

Introduction to Ancient Civilizations

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Key concepts, major societies, and lasting contributions

1. What Is an “Ancient Civilization”?

Element	Description
Time frame	Roughly 5,000 BCE – 500 CE (the period before the Middle Ages)
Geographic scope	Centers of human settlement in river valleys, coastal plains, and fertile highlands
Core characteristics	- Urban centers (cities) - Centralized government or ruling elite - Specialized labor & social stratification - Surplus food production - Writing or record-keeping systems - Monumental architecture and art - Trade networks (local and long-distance)
Why they matter	Foundations of law, language, technology, religion, and political organization that shape later societies.

2. Major Early River Valley Civilizations

Civilization	Core region (river)	Approx. dates	Notable achievements
Mesopotamia (Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria)	Tigris/Euphrates, modern Iraq	4,000 BCE – 600 BCE	Cuneiform writing; Code of Hammurabi; ziggurats; early mathematics (base-60).
Ancient Egypt	Nile River, modern Egypt	3,100 BCE – 30 BCE	Hieroglyphic script; pyramids & temples; centralized bureaucracy; calendar of 365 days.

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Indus Valley (Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro)	Indus River basin, modern Pakistan/India	2,600?BCE?–?1,900?BCE	Grid?planned cities; standardized baked?brick construction; undeciphered script; sophisticated drainage.
Ancient China (Xia, Shang, Zhou)	Yellow River (Huang He)	2,100?BCE?–?256?BCE	Oracle?bone script; bronze casting; Mandate of Heaven concept; early ironworking.

Common threads

- Dependence on predictable river flooding for agriculture.
- Development of irrigation and water?control projects.
- Emergence of city?states or kingdoms with ruling elites.

3. Classical Civilizations Beyond the River Valleys

Civilization	Region	Key Period	Highlights
Minoan Crete	Aegean Sea, Crete	2,700?BCE?–?1,450?BCE	Palace of Knossos; Linear A script; maritime trade.
Mycenaean Greece	Mainland Greece	1,600?BCE?–?1,100?BCE	Linear B script (early Greek); fortified citadels; Homeric legends.
Olmec	Gulf Coast of Mexico	1,200?BCE?–?400?BCE	Colossal head statues; early writing symbols; “mother culture” of Mesoamerica.
Nubia (Kush)	Nile Valley south of Egypt	2,500?BCE?–?350?CE	Iron smelting; pyramidal tombs; periods of Egyptian rule and independence.
Persian Empire (Achaemenid)	Iran & surrounding territories	550?BCE?–?330?BCE	Royal Road; satrapy administrative system; Cyrus Cylinder (early