

Interact with History

World History Pattern of Interaction

Pages 26 - 32

It has been a tough year ever since the harvest failed. Many times, you've cursed the name of Mummar, the government official responsible for overseeing the harvest. But now that you've heard about the king's punishment for Mummar, you're not sure what to think

The law of the Babylonian Empire-Hammurabi's Code- hold a people responsible for their actions. It usually applies retaliation as punishment. That is, if you put out the eye of another, your own eye will be put out. Mummar had hired a substitute to handle the harvest this year, and the harvest was a disaster. Because of Mummar's decision, your city has suffers through a serious food shortage. Some people may die. Therefore, the king has sentenced Mummar to die.

Examining the issues:

- *Does the king's decision represent justice or revenge?
- *What should be the main purpose of laws: to promote good behavior or to punish bad behavior?
- *Do all communities need a system of laws to guide them?

Hold a class debate on these questions. As you prepare for the debate, think about what you have learned about the changes that take place as civilizations grow and become more complex.

As you read about the growth of civilizations in this chapter, consider why societies developed systems of laws.

Setting the stage: Two rivers flow from the mountains of what is now Turkey down through Syria and Iraq, and finally to the Persian Gulf. Six thousand years ago, the waters of these rivers provided the lifeblood that allowed the formation of farming settlements. These grew into villages and then cities. This pattern would also occur along other river systems in northern Africa, India, and China, as the world's first civilizations developed.

Geography of the Fertile Crescent

A desert climate dominates the landscape between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea in Southwest Asia. Yet within this dry region lies an arc of land that provides some of the best farming in Southwest Asia. The region's curved shape and the richness of its land led scholars to call it the **Fertile Crescent**.

Fertile Plains: In the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent, the Tigris (TY-grihs) and Euphrates (yoo-FRAY-teez) rivers flow southeastward to the Persian Gulf. Between them lies a plain that became known as Mesopotamia which I Greek means “land between the rivers.”

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flooded Mesopotamia at least once a year. As the floodwater receded, it left a thick bed of mud called **silt**. In this rich, now soil, farmers could plant and harvest enormous quantities of wheat and barley. The surpluses from their harvests allowed villages to grow.

Environmental Challenges: People first began to settle and farm in southern Mesopotamia before 4500b.c. Around 3500b.c., the people called the Sumerians, whom you read about in Chapter 1, arrived on the scene. The Sumerians mixed with the local farmers, and their language became dominant in the region. No one knows for sure where the Sumerians came from. Good soil was the advantage that attracted these settlers to the flat, swampy land of Sumer. There were, however, three disadvantages to their now environment.

First, the flooding of the rivers was unpredictable. Sometimes it came as early as April, sometimes as late as June. After the flood receded, the hot sun quickly dried out the mud. Little or no rain fell, and the land became almost a desert. How could Sumerian farmers water their fields during the dry summer months in order to make their barks grow?

Second, Sumer was a small region, only about the size of Massachusetts. The villages were little clusters of reed huts standing in the middle of an open plain. With no natural barriers for protection, a Sumerian village was almost defenseless. How could the villagers protect themselves?

Third, the natural resources of Sumer were extremely limited. Without a good supply of stone, wood, and metal, what were the Sumerians to use for tools or buildings?

Creating Solutions: Over a long period of time, the people of Sumer created solutions to deal with these problems. To provide water, they dug **irrigation** ditches that carried river water to their fields and allowed them to produce a surplus of crops. For defense, they built city walls with mud bricks. Finally, Sumerians traded with the peoples of the mountains and the desert for the products they lacked. Sumerians traded their grain, cloth, and crafted tools for the stone, wood, and metal they needed to make their tools and buildings.

These activities required organization, cooperation, and leadership. It took many people working together, for example, for the Sumerians to construct their large irrigation systems. Leaders were needed to plan the projects and supervise the digging. These projects also created a need for laws to settle disputes over how land and water would be distributed. These leaders and laws were the beginning of organized government.

Sumerians Create City-States

The Sumerians stand out in history as one of the first groups of people to form a civilization. Five key characteristics set Sumer apart from earlier human societies: (1) advanced cities, (2) specialized workers, (3) complex institutions, (4) record keeping, and (5) advanced technology. All the later peoples who lived in this region of the world built upon the innovations of Sumerian civilization.

By 3000 b.c., the Sumerians had built a number of cities, each surrounded by fields of barley and wheat. Although these cities shared the same culture, they developed their own governments, each with its own rulers. Each city and the surrounding land it controlled formed a **city-state**. A city-state functioned much as an independent country does today. Sumerian city-states included Uruk, Kish, Lagash, Umma, and Ur. As in Ur, which in chapter 1 describes, the center of all Sumerian cities was the walled temple with a ziggurat at its center. There the priests appealed to the gods for the well being of the city-state.

The Power of Priests: Sumer's earliest governments, were controlled by the temple priests. The farmers believed that the success of their crops depended upon the blessings of the gods, and the priests acted as go-between with the gods. In addition to being a place of worship, the ziggurat was like a city hall. From the ziggurat the priests managed the irrigation system. They also demanded a portion of every farmer's crop as taxes.

Monarchs Take Control: In time of war, however, the priests did not lead the city. Instead, the men of the city chose a tough fighter who could command the city's soldiers. At first, a commander's power ended as soon as the war was over. After 3000 b.c., wars between cities became more and more frequent. Gradually, Sumerian priests and people gave commanders permanent control of standing armies.

In time, some military leaders became full time rulers, or monarchs. These rulers usually passed their powers on to their sons, who eventually passed it on to their own heirs. Such a series of rulers from a single family is called a **dynasty**. Between 3000 and 2500 b.c., many Sumerian city-states came under the rule of dynasties.

The Spread of Cities: Sumer's city-states grew prosperous from the surplus food produced on their farms. These surpluses allowed Sumerians to increase long-distance trade, exchanging the extra food and other goods for items they need but did not have.

As their population and trade expanded, the Sumerians came into contact with other peoples, and their ideas—such as living in cities—spread. By 2500 b.c., new cities were arising all over the Fertile Crescent, in what is now Syria, northern Iraq, and Turkey. So, too, did the Sumerians absorb ideas such as religious beliefs from neighboring cultures. This process of a new idea or a product spreading from one culture to another is called **culture diffusion**.

Sumerian Culture

The belief system, social structure, technology, and arts of the Sumerians reflected their civilization's triumph over its harsh environment.

A Religion of Many Gods: Like many peoples in the Fertile Crescent, the Sumerians believed that many different gods controlled the various forces in nature. The belief in many gods is called **polytheism**. Enlil, the god of cloud and air, was among the powerful gods. Sumerians feared him as “the ranging flood that has no rival.” Lowest of all the gods were demons known as Wicked Udugs, who caused disease, misfortune, and every kind of human trouble. Altogether, the Sumerians believed in roughly 3,000 gods.

Sumerians described their gods as doing many of the same things humans do—falling in love, having children, quarreling, and so on. Yet the Sumerians also believed that their gods were both immortal and all-powerful. Humans were nothing but their servants. At any moment, the mighty anger of the gods might strike, sending a fire, a flood, or an enemy to destroy a city. To keep the gods happy, the Sumerians built impressive ziggurats for them and offered rich sacrifices of animals, food, and wine.

Sumerians worked hard to earn the gods' protection in this life. Yet they expected little help from the gods after death. The Sumerians believed that the souls of the dead went to the “land of no return,” a dismal, gloomy place between the earth's crust and the ancient sea. No joy awaited souls there. A passage in a Sumerian poem describes the fate of dead souls: “Dust is their fare and clay their food.”

Some of the richest accounts of Mesopotamian myths and legends appear in a long poem called the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is one of the earliest works of literature in the world. Through the heroic adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary king, the narrative offers a glimpse into the beliefs and concerns of the ancient Sumerians. The epic tells of Gilgamesh's unsuccessful quest for immortality, a theme that recurs in ancient literature.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

**Gilgamesh, whither are you wandering?
Life, which you look for, you will never find.
For when the gods created man, they let
Death be his share, and withheld life
In their own hands.**

Epic of Gilgamesh

Sumerian beliefs and legends such as those in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* greatly influenced other ancient cultures, including the Hebrews and the Greeks.

Life in Sumerian Society: With civilization came greater differences between groups in society, or the beginning of what we call social classes. Priests and kings made up the highest level in Sumerian society. Wealthy merchants ranked next. The vast majority of ordinary Sumerian people worked with their hands in fields and workshops. At the lowest level of Sumerian society were the slaves. Some slaves were foreigners who had been captured in war. Others were Sumerians who had been sold into slavery as children

to pay the debts of their poor parents. By working obediently day and night, Sumerian slaves could hope to earn freedom.

Social class affected the levels of both men and women. On the whole, Sumerian women could pursue most of the occupations of the city life, from merchant to farmer to artisan. They could hold property in their own name. Women could also join the lower ranks of the priesthood. However, Sumer's written records mention few female scribes. Therefore, scholars have concluded that girls were not allowed to attend the schools where upper class boys learned to read and write. Even so, Sumerian women had more rights than women in many later civilizations.

Sumerian Science and Technology

Sumerians invented the wheel, the sail, and the plow; they were the first to use bronze; and they developed the first system of writing cuneiform. Cuneiform tablets provide evidence of other Mesopotamian innovations. One of the first known maps was made on a clay tablet in about 2300 b.c. Other tablets contain some of the oldest written records of scientific investigations in the areas of astronomy, chemical substances, and symptoms of disease.

Many other new ideas arose from the Sumerians' practical needs. In order to erect city walls and buildings, plan irrigation systems, and survey flooded fields, they needed arithmetic and geometry. They developed a number system in base 60, from which stem the modern units for measuring time (60 seconds= 1 minute) and the 360 degrees of a circle. Sumerian building techniques, including the use of mud bricks and mortar, made the most of the resources available. Their architectural innovations- such as arches, columns, ramps, and the pyramid-shaped design of the ziggurat-permanently influenced Mesopotamian civilization.

The First Empire Builders

From 3000 to 2000 b.c., the city-states of Sumer were almost constantly at war with one another. The weakened city-states could no longer ward off attacks from the peoples of the surrounding deserts and hills. Although the Sumerians never recovered from the attacks on their cities, their civilization did not die. Succeeding sets of rulers adapted the basic ideas of Sumerian culture to meet their own needs.

Sargon of Akkad: About 2350 b.c., a conqueror named Sargon defeated the city-states of Sumer. Sargon led his army from Akkad, a city-state north of Sumer. Unlike the Sumerians, the Akkadians were a Semitic people- that is, they spoke a language related to Arabic and Hebrew. The Akkadians had long before adopted most aspects of Sumerian culture. Sargon's conquests helped to spread that culture even farther, beyond the Tigris-Euphrates Valley.

By taking control of both northern and southern Mesopotamia, Sargon created the world's first empire. An **empire** brings together several peoples, nations, or previously

independent states under the control of one ruler. At its height, the Akkadian Empire extended from the Mediterranean coast in the west to present day Iran in the east. Sargon's dynasty lasted only about 200 years, after which it declined due to internal fighting, invasions, and a severe famine.

Babylonian Empire: In about 2000 b.c., nomadic warriors known as Amorites, another Semitic group, invaded Mesopotamia. Within a short time, the Amorites overwhelmed the Sumerians and established their capital at Babylon, on the Euphrates River. The Babylonian Empire reached its peak during the reign of **Hammurabi**, from 1792 b.c. to 1750 b.c. Hammurabi's most enduring legacy is the code of laws he put together.

Hammurabi's Code: Although individual Sumerian cities had developed codes of laws, Hammurabi recognized that a single, uniform code would help to unify the diverse groups within his empire. He therefore collected existing rules, judgments, and laws into the Code of Hammurabi had the code engraved in stone, and copies were placed all over his empire.

The code lists 282 specific laws dealing with everything that affected the community, including family relations, business conduct, and crime. The laws tell us a great deal about the Mesopotamians' beliefs and what they valued. Since many were merchants and traders, for example, many of the laws related to property issues.

Although the code applied to everyone, it set different punishments for rich and poor and for men and women. It frequently applied the principle of retaliation (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth) to punish crimes. Following are two of the laws:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

*If a man has stolen an ox, a sheep, a pig, or a boat that belonged to a temple or palace, he shall repay thirty times its cost. If it belonged to a private citizen, he shall repay ten times. If the thief cannot pay, he shall be put to death.

*If a woman hates her husband and says to him "You cannot be with me," the authorities in her district will investigate the case. If she has been chaste and without fault, even though her husband has neglected or belittled her, she will be held innocent and may return to her father's house...If the woman is at fault, she shall be thrown into the river.

Code of Hammurabi, adapted from a translation by L.W.King

Despite its severity, Hammurabi's Code carried forward an important idea in Mesopotamian civilization. It reinforced the principle that government had a responsibility for what occurred in society. For example, if a man was robbed and the thief was not caught, the government was required to compensate the victim for his loss.

The centuries after Hammurabi's reign, The Babylonian Empire fell to nomadic warriors. Over the years, new groups dominated the Fertile Crescent. Yet many ideas of the early Sumerians would be adopted by the later peoples, including the Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Hebrews. Meanwhile, a similar pattern of development, rise, and fall, was taking place to the west, along the Nile River in Egypt. Egyptian civilization is

described in Section 2.

History Makers:

Hammurabi

The noted lawgiver Hammurabi was also an able military leader, diplomat, and administrator of a vast empire. Hammurabi himself described some of his accomplishments:

*When (the gods) Anu and
Bel gave me the land of Sumer
And Akkad to rule, ...I dug
Out the Hammurabi-canal
Named Nuhus-nisi, which
Bringeth abundance of water
Unto the land of Sumer and
Akkad. Both the baks therof
I changed to fields for cultivation
And I garnered piles of
Grain, an dI procure unfailing
Water for the land...
As for the land of Sumer and
Akkad, I collected the scattered
People thereof, and I
Procured food and drink for
Them. In abundance and
Plenty I pastured them, and I
caused them to dwell in peaceful habitation.*