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Introduction

While homo sapiens—humans—have been around for a couple hundred thousand years, for most of their history they were not considered “civilized.” Humans originally lived in small groups and gathered nuts and berries and hunted in order to survive. Many were nomadic. That is, they moved from one place to another. They may have moved to follow herds of animals, or they may have had to search for new sources of plants, nuts, and berries. Overpopulation may have diminished the food source, or natural disasters such as fire, drought, or flood may have made moving necessary.

The Ice Age also caused humans to relocate. Huge populations had to move to warmer climates in order to survive. As much of the earth’s surface water became ice, the level of the seas fell, making it easier for people to move from one continent to another. Eventually humans inhabited what is now Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, and North and South America.

Better tools enabled people to build better shelters, and improved weapons allowed humans to become more efficient hunters, so they did not need to move around as much. Settlements sprang up, and many groups began to farm or grow their own food rather than hunt for it. Improved agricultural techniques eventually made it possible for humans to produce more food than they could consume. This allowed them to trade, build, create monuments, and invent new tools and weapons.

When people established cities, civilizations began to develop. This happened about 5,000 years ago. Culture, political and social development, and technological achievement are all characteristics of a civilization. Other characteristics include the invention of writing, mathematics, improved agricultural practices, sophisticated architecture, and trade.

This book follows the development of civilizations from their primitive beginnings in the Fertile Crescent over 5,000 years ago to more recent civilizations. It will not only examine many important civilizations and describe them in detail, but it will also highlight the achievements each civilization has contributed to our present life.

This book will also point out how cultures borrowed from previous cultures, adopting those elements they liked while rejecting those elements they didn’t. This refining process, repeated many times, has given us the world we live in today. Perhaps Sir Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientific geniuses of all time, made the point best when he said, “If I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” He was making the point that every inventor, scientist, philosopher, and artist is able to build or add to the inventions and accomplishments of those who have gone before. Many times these accomplishments can be traced to one man. Others are traced back to groups of people or to a civilization. The accomplishments of past civilizations have shaped the world we live in today.

For example, I am able to write this book because of the accomplishments of many civilizations. The Sumerians invented writing and mathematics, the Chinese invented paper, and the Phoenicians invented the alphabet. Each of these monumental inventions makes it possible for me to communicate with countless teachers and students.

One final note. It must be emphasized that when studying one civilization or culture at a time, students should be reminded that other civilizations and cultures were thriving simultaneously. One civilization did not abruptly end and another dramatically begin. For example, while the Assyrians were thriving, so were the Etruscans, Greeks, Phoenicians, and others.
The Fertile Crescent

The term “Fertile Crescent” refers to an area in the Middle East where the earliest known civilizations of the world began. The area got its name because the soil is fertile and the region is shaped like a crescent. Like a huge arch, the Fertile Crescent covers an area from the Persian Gulf through the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys and along the Mediterranean Sea. Some people refer to the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent as Mesopotamia. The western part of the Fertile Crescent is sometimes referred to as the Mediterranean section.

The Fertile Crescent was an ideal place for nomadic people to settle, build cities, and eventually develop civilizations. Sheep, goats, and various kinds of grains were found in abundance in the wild. With a permanent food source, there was no need to move around to find food. It was easier to grow crops in the rich soil and to raise animals for food. People living in the Fertile Crescent were able to grow more crops than they could eat and raise more animals than they needed, so they could trade the excess crops and animals with others. As trading increased, the population grew, and the people needed to develop laws, keep records, and invent ways to deal with their new way of life. There was a need for a written language, mathematics, laws, medicine, agriculture, and other developments because of the many people living close to one another.

When humans changed their lifestyle from hunters and fishers to farmers about 5,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, the developments and inventions that came from this change helped to develop the world’s first civilizations. These civilizations have affected world history tremendously, not only in social and business areas, but in religion as well. Many of the great religions that exist in the world today had their beginnings in the area known as the Fertile Crescent.

The Fertile Crescent was not only the home of the first civilizations, but also the area where many later civilizations were developed. Some of the civilizations that developed in the Fertile Crescent were the Assyrians, Sumerians, Canaanites, Philistines, Phoenicians/Carthaginians, Akkadians, Hittites, Palestinians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Israelites, and others.

Identifying Modern Countries in the Fertile Crescent

Using an atlas, identify the middle-eastern countries that exist in the areas in and around the Fertile Crescent on the map at right. The outlines of the countries are shown as dashed lines.
The Importance of the Fertile Crescent

Shown below are four statements relating to the importance of the Fertile Crescent. Read the statements below and then elaborate on them. To “elaborate” means you take the statement, explain its meaning, and add details or important information.

1. A fertile area allowed humans to settle in one place and develop civilizations.

________________________________________________________________________
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2. A surplus of food meant that not everyone needed to hunt or farm.

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3. People living in the Fertile Crescent were able to grow more food and raise more animals than they needed to eat.

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4. The transition from hunting and farming to trading caused civilizations to develop.

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Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means “between two rivers.” The two rivers referred to are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers begin in what is now Turkey, flow southeast, converge in the southeast in what is now Iraq, and empty into the Persian Gulf. The hot, dry climate of Mesopotamia was mixed with seasonal flooding, which made farming a challenge. Farmers in ancient Mesopotamia learned to deal with these problems by building levees to control the floods and developing irrigation systems in order to produce wheat, barley, sesame, and flax. They were also able to produce many different kinds of fruits and vegetables.

People talk about Mesopotamia as if it were a single civilization or culture. Actually, Mesopotamia was an area, not a civilization. It was composed of several independent city-states, each with its own religion, laws, language, and government. Many civilizations have existed in Mesopotamia, some of them at the same time. While one culture may have dominated a certain period, other cultures may have existed and were seeking to become independent. Some of the cultures that have existed in this area are Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, and Iraq.

The Sumerians and the Akkadians

The first group of people to inhabit Mesopotamia were the Sumerians. They originally lived in the mountains, but moved to the Plain of Shinar near the Persian Gulf to take advantage of the fertile soil. First, they drained the marshes and then controlled the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers by building levees and irrigation canals. As a result, the Sumerians had a stable food supply, and not everyone was needed to farm, hunt, or fish. Some Sumerians became tradesmen, merchants, soldiers, priests, government officials, and artisans. Their country was called Sumer.

The Sumerians are given credit for many inventions. One of the most important was the invention of a written language. Writing was invented so the Sumerians could keep records. Their writing was, of course, very simple. It was composed of pictures called pictographs. Scribes, who were professional writers, drew the pictures on clay tablets using a wedge-shaped instrument, or stylus. Over a period of time, the writing became more sophisticated. The pictures were replaced with shapes and lines. This type of writing is called cuneiform. Other inventions include the wheel,
which was developed for making pottery, but was later used to make vehicles. They also invented the water clock, the twelve-month calendar, the plow, and the sailboat.

The Sumerians had a numbering system based on the number 60. We still use the Sumerian system today when measuring time. For example, sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. Also, a circle has 360 degrees.

Between 3500 and 2000 B.C., the Sumerians were living in large villages. Eventually they became prosperous, and the villages developed into self-governing city-states. The buildings in these city-states were made of sun-dried mud bricks. The Sumerians used these mud bricks as building materials because there was no building stone and very little timber in Sumer, and the rivers were a great source for mud.

The buildings in Sumer were different from other civilizations, such as the Egyptians. Sumerians learned how to use a keystone to make arches. A keystone is a wedge-shaped stone in an arch that causes the arch to lock together. The doorways, gates, and other openings in buildings in the Sumerian cities had arches. Similar openings in Egyptian buildings were square.

Priests, wealthy citizens, and merchants had two-story houses. These houses had an open courtyard that all the rooms of the house opened into. There were smaller homes for others, also.

Religion was important to the Sumerians. At the center of each city-state was a temple that was surrounded by courts and public buildings. These temples were called ziggurats. Ziggurats were originally built on platforms, but eventually became temple-towers brightly decorated with glazed bricks. They were like huge pyramids with terraced sides that were flat on the top.

The Sumerians had many gods. They believed the gods spoke to them through their priests. Since the priests were representatives of the gods, they had a great deal of power in Sumer. When a priest commanded that something be done, the people believed the command was actually coming from one of their gods, and they obeyed. The ability to make important decisions and have people obey them elevated the status of priests. They became priest-kings and ruled large areas.

While Mesopotamia offered many advantages for settlement, such as rich soil, water, and game, there was one great disadvantage. The land did not provide any natural protection from invaders. Enemies could easily march into Sumer from almost any direction. This made Sumerians vulnerable to attack, not only from foreign armies, but from other Sumerian cities as well. Wars between Sumerian cities were common.

The importance of natural protection cannot be overstated. Compare the location of Egypt with Sumer, for example. Egypt is protected by a desert on both sides of the Nile River, which is difficult to navigate in some spots. Nations wanting to conquer Egypt would have a difficult time overcoming these natural barriers to launch an attack. Consequently, Egypt's culture grew rapidly. Sumer, on the other hand, did not have natural barriers. Sumerians not only had to worry about invading armies, but also about other groups of people who wanted to share the fertile soil of Mesopotamia.

One of the groups that moved into Sumeria was the Akkadians, who had been living on the Arabian peninsula. The Akkadians were a Semitic people. This means they spoke a Semitic language related to languages similar to Arabic and Hebrew. The Akkadians formed their own country where the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers were close together. Their country was called Akkad. The Akkadians adopted much of the Sumerian culture. After many clashes between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, more Semites invaded Sumeria. The Sumerian culture was eventually absorbed by the invaders. This combined civilization lasted until about 1950 B.C. when the Amorites and the Elamites captured Ur, Mesopotamia's most important city.