these cities spoke a language apparently unrelated to any other. Today they are called Sumerians, and their land called is called Sumer. Sumer was not a unified state at first, but a collection of city-states such as Uruk, Eridu, Lagash, and Ur, bound together only by a common culture. At first, these cities were ruled by priest-kings who claimed that their power was bestowed by the gods. Like many early gods, these were an unruly lot. Evidently they were lazy as well, since Sumerians believed that humans were created to do the hard work of intensive agriculture. The Sumerians built large temples as homes for their gods, and brought crops and other goods there as offerings. The priest-kings, who lived in or near the temples, collected these offerings on the behalf of the Gods, keeping a portion for themselves and redistributing the

rest among city dwelling specialists, including scribes, bureaucrats, craftspeople, servants, and warriors.

The Sumerians were some of history's great cultural pioneers. Writing, perhaps their most important innovation, was at first used for accounting. Later, it came to be used for recording anything that could be spoken, from poetry and literature to propaganda. Thinking with stylus in hand was also crucial to the development of mathematics, especially geometry, which was necessary for planning the layout of fields and irrigation canals. The ownership of these fields was one source of dispute among Sumerians, and the first legal codes were adopted in about 2350 to deal with conflicts in a roughly standardized way. While the Sumerians did not invent bronze, they did make advances in bronze casting. They were also some of the first people to use wheeled vehicles on a regular basis.

Both wheels and bronze were soon put to violent uses. Around 2900 BCE, around the time that the first tin-copper bronze was developed, war became much more common in Sumer. The population had enough that cities began to compete with each other for land and water. At the same time, people such as the Elamites from the nearby Zagros Mountains had taken to raiding the relatively wealthy Sumerian cities. Walls soon rose around the cities; a sure sign of increasing violence. High-ranking warriors, whose services were now more sought after, began to compete with the priests for power. In many Sumerian cities, such men gained control, and priest-kings were replaced with warrior kings. These ambitious rulers tried to bring other cities under their control, and some cities came to dominate others at various times.

As all this was unfolding, the Akkadians, a Semitic people who lived upstream from the Sumerians, had developed city states of their own. In 2350 BCE, a Akkadian warrior-king named Sargon conquered Sumer, consolidating it with Akkad to form the world's first **empire**. Sargon's descendants ruled Mesopotamia for about 200 years, until the Sumerian city of Ur revolted and took control of its own empire (called the Third Dynasty of Ur, or Ur III). The reestablishment of Sumerian control would not last, however, partly because Sumerian irrigation practices had caused severe salt buildup in the fields, making them less and less fertile. As a result, power tended to drift upstream. Ur III collapsed around 2000 BCE, bringing a period of chaos that was ended with the conquest of Sumer by a people called the Amorites, who established their capital at Babylon. This was the beginning of the Old Babylonian Empire, which eventually absorbed the Sumerians.

EGYPT: THE GIFT OF THE NILE

It is hard to imagine a place more conducive to state formation than the Nile valley. Flowing north for 4,000 miles from the east African highlands to the eastern Mediterranean, the Nile is a long, fertile strand in the midst of a harsh desert. The river concentrated the inhabitants of ancient Egypt along its length, while the surrounding deserts sheltered them from invaders. This isolation made Egypt a much more stable, peaceful place than Mesopotamia. So did the Nile itself. The Nile is a much gentler river than the Tigris or Euphrates. It does flood, but it does so predictably—every year in the late summer, leaving a new deposit of fertile silt along its riverbanks. Seed sown in the silt grows through the winter, to be harvested in the spring. Another convenient feature of the region is that winds usually blow from north to south. This allowed boats to sail south and then drift back north with the river current. The Greek historian Herodotus aptly called Egypt “the gift of the Nile”. To the ancient Egyptians, the Nile was everything.

Ancient Egypt was divided into Lower Egypt (downstream, in the north), and Upper Egypt (upstream, in the south—yes, it is confusing). A king of Upper Egypt named Narmer united all Egypt under his kingship around 3000 BCE, and moved his capital to Memphis, in Lower Egypt. By Narmer’s time, many characteristics of Egyptian culture were in place. The king (later called Pharaoh) was not just thought to be in touch with the gods, as in Mesopotamia. He was considered to be a god himself, and Egypt and its peoples were considered his property. These god-kings built their administration around their families, who helped run the kingdom. They also relied on scribes, who recorded accounts and events in Egypt’s famous hieroglyphic script. Egyptian documents were written in ink on lightweight sheets of papyrus, making them much more portable than the clay tablets of Mesopotamia. Hieroglyphic writing was very difficult to master, however, and scribes had great prestige. Another distinctive Egyptian practice which originated around this time was mummification, which was thought to be necessary to convey people to the afterlife. At first, only kings were mummified. Later, nobles and other wealthy people got to become mummies as well.

The unification of Egypt under Narmer marked the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period of Egyptian history, during which kings grew steadily more powerful. Their rule had

become absolute by the beginning of the Old Kingdom—a series of powerful dynasties which ruled from Memphis—in 2575 BCE.. The Old Kingdom was the heyday of those most famous Egyptian artifacts—the pyramids, which were built as enormous tombs for kings. The Great Pyramid, built for king Khufu in 2550 BCE, is 146 meters high, an enormous monument to the absolute power (and perhaps the megalomania) of the king.

After about 2400 BCE, the kings lost power to nobles, who had gained hereditary control over their lands. The Nile had low floods around 2150, causing famine and chaos that divided Egypt into two kingdoms. The Old Kingdom had fallen, giving way to the so-called First Intermediate Period of Egyptian history. In 2040 BCE Mentuhopte II of Thebes, in Upper Egypt, united Egypt once again, inaugurating the Middle Kingdom. Kings regained some power during the Middle Kingdom, though they never became as all-powerful as those of the Old Kingdom. Egypt expanded, however; south into Nubia in 1960 BCE, and north into the Levant in the early 1800's BCE. Egypt itself was conquered for the first time in about 1640, by the Hyksos, one of a number of warlike, chariot-riding peoples who were terrorizing the old empires at the same time.

THE MYSTERIOUS HARAPPANS

To the east of the Iranian plateau was a region very similar to Mesopotamia. Two rivers, the Indus and the Saraswati, flowed through dry lowlands, often jumping their banks and inundated the lands nearby. In this environment, a complex culture emerged and thrived for nearly a thousand years, between about 2600 and 1700 BCE. This culture is alternately called the Indus Valley culture or the Harappan culture, after the modern name for one of their cities. These people were less urbanized than the Mesopotamians. The city of Mohenjodaro had about 35,000 people, while Harappa had around 25,000. There were a few other small cities, but many of the Harappan people were scattered across the region in small villages. The cities were well-planned, however, with evenly spaced avenues, mud-brick buildings, defensive citadels, working sewers, and public baths which may have been used for ceremonial bathing—still common in India. Standardized weights and a system of writing helped regulate a widespread trade, which seems to have been vital for the Harappans. In fact, the Harappan culture may have emerged as a result of the development of sea-going trade with Sumer. But this is not certain. Very little is

certain about the Harappans, because their system of writing has never been deciphered, and because ground water has hampered archaeological digs. Some Harappan art seems to be related to later Hindu images, such as the god Shiva, but the links are not clear.

The Harappan culture went into decline around 2000 BCE, and its cities had been abandoned by 1700 BCE. Once again, nobody is sure what happened. One major cause of the collapse may have been the shifting tectonic activity of the still-rising Himalayas, which caused the Saraswati river to dry up. Other factors may have included a shift in trade with Sumer, and, possibly, invasions by warlike, chariot-riding Indo-Aryan peoples. These peoples certainly did spread into India, but the Harappan culture seems to have collapsed before they arrived. Unless we decipher the written record the Harappans left, we may never know what really happened to them.

THE FIRST CHINESE STATES

As we saw in the last chapter, rice farming emerged along the Yangtze River, while millet farming emerged in the loess soils that give the Yellow river its color. By 3200 BCE, rice farming had spread north, and the combination of rice and millet farming allowed large populations to emerge along the Yellow river. These people belonged to what archaeologists call the Longshan culture. They were probably organized into chiefdoms, with sharp distinctions between priests, warriors, and commoners (who performed the intense labor of rice irrigation). Like later Chinese, the Longshan people venerated their ancestors, whom they saw as mediators between themselves and the gods. These were mostly nature gods, thought to be under the rule of a supreme being. Priests tried to discover the will of the gods by cracking the shoulder blades of oxen, or the bottom shell of tortoises, and then “reading” the pattern of cracks that formed. When writing emerged (possibly based on such cracks and their supposed meanings) priests began to write questions on their oracle bones and shells. These were addressed to their ancestors, who were thought to ask the gods questions on the priests’ behalf. Such oracle bones are an invaluable source of information on ancient China, helping historians separate fact from legend.

According to traditional Chinese history, Yu the Great founded the Xia dynasty in 2205 BCE. This dynasty was followed by the Shang in 1766, which gave way to the Zhou in 1122.

The Shang and Xia dynasties were thought to be legendary for years, until ruined cities from the Shang period were actually discovered. Oracle bones from these cities record a series of kings that corresponds almost exactly to traditional histories. However, no evidence of a Xia state has been found, so it seems that the Shang dynasty was the first state-level society in China. The most distinctive artifacts from Shang China are beautiful cast bronze vessels, as well as bronze weapons (which were put to use quite often). By Shang times the characteristic, highly-stratified pattern of Chinese society had emerged. Family relations were central to Chinese life, and governed by a strict pattern of deference known as **filial piety**. Younger brothers deferred to older brothers, and older brothers deferred to fathers, who (at least in theory) were masters of their household. This pattern was extended to ancestors, who were venerated, and heads of state, who were treated almost as fathers of the people. The common Chinese pattern of harsh authoritarian rule was well established by Shang times. Leaders lived in great elegance, while commoners had next to nothing. Many Shang leaders were buried with scores of servants, dogs, and horses, sacrificed to serve them in the afterlife. The Shang dynasty lasted for over 600 years, until 1122 BCE, when it was overthrown by King Wu of Zhou, who established the Zhou dynasty.

THE GROWTH AND SPREAD OF STATE SOCIETIES

The first urban societies had created a contrast between themselves and less complex societies. With their large, settled populations and cities full of specialists, states were much wealthier than other societies (at least the occupants of cities were; the peasants in the countryside were not). The simpler peoples who traded with the wealthy states soon came to desire urban luxuries for themselves. Some set up states of their own, modeled on the river valley states. Others, such as the Akkadians and Amorites of Mesopotamia, found that they could simply conquer pre-existing states, usurp the previous rulers, and get rich by plundering or taxing the lands they had conquered. In some places, local changes may have led to the independent formation of states. However it happened, by about 2500 BCE, the state style of society had begun to spread from the river valleys into surrounding lands.

THE MINOANS

An example of a state society that arose more or less peacefully, based on trade, was that of the Minoans, who established small states on the island of Crete. Minoan culture was named by modern archaeologists after King Minos, who in Greek legend kept a ferocious half-bull, half-man called the Minotaur in a great maze. We can be fairly sure the Minotaur never existed, but we don't know whether Minos existed, or even what the Minoans called themselves, because Minoan writing has not been deciphered. We do know that they were not an Indo-European people like the Greeks, Celts, or Germans. They were more peaceful than most Indo-Europeans, partly because they were sheltered by their island home. They grew wheat in the valleys, grapes and vines on the hillsides, and traded their wares with Egypt and other societies around the Mediterranean.

The Minoans had an extremely charming, naturalistic art style, depicting dolphins and other sea creatures as well as attractive portraits of people. A common theme features young, svelte people vaulting over the backs of bulls. This may have been part of a religious ceremony, and the bull theme may help explain the legend of the Minotaur. The Minoans seem to have been less patriarchal than many other cultures of the time, and depictions of bare-breasted priestesses suggest goddess worship. From a distance, the Minoan culture seems quite peaceful and attractive. But we shouldn't romanticize too much. A darker side of Minoan culture is suggested by the snakes wielded by the priestesses, as well as evidence of human sacrifice and even cannibalism.

Minoan culture seems to have been based around several large palaces at various places on the island. Many of these were destroyed by earthquakes in 1700 BCE. Afterward, the palace at Knossos grew larger, suggesting that its ruler gained control over the rest of Crete. The northern part of the island was devastated in 1625 by the eruption of the island volcano of Thera. Minoan culture declined thereafter, until it was overrun by the more warlike Mycenaeans around 1400.

THE CHARIOT AGE

The Minoan states were just the best known of several small states that sprang up around the Mediterranean around the same time. Others included the famous city of Troy, on the eastern Anatolian coast, and Phoenician cities like Tyre and Byblos, in the eastern

Mediterranean. These places were based mainly on trade, and, at least in their early years, were relatively peaceful. But the spread of state societies was not always so peaceful. Further inland, the spread of state societies frequently occurred through conquest. The Akkadians and Amorites who conquered Mesopotamia had been early examples of simpler societies conquering more complex societies, and then becoming complex themselves. Oftentimes in later years, such conquerors were nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists who had learned to use horses in warfare. Such people were less numerous than settled people, but much fiercer, because every able-bodied adult male could be a warrior. The vast majority of settled people, on the other hand, were farmers—too poor and hard-working to be effective warriors. In addition, nomads could keep large herds of horses by grazing them on the steppes, while people in cities had to feed their horses grain, which was expensive. Such nomadic horse warriors would be a threat to state societies for thousands of years.

At first, however, they did not ride their horses. They rode behind them in chariots, truly formidable instruments of war. Chariots were fast and maneuverable, allowing a driver and an archer to easily defeat many foot soldiers. Soon after the invention of the chariot, around 1700 BCE, older states began to be terrorized by charioteers. The Hyksos who ended the Middle Kingdom of Egypt were chariot fighters, as were the Kassites, who conquered the Old Babylonian Empire, and the Mittani, who conquered northern Mesopotamia. Chariots had even reached China by 1300 BCE, and were used by warriors of the Shang Dynasty (one Shang king was buried with his chariots and the two horses that pulled it). Many of the charioteers in the west were warlike Indo-European peoples, who came down from northern lands around this time. The most important were the Hittites, the Aryans, and the Mycenaeans.

HITTITE AND EGYPTIAN EMPIRES

The Hittites migrated into Anatolia around 2000 BCE and set up several city states. By 1650 they ruled all of Anatolia from their capital at Hattusas. In the 1500's BCE they expanded further, conquering parts of Mesopotamia and beginning to expand into Syria. The Hittites were quick learners, and borrowed aspects of statecraft from Mesopotamia, including legal codes and cuneiform writing. Hittite kings were not considered divine, however, and they ruled in a rather less despotic way than Egyptian or Mesopotamian kings. Like the later Romans, the Hittites

were a practical, efficient people. They were especially capable with weapons technology. They were pioneers in chariot building, and were among the first to smelt iron. Despite their capacity for warfare, the Hittites were relatively fair-minded rulers of their empire (compared to many other imperialists).

The Hittites were able hold Anatolia, the core of the lands they conquered, for several hundred years. In lands with more established states, however, chariot warriors were not able to hold on to their conquests. The Egyptians soon learned to use chariots themselves, and threw off the Hyksos in 1575. Egyptian kings first began to refer to themselves as pharaoh during the ensuing Middle Kingdom period. In order to prevent further invasions from Southwest Asia, they began to conquer the eastern Mediterranean, adding its territories to a growing empire that soon began to butt up against that of the Hittites.

New Kingdom Egypt was the scene of an interesting religious controversy. Egyptian priests had grown steadily more powerful at the expense of the pharaohs. This trend was countered by the Pharaoh Akhnaton, who decided to stop worshipping the old Egyptian gods. He shut down ancient temples and replaced them with monuments to Aton, the sun god. Akhnaton believed Aton to be a universal god, so this was the first historical instance of monotheism. But the new religion didn't last. Akhnaton's religious obsession caused him to neglect Egypt's foreign possessions, which were temporarily lost. After his death, worship of the old gods was restored, as were Egypt's imperial lands. Egyptian expansion in the eastern Mediterranean was finally halted by the Hittites in 1296, in pitched battle at Kadesh, which left both empires weakened. In the meantime, the Assyrians of northern Mesopotamia had thrown off their Mittani rulers, and begun to expand at the expense of Hittites and Egyptians.

VEDIC ARYANS IN INDIA

The Harappan states of the Indus valley had vanished by 1700 BCE. Shortly afterward, around 1500 BCE, a warlike, chariot-riding Indo-European people were migrating into northern India, over-running and conquering the original Dravidian inhabitants. These people referred to themselves as "Arya", which means "noble" in their language (ancient Sanskrit) and are known to historians as Aryans. We don't know whether the first Aryans appeared before the collapse of the Indus states. The first waves may have, and may have helped accelerate the collapse that

was already underway. In any case, the Aryans brought a new culture to India, which would serve as a major foundation later Indian society.

The Aryans were cattle herders and pastoralists, and didn't establish states for many centuries. Most of what we know about them comes from their sacred literature, the Vedas; an orally transmitted body of literature composed between 1700 and 500 BCE (writing was only re-introduced to India after 700 BCE). The oldest Vedas are gathered in a collection called the Rig Veda, so the period from 1700 to 1000 BCE is often called the Rigvedic period. The early Vedas reveal a pantheon of amoral nature gods resembling their cultural relatives, the Greek gods. Most religious practice involved rituals for assuring the favor of the gods. These often involved animal sacrifice and drinking of soma, an intoxicating beverage. The Vedic tradition would form the taproot of the Hindu religion, which would become much more sophisticated in later years.

Another Indian tradition whose roots can be traced to the Vedic Aryans is the **caste** system. Originally, Vedic society was divided into three groups. The Aryans were divided into nobles and commoners, while the conquered Dravidians were set aside as an underclass, the *Dasas*. Later, the Aryans began to group themselves into four groups, or castes: priests (*Brahmans*), nobles or warriors (*Kshatriya*), peasants or merchants (*Vaishya*), and servants (*Shudra*). Uncommonly rigid divisions emerged between these groups, in the form of traditions allowing people to eat with and marry only other members of their caste. In time, the castes multiplied, and today there are literally thousands of different castes and sub-castes in Indian society.

MYCENAEANS

The first Greek-speaking people to emerge into history were the Mycenaeans, who settled in mainland Greece around 2000 BCE, displacing the non-Indo-European people who had been living there before. These people (who probably called themselves Achaeans) were the warlike, bronze-age people described later by Homer. They rode chariots, though these seem have mostly served as status symbols, which they rode to the battlefield and before dismounting to fight on foot; as in the battle scenes from the Iliad. By 1600, the Mycenaeans had established fortress kingdoms on the Greek mainland, and adapted the Minoan script to their own language.

Taking quickly to the sea, they prospered through a combination of trade and piracy, and expanded into the Aegean and onto Crete in the 1400's. They may have raided Troy around this time, thus inspiring the stories that would become the Iliad and Odyssey.

INVASIONS AND THE IRON AGE

By the 1200's, a new wave of northern invaders once again disrupted the older states. The Hittite empire was overrun by Phrygians, Thracians, and Luvians, leaving only remnant Hittite city-states in southern Anatolia. The Myceneans were overrun by other invaders, probably the mysterious Sea Peoples who tried to raid Egypt around the same time. Taking advantage of Egyptian and Hittite weakness in the eastern Mediterranean, the Sea Peoples finally settled in Gaza. They were known as Philistines to the ancient Hebrews, who settled in Canaan around the same time. Mesopotamia, meanwhile, was overrun by Aramaeans, whose language would become the region's lingua franca in later years.

During all this turmoil, knowledge of iron-working passed from the Hittites to other peoples, such as the Sea Peoples. Iron was actually not much better than bronze for weapons, but it was vastly more plentiful, so it allowed more people to arm themselves more cheaply. Armored foot-soldiers soon ended the dominance of charioteers. Since more people were now armed, war became more common. On the other hand, iron was also useful for making farm implements, so both plowshares and swords became more widespread. Aided by iron technology, Dorian Greeks moved into the lands previously occupied by the Myceneans, and then began to colonize the northern Mediterranean coast. The Phoenicians adopted iron working as well, growing more powerful in their homeland, and beginning to colonize the North African coast.

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENTS

In Africa, the advent of the Iron Age accelerated movements that were already underway. The Bantu peoples had been migrating from their West African homeland since as early as 3500 BCE. They learned to use iron in East Africa, around Lake Victoria. This technology may have diffused from the Middle East, but it may have developed independently. In any case, the

combination of iron use, farming, and cattle herding enabled the Bantu to spread into southern Africa, displacing and assimilating the native Khoisan hunter-gatherers. The Bantu reached southeast Africa by 500 AD, driving most of the Khoisan into the region around the Kalahari Desert, where some became cattle herders themselves.

Another black African people, the Nubians, had established a state called Kush along the upper (southern) Nile by 1700 BCE. At first, Kush remained in the shadow of Egypt, which had raided the area for slaves, cattle, and gold for centuries. Egypt conquered Kush around 1500 BCE, but when Egypt was weakened in the upheavals beginning in the 1200's, Kush became independent once again, and re-emerged as a strong state. Nubian society was heavily influenced by Egypt, as is obvious from the burial of kings in pyramids, a practice that continued long after it was abandoned in Egypt. During Egypt's Late Period, Kush conquered their northern neighbor. Their rule lasted from 712 to 657, when they were driven out by Assyrians. The Egyptians rallied and drove out the Assyrians in 653, and then attacked Kush, forcing the Nubians to move their capital to Meroe, in the south. Henceforth, their kingdom was known as Meroe, and it would last for many centuries more.

MIDDLE EASTERN EMPIRES

ASSYRIANS

The invasions between 1200 and 1000 scrambled the old power structure of the Middle East. Egypt lost its unity and began to decline after 1070. After 712, it would be ruled by various foreign peoples until modern times. The Hittites never recovered either, and their remnant states would be swallowed up in the next centuries by other peoples. Ever since the chariot invasions of the 16th century BCE, Mesopotamia had been the scene of a continuing clash of migrating peoples. All this time, however, the regions of Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south had maintained their cultural identities. Assyria had just thrown off its Mittanni rulers when it was invaded by Aramaeans, while Babylonia was invaded by Chaldeans. By the 900's BCE, however, both of these peoples had begun to settle down, and were incorporated into the older cultures. The Assyrian kingdom began an imperial expansion around 930, gaining control over or tribute from peoples from northern Mesopotamia to the Levant. They continued

to expand over the next centuries, and King Tiglath-pileser III took control of Babylon in 729. When it conquered Egypt in 671, the Assyrian empire had reached its greatest extent. By this time, however, it was overextended, and subject peoples were rising up against harsh Assyrian rule.

THE NEW BABYLONIAN EMPIRE

Babylon rebelled under the Chaldean king Nabopolassar in 615. By 605, a coalition of Babylonians and Medes (an Indo-European people who had recently moved into the Iranian plateau) defeated the Assyrians. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Chaldeans set up a new Babylonian empire, occupying most of the old Assyrian empire, except for Egypt. The Medes, meanwhile, set up their own empire to the north and east of the Babylonian empire.

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

The Persians, relatives of the Medes, had recently occupied the northeast coast of the Persian Gulf. The Medes also claimed control of this area, so they invaded in 550 BCE. This was a mistake. The Median king was captured by Cyrus of Persia, who then went on the offensive and took control of the Median Empire. By 539, Cyrus had also conquered the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia as well as the Babylonian Empire. The Persian empire was now the largest empire the world had yet known, but it continued to expand under Cyrus' successors. Cambyses conquered Egypt and Libya. Darius extended the empire to the Indus River in 518, and then crossed Anatolia into Europe in 513. Darius' forces were finally turned back by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon. His son, Xerxes, also attacked Greece, but was soundly defeated in 480 and 479. This brought Persian expansion to a halt. Nevertheless, the Persians had established a huge, well-organized empire which stretched to the edges of Europe, Africa, and India. This brought cultures from all these regions into direct contact for the first time, making the region simultaneously smaller and more cosmopolitan.

STEPPE NOMADS AND THEIR IMPACT

Regions from areas far wider than the Persian Empire were also coming into contact with each other, for better and for worse. Beginning around 1000 BCE, Indo-Iranian people related to the Medes and Persians, such as the Scythians, Sarmatians, Sakas, and Kushans, had made the transition from partially-settled, seasonal pastoralism to full time, nomadic pastoralism. They learned to ride horses well during the same period, and were soon riding them into battle. This skill had revolutionized warfare, and the struggles between the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians were fought partly by horsemen. The pastoralists benefitted most from the new skill, however, because horses were easy to keep on the grassy steppes of Central Asia. This made the pastoralists even more fierce and mobile than before. Cyrus, for example, spent a great deal of his time campaigning against the nomadic Scythians, mostly unsuccessfully. In later years, nomads would regularly terrorize, and even conquer, empires just as vast as that of the Persians. But the nomads were more than just a destructive force. They were also the first people to range all the way across the central Asian steppes, from Eastern Europe to the edge of China. By 500 BCE, they had helped establish the Silk Road, a series of trade routes linking the Persian Empire with China.

THE NEW WORLD

MESOAMERICAN SOCIETIES

THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

Maize, beans, and squash—the central trinity of Mesoamerican agriculture—were being grown in increasingly sophisticated and intensive ways in Mesoamerica by 3500 BCE. Permanent villages soon began to appear, and populations began to grow. By 1500 BCE, the first chiefdoms were forming, and tendrils of trade began to grow between them. These increasingly complex, stratified societies were the foundations for later Mesoamerican states, and the period from 1500 BCE to 150 CE is often called the Formative (or Pre-Classic) period of Mesoamerican history. The most important culture of the Formative period was that of the Olmecs, whose culture was centered around two towns along the southern Gulf of Mexico: San Lorenzo and La Venta. These were not cities so much as ceremonial centers, presided over by

priest-chieftans. As in later Mesoamerican societies, religion was pervasive. Half-human, half-jaguar images (sometimes of babies) are common in Olmec art. It has been suggested that this signifies a combination of shamanism and ancestor worship, where the dominant members of society claimed to be descended from Jaguar gods. The Olmecs also carved enormous stone heads, some weighing over 20 tons, which probably represented rulers. Olmecs were the first Mesoamericans to build pyramids, and were probably the first to play the famous ceremonial ball game that, at least in later years, sometimes ended with the sacrifice of players.

Olmec society was declining by about 400 BCE, but by this time new societies were arising in surrounding areas. To the south and west, powerful city-states were emerging in highland valleys. Several small city-states emerged to the south in the valley of Oaxaca, home of the Zapotecs. One city-state, Monte Alban, soon came to dominate the rest, serving as the capital of a Zapotec state. Several features of Mesoamerican society seem to have originated in the Oaxaca valley; including hieroglyphic writing, a very accurate calendar based on two interlocking cycles of 365 and 260 days, and the practice of ritual human sacrifice (often of prisoners of war). In the Valley of Mexico, two city states—Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan, were rivals until a volcano destroyed Cuicuilco in the first century CE. Unchallenged, Teotihuacan began to grow into a great city. To the east, the Mayans had spread from the Guatemalan highlands to the lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula by 800 BCE. By 300 BCE, city-states, heavily influenced by Olmec and Zapotec culture, had emerged throughout this region, and had begun to compete with each other.

EARLY ANDEAN SOCIETIES

Besides Mesoamerica, the other center of complex societies in the New World was the region of the Andes and the Peruvian coast. Most people know about the Inca empire that was destroyed by Pizarro, but this was only the last and largest of a series of sophisticated societies of the Andes. The Andean peoples never developed a system of writing, so our knowledge of them is almost entirely based on archaeology, which cannot give us the detail of written accounts. In many ways, however, the people of the Andes were more sophisticated than the Mesoamericans. They were working metals such as gold and silver long before the Mesoamericans, and domesticated llamas and alpacas, the only beasts of burden native to the

Americas. Wool from these animals, as well as cultivated cotton, provided raw materials for beautiful textiles, some of the finest ever made.

Andean history is usually divided into several periods, as Figure shows. The first complex societies appeared in river valleys that watered the deserts of the Peruvian coast. These people subsisted mainly on the rich sea life of the coast, but they came to rely more and more on beans and squash. In the highlands, people domesticated potatoes and quinoa. The first monumental architecture, in the form of mounds, stone walls, and fire pits, appeared in the early third millennium. This period, between about 3000 BCE to 2000 BCE, is called the Preceramic Period. The appearance of pottery around 2000 BCE marks the beginning of the Initial Period, a time of intensifying social complexity and reliance on agriculture. Maize was first introduced into the region at this time, and large irrigation works and U-shaped ceremonial buildings began to appear.

After about 800 BCE, Andean history is divided into alternating Horizon and Intermediate periods. Roughly speaking, during the horizons a widespread type of art or culture unified the region, while traditions diverged during the Intermediate Periods. During the First Intermediate period, a highland site called Chavin de Huantar, on a route between the coast and the tropical forests on the east side of the Andes, became an important cultural center. A large, U-shaped temple there showed coastal influences, but artwork at the site featured forest animals such as caymans, monkeys, and jaguars. Some carvings feature humans with jaguar-like features, reminiscent of Olmec art. As with the Olmec tradition, Chavin motifs spread through surrounding lands, though there is no evidence of any central political authority.

