

Handout 2: Early Cities

Adapted from Big History by Cynthia Stokes Brown (2007)

“Were these four societies civilization?” As you read, identify evidence that will help you answer this question and determine if they meet the criteria for civilization.

The first cities developed in about 3500 BCE in four river valleys across Afroeurasia. The earliest cities appeared in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys in what is now southern Iraq. Cities also appeared in the Nile valley in Egypt, the Indus valley in Pakistan/India, and in the Yellow River valley in China. All of these cities were supported by farming in the river valley areas, although the specific crops varied by place. They all also had domesticated animals which provided food as well.

Mesopotamia-Sumer

The name Mesopotamia actually means “land between rivers” in ancient Greek. This society, also known as Sumer, is an ancient civilization of cities that developed on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers over five thousand years ago.

The first of eight Sumerian cities to develop was Uruk. Uruk had two major temples. One was to An, the sky god and another to Inanna the goddess of love and protection. Each major city in Sumer was devoted to one or more gods. The Sumerians believed that the gods resided in the temples they built for them.

Sumerians believed in seven major gods and goddesses, who formed a council that decided what would happen to people. The four gods were An (sky), Enlil (air), Enki (water and wisdom), and Utu (sun). The three goddesses were Ki (Earth), Nannar (moon), and Inanna (love and protection). People in Sumer ranked gods just like they were ranked when hierarchies appeared. The major gods lived in temples that formed large towers called ziggurats.

Over time, the cities of Sumer were united. King Sargon of the city Akkad conquered the other cities, demolished their walls, and appointed his sons as governors. Sumer was now ruled by one city and its ruler controlled others, supported by scribes and priests. Sargon’s grandson, Naram Suen, declared himself a god.

Indus River Civilization

People began living in the Indus Valley in about 7000 BCE and on the Indus River by 3000 BCE. Archeologists have excavated two Indus Valley cities, Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. Scholars have not been able to decipher Indus script, so not much is known about their culture.

Scholars do know that the people of Mahenjo Daro and Harappa were able to separate drinking water from waste-water in the first known sewage system. Some carvings on artifacts found in these cities may depict some early forms of Hindu gods. By 1500 BCE life on the Indus River had disappeared. Scholars think there may have been an earthquake or a flood that made life difficult. Another possibility is that farming became difficult because of salinization. Salinization occurs when land gets too much salt caused by the evaporation of water. Since even fresh water has

small amounts of salt in it, the same problem could have caused the decline of ancient Sumer as well.

Egypt

Fortunately, scholars have been able to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, a form of writing that Egyptians developed around 3300 BCE. Scribes or record keepers who could read and write well, kept information on an early form of paper called papyrus. Documents reveal that Egyptian settlements were united in about 3100 BCE and ruled from a city called Memphis on the Nile River Delta.

The Nile River, the longest river in the world at 4,160 miles, gave Egyptians many advantages. It provided transportation by boat that allowed their ruler, called a pharaoh, to control the distribution of resources through the kingdom. Since the river flooded annually, Egyptians farmers were able to trap water in deposits of soil to water their crops. Salinization occurs when water evaporates leaving too much salt. Because there was less evaporation here, agriculture lasted much longer than in the Indus Valley or in Sumer.

In 1687 BCE, Egypt was invaded by a people called the Hyksos who rode horse drawn chariots. This drew Egypt into warfare and Egypt ruled the Nile far to the south and as far as the Euphrates River in the north.

Yellow River

In China, in the far eastern part of Eurasia, a fourth civilization developed. Early Chinese cities developed on the agricultural surplus produced near the Yellow River. Urban areas evolved from villages on terraced land near the Yellow River. By 3000 BCE there were walled villages in northern China with richly appointed tombs containing pottery with mark that appeared to be ancient Chinese script.

By 1523 BCE, the Shang family had established military and political power by importing weapons from the Middle East. The Shangs ruled for 500 years. Their capital was in Anyang, now in the Honan province of modern China.

During the Shang dynasty, elites, or people at the top of the social hierarchy used bronze to make cooking pots and other artifacts. Bronze was also used for wheeled vehicles. They made books out of bamboo and used brushes for writing. There is also evidence they practiced human sacrifice.