

Nipissing University

History 2055 -- Ancient Civilizations

General Characteristics of Mesopotamian Civilization

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In our last lecture we met our very first city. In a blink of an eye, human beings, at least in one corner of the world (perhaps in more, if we only knew), ceased to be only food gatherers, tied to a life of nomadic hunting and cropping of wild foods, and began living in stable settlements of great size -- instead of tribes of a hundred or so, they were inhabiting not merely villages but full-sized towns including thousands of people. Their new way of life made it possible for them to acquire personal and civic wealth and required them to create new political and religious institutions.

It was an amazing moment in human history: no matter how long it actually lasted, much was done in a very short time.

The accomplishments of Çatal Hüyük and the other towns of 7000 B.C. or a bit later are, however, overshadowed by an even greater urban movement that took place in a region nearby, Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, modern Iraq. Çatal Hüyük and other settlements like it lasted a long time, but eventually were abandoned and not reoccupied. We don't know why.

Mesopotamian civilization, which began around 5000 B.C. and really blossomed around 3000 B.C., made a bigger impression on the historical tradition. The inhabitants of Çatal Hüyük and its trading partners were completely forgotten until a generation ago. This was a result of their leaving no written records of any sort, and later generations never knew they had been there. The Mesopotamians invented writing (though recent discoveries suggest the Chinese may have written earlier) and left many records, from inventories to diplomatic correspondence to epic poetry. It is hard, I think, for older historians to adjust to the idea that these nameless people in Turkey were even more important as pioneers than the well- documented, familiar, homey Sumerians and Akkadians of Mesopotamia.

Historians are attracted to Mesopotamia, and will continue be attracted to it because its story makes a good starting point for ancient history. Its civilization was not only impressive in its own accomplishments, but provided an obvious basis for later feats by the Persians, the Greeks, and others.

Today we are going to be looking at the basics. **What is Mesopotamia? Why did it become the site of a flourishing and long-lived urban culture? What were the important characteristics of its culture?**

Mesopotamia is a late, Greek word for the country we now call Iraq (though some parts of Mesopotamia are in Iran). It means "the land between the rivers." From all accounts, it is rather unimpressive to the eye, because it is simply a great plain of mud between two muddy rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. It retains few visible signs of its ancient greatness. Like Çatal Hüyük, the cities of Mesopotamia were built of nothing but mud. A city that is abandoned for any length of time has its buildings collapse and become filled with blowing sand. If another group does not claim the site and add another layer of occupation, the place quickly turns into something scarcely distinguishable from a natural hill.

But the mud that has swallowed up the ancient cities made them possible in the first place.

There has never been enough rain in the country to support an extensive agriculture. In the earliest days the farmers seem to have lived on the edges of marshes hunting the animals that lived there, fishing, and collecting all kinds of plant foods; agriculture was added to this older style of life. We have pictures from later periods that give us an idea of what this world looked like. At least until the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s some of this style of life survived among the "Marsh Arabs."

If ancient Iraqis were to leave the marshes and become a more agricultural people, something had to be done about the water supply. The answer was right at hand: irrigation from the great rivers. The rivers themselves gave agriculturalists a head start. Both Tigris and Euphrates are prone to flooding. They carry down clay to the plains of the south, building up banks until the rivers are often higher than the surrounding countryside. When the inevitable but unpredictable flood takes place, they can change course. Like the lower Mississippi, the Euphrates is flanked by lagoons, marshes, and old abandoned or semi-abandoned river courses.

Early experiments in irrigation took place along the rivers and their side channels, and early canals were simply improvements of what nature had provided. Before 3000 B.C., the people of the area, encouraged by a drying trend that it less easy than ever to take water for granted, had invented the most productive agriculture that the world had yet seen.

Its chief features:

- the systematic use of irrigation
- the cultivation of barley as a staple crop
- the domestication of the date palm
- the use of the plow
- the city-state as an organizing principle of economic and political life.

The domesticated date palm was (and is) a very useful tree. Around 3000 the ancient Iraqis learned to trim side-growth of the date palm to produce taller trees that could be grown in an orchard, and began to artificially pollinate the trees to assure better crops. Other crops were used, too, wheat, flax, apples, plums and grapes, and cattle and sheep were both kept on the unirrigated lands that were near every settlement.

In the centuries before 3000, successful agriculture and the technology associated with it made possible and necessary the city. Scholars are unanimous in saying that the problems of building and maintaining an irrigation system forced Mesopotamians to cooperate on a large scale. When they did so successfully, the agricultural pay-off allowed their settlements to grow to great size, thus giving the more cooperative groups an advantage over their less-organized neighbors.

By 3000 B.C., cities were big: Uruk, known in the Bible as Erech, held 50,000 people. And Uruk was simply one of several cities of the time. The phenomenally fertility of irrigated Iraqi mud made it possible for major centers to exist even in sight of each other, as Ur and Eridu were. From the period just after 3000 B.C., we know of 14 major cities in an area smaller than Belgium.

This country is the first we can talk about in terms of the written records that it left behind. The well-organized people of the city-states invented writing around 3100 B.C. It was picture-writing, which was quite sufficient for the use that writing was being put to: to make inventories of cattle and other goods. The

first writing that indicates a specific language reveals to us the first people whose name is more or less their own, and not one entirely imposed by later archaeologists. These people are the Sumerians.

The Sumerians are a bit of a mystery to us, because they were entirely forgotten for millennia before the 19th century, and their history has been reconstructed from their clay tablets. Linguistically, the Sumerians are oddballs. The modern and ancient languages of Iran and Iraq are either Semitic (in the same family as Hebrew and Arabic) or Indo-European (in the same family with English or Sanskrit). The Sumerians had what is called an agglutinative language, similar in structure to Finnish or Caucasian and central Asian languages like Turkish or Hungarian, but with no close resemblances to any known tongue.

We have very few clues as to the origin of the Sumerians.

The Sumerians were simply one element in a very complex ethnic situation. They themselves predominated in Sumeria; but a little farther north, around Kish and Sippar, or later Babylon and much later Baghdad, were a group who spoke a Semitic language, the Akkadians, whose country was called Akkad. But in the third millennium B.C., between 3000 and 2000 B.C., Sumer and Akkad really had a single urban culture, a culture apparently invented by the Sumerians.

The Sumerians and the Akkadians were not the only people in the world, or even in Iraq. This rich country was constantly attracting foreigners, especially nomads from the surrounding desert. Indeed, as in Egypt, the desert was right next door all the time -- anyplace that was not irrigated was either desert or marsh, and so nomadic herdsman were always within a few miles, in constant contact with urban civilization. Since the Iraqi desert is not so fierce as those surrounding Egypt, it was more of a highway than a barrier. The whole history of ancient Iraq is dominated by the interaction between nomads and cities.

The most impressive ruins in any Sumerian or Akkadian city are always the temple and palace districts. Gods and kings are an important part of Sumerian literature, too. It is a bit surprising, then, that the original organization of the city was not monarchical. The cities were thriving by 3000 B.C., while unambiguous signs of kingship appear only about 2700. Nor were the cities necessarily dominated by the priests, though religion was an important part of Sumerian life. Traces in the literature, which presents kingship as a divine institution dating back into the immemorial past, nevertheless allow us to say that originally the cities were republics governed by citizen-landholders, or, perhaps more precisely, by landholding households, which were in turn governed by the head of the household. In the original cities, the heads of families made the decisions about community action.

A story from around 2700 B.C. about an early, legendary king, Gilgamesh of Uruk, gives us a concrete picture of how these republics worked at a later stage. According to the tale, Gilgamesh was faced with a demand for submission by the powerful king of Kish. He wished to resist, but was not authorized to make the decision on his own. He had to consult with a council of city elders, no doubt important landowners. They feared war more than Gilgamesh, and opted for submission. Unwilling to do this, Gilgamesh appealed to an assembly of all male citizens of fighting age, who overruled the elders. The implied constitution is much like that of city-states in other eras. The fighting free men are the ultimate basis of authority, but a smaller group holds day-to-day authority. In this story, Gilgamesh is not an absolute sovereign, if he is sovereign at all, but an official, one who has to deal with various bodies of citizens to implement his plans for war or peace.

This is a late stage of Sumerian republicanism, and one can easily understand why it was about to fail. There are big differences of wealth and influence between the citizens in 2700 B.C., and may have been

even greater between citizens and non-citizens. War-leaders in many societies, including Rome and the cities of the Italian Renaissance, have acquired dynastic kingship by taking a strategic position between rich and poor citizens.

When we first have detailed information about the social and economic set-up of Mesopotamian cities, towards the middle of the third millennium (3rd millennium = 3000-2000 B.C.), there are already vast differences in wealth apparent. The agricultural land was divided roughly into thirds. The various temples of the cities, which were among their earliest institutions, had through donations acquired about one third. In the state of Lagash, the temples owned 673 square miles, land that was in theory sacrosanct and inalienable. The revenues from leased and directly managed lands allowed temples to run many other economic enterprises. The temples employed artisans and industrial workers as well as gardeners and servants.

The kings of the third millennium, once established, had similar wealth and economic influence. He often owned another third of the land, which was worked in a similar way, and used his produce to support his dependents, who included soldiers. In Shuruppak around 2600, the ruler maintained six or seven hundred soldiers with equipment, on top of the artisans on his estates and within his palace.

The last third of the land was held by private citizens. Some of it belonged to proprietors or perhaps family groups who cultivated their own property themselves or with the help of a few dependents or employees. Many estates were owned by the rich, members of the ruling family, palace administrators, and priests. They, too, had their coteries of dependents and clients.

Thus though the economy of Sumer and Akkad was "free" in one sense of the word, so that houses, fields, fishponds, livestock and slaves could all be bought and sold, in another sense it was quite rigid, because small numbers of rich people had a terrific amount of economic clout. The growth of monopoly ownership helps explain the Mesopotamian proclivity for bureaucracy, and the development of writing. Most cuneiform tablets we have are concerned with economic matters.

The economic situation I have just sketched explains why the walled cities of Sumer and Akkad were dominated by large buildings dedicated to divine or royal service. The domination can be easily illustrated. (Maps and illustrations will be shown in class.)

We will have more to say about Mesopotamian religion and politics in other lectures. I want to end this one by emphasizing that Sumer and Akkad, though perhaps the most prosperous and advanced urban area in the third millennium, was not isolated in a world where everyone else was a nomad, a hunter, or a small-time peasant farmer. There were indeed other cities elsewhere, for instance at Susa in what is now southwestern Iran, which dates from perhaps 3000 B.C., or Ebla in Syria, which was flourishing by 2500. Sumer and Akkad traded extensively with these and other towns, indeed may have sparked foreign urbanism by sending out merchant colonies.

For its very survival, Sumeria had to draw on the resources of other regions. Its soil and waters were rich in food, and there was all the mud and reeds you would ever need for building materials. But there was not even timber in Sumeria, and there were no mineral deposits. The great age of Sumerian urbanism coincided with the introduction of bronze, but there was no way that Sumer could ever produce its own bronze from native resources. We must not visualize Sumer as an isolated patch of civilized life (though they often did so themselves). It was the metropolitan center of a much wider world.

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