



The Ancient Near East

The Tanakh



Reader

Pyramids of Giza



Mask of Tutankhamun



Standard of Ur

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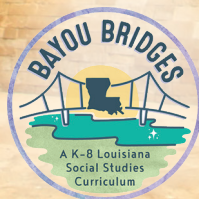
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The Ancient Near East

Reader



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The Ancient Near East

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Chapter 1

Ancient Mesopotamia

A Land Between Two Rivers

More than five thousand years ago, Mesopotamia was one of the first civilizations. It was a meeting place where people from Africa, Europe, and central Asia would trade with and learn from one another. Mesopotamians experimented to find ways to make their lives easier. For instance, they built irrigation systems to help them farm, and they constructed better homes. They also thought a lot about religion and studied the stars in the sky. They began to learn more about math, science, medicine, art, and building.

The Fertile Crescent is a big curve of land that starts by the Mediterranean Sea and goes all the way to the Persian Gulf. This crescent-shaped area is called **fertile** because the soil and climate are excellent for growing many crops.

The Framing Question

Why is Mesopotamia called a “cradle of civilization”?

Vocabulary

fertile, adj. able to support the growth of many plants; capable of producing new life



Mesopotamians worked to better understand the world around them. They often recorded their observations by carving them into stone.

Some of the world's first civilizations developed in this area. Today, parts of the countries of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt are in the Fertile Crescent.

Mesopotamia is the name given to a region within the Fertile Crescent. The name *Mesopotamia* means land between rivers. This region is between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. These rivers start in the mountains of southern Turkey. They flow south through a plain in what is now Iraq. Both rivers empty into the Persian Gulf.

People started settling in Mesopotamia around 7000 BCE. Over thousands of years, Mesopotamians developed complex civilizations.

Fertile Crescent



Today, the Fertile Crescent spans several countries.

A Cradle of Civilization

Many of the first civilizations in the world started in places with major rivers, fertile soil, and mild climates. In these areas, people who wanted to live together in permanent communities could do so. This is because they could grow enough crops to survive and still have extra to store for later. They could live in one place instead of always moving around to hunt and gather. Historians often call these places “cradles of civilization.”

Mesopotamia was one of these cradles. Over thousands of years, different groups of people settled in and near Mesopotamia. Gradually, they built bigger and bigger towns and cities with large, complex buildings. People began to specialize in doing different jobs. For example, some people learned to write. They could keep records of important information, such as how many people lived in a region and how much food was produced.

The Power of Floods

When people began living in Mesopotamia, they grew wheat and barley. They also fished, hunted for food, and raised animals such as sheep and goats. They used water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to grow crops. But it was not always easy. In the summer, the weather was hot and dry, and sometimes the rivers did not have enough water for the farms. In the spring, the rivers could overflow and cause floods. These floods would damage villages and crops. However, floods were also helpful. They left behind **silt**, which is very fine, rich soil. The silt made the land in Mesopotamia more fertile.

Vocabulary

silt, n. small particles of rock, minerals, and soil carried in water

People in Mesopotamia experimented with local materials to make it easier to grow food. They dug clay from the ground and used it to make bricks. They built structures called **levees** to keep some floodwaters back. They also built canals to bring water from the rivers to their farms. Now they could grow more food and even store some for later. All these projects required people to cooperate with each other. Over time, people made more rules for living and working together. These steps led to the formation of governments and laws.

Vocabulary

levee, n. a wall or barrier built to prevent flooding

Being able to grow enough food not only changed the way people lived but also changed the way they worked. There was now a need for containers to store food, which led to the development of pottery. Some people now had the job of making pots—and bricks, tools, and weapons. Other workers decorated the pots.

There were many other jobs, too. Traders exchanged extra food for supplies they needed with people in other towns. Some people became religious or political leaders. As time went on, villages grew into small towns and cities.

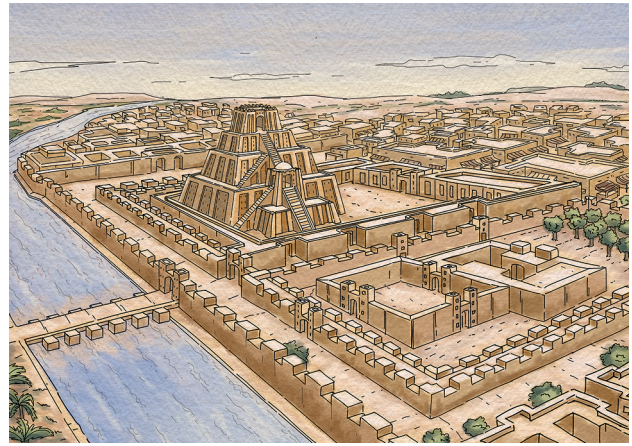
The Sumerians

By around the year 3000 BCE, cities had started to grow in the southern part of Mesopotamia. They made up the civilization that historians now call Sumer. Over time, the towns of Sumer became bigger **city-states**. Each city-state was protected by strong walls built of bricks that were

Vocabulary

city-state, n. a self-governing city that controls the land around it

made from mud and straw. There were at least twelve Sumerian city-states, including Ur, Kish, and Uruk. Priest-kings led each city-state. Sometimes, the city-states fought against each other. Other times, they would work together or trade.



Tall brick walls protected Sumerian city-states.

Much of what we know about Sumer was learned from objects. One example is a special box called the Standard of Ur. This box was made around 2500 BCE and offers clues about what life was like in Sumer. One side shows soldiers fighting. On another side, a king and his court are shown having a fancy dinner and being entertained by musicians. There are also images of people who



The images and materials of the Standard of Ur tell people today about life in Sumer.

had to pay taxes to the priest-king. The blue color on the box comes from a rock called lapis lazuli. This rock did not come from Sumer. Instead, it came from what is today called Afghanistan. This is evidence that people in Sumer traded over long distances with other groups.

Sumerian Religion and Achievements

The Sumerian religion was a form of **polytheism**. Sumerians believed different gods had control over things like the weather, the seasons, and how well crops grew. Belief in these gods influenced Sumerians' work, health, and home life. Gods were also connected to issues that affected the entire **society**, such as war. Each city in Sumer had its own main god and built a temple called a **ziggurat** to honor that god. The ziggurat was part of a building complex that included places for priests and officials to work, as well as rooms to store food. Ziggurats were eventually built all over Mesopotamia.

Sumerians also made statues of their gods. These were built from clay and also special materials, such as gold and lapis lazuli, which Sumerians obtained by trading with other cultures.

Sumerians used ziggurats to observe the stars and planets in the sky, and they used writing to make records of what they saw. They used math, especially geometry, to understand the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. They even made

Vocabulary

polytheism, n. the religious belief in many gods

society, n. the system of how people interact and live together in a community

ziggurat, n. a Mesopotamian temple with a pyramid shape and staircases on the outside walls

a calendar based on the moon and figured out how to measure time in a way that is still used today. This calendar also helped Sumerians identify the best time to plant crops.

Several Sumerian inventions made people's lives easier. Sumerians invented the wheel, which allowed them to make potter's wheels, carts, and **chariots**. They used plows to farm, and they discovered how to make a strong metal called bronze by mixing copper and tin.

Bronze could be used to make sturdy tools, weapons, containers, and more. The Sumerians even came up with one of the first board games, called the Royal Game of Ur.

Perhaps the most notable Sumerian achievement was writing. Sumerians did not write with paper and pencils like we do today. They wrote by making marks in tablets, or slabs of soft clay. To make the marks, they pressed the end of a special type of **reed** into the clay. Then they let the clay dry and harden. The Sumerians also created a code of markings, like an alphabet, which historians call **cuneiform**.

Vocabulary

chariot, n. a carriage with two or four wheels, pulled by horses or other animals



Chariots were sometimes used in battle.

Vocabulary

reed, n. a tall, thin grass used to draw on clay tablets

cuneiform, n. an ancient form of writing that used symbols carved into wet clay tablets

Many historians believe that cuneiform is the oldest form of writing in the world. Sumerians used cuneiform to record things such as important events, agreements, observations of the sun and stars, and how they took care of their cities.



This clay tablet features an example of the cuneiform that Mesopotamians developed to keep records.

Although the Sumerians had plenty of resources, such as clay and water, they did not have enough wood, stones, or metals. They needed these materials to make items like tools and jewelry. To get these things, they traded with other cultures.

Social Classes

The Sumerians lived in a society with groups of people who had different jobs and ways of life. Most people were farmers who grew food to feed their families and then used any extra food to pay taxes or trade for goods. Some people were shopkeepers or artists. There were also soldiers, government officials, and priests. The most powerful people in this society were the kings and queens, who believed the gods gave them the power to rule. They made decisions for their people and led the city-states. Enslaved persons were considered the lowest of Sumerian society. They were forced to work for others.

One important job was that of a **scribe**. Scribes could read and write in cuneiform and so were able to keep records for governments and businesses. They also

Vocabulary

scribe, n. a person whose job is copying written information

wrote down stories people told. Some scribes may have made up new stories. Becoming a scribe was difficult and required a lot of training. Usually, only boys from wealthy families could become scribes, but occasionally girls were also trained as scribes.

The Akkadians and Amorites

Sumer thrived for more than a thousand years, but it was eventually conquered. To the north of Sumer was the kingdom of Akkad. Akkad was ruled by King Sargon. Sargon's army was strong, and he began taking over Sumerian cities. When he conquered Sumer, Sargon became the leader of the first-ever **empire**. He now ruled over many different groups of people and lands. He was the first ruler of a **dynasty** that would last for two hundred years. His daughter, Enheduanna, became a priestess in Ur. The hymns and poems that Enheduanna created were later written down by scribes, making her the world's first named author. People within the Akkadian empire started speaking the Akkadian language and trading more with each other. They also created new styles of art during this time.

Vocabulary

empire, n. a group of countries or territories controlled by a single leader

dynasty, n. a series of rulers who are all from the same family

Later, a group known as the Amorites came to the Euphrates River around 1800 BCE. They founded a city called Babylon.

Its king, Hammurabi, began taking over other cities. Soon, the Babylonian empire controlled most of Mesopotamia. But this empire only lasted for about fifty years, fading away after Hammurabi died.

Even though his empire did not last long, Hammurabi left something that would be very important for future civilizations. As king, Hammurabi ordered that the laws of the empire be carved into stone pillars. These pillars were placed where everyone could see them so that everyone could know the laws. These laws are now known as the Code of Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi had rules against stealing, hurting others, and cheating in business. It also stated what would happen if someone broke a law, including the phrase “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This law meant that if a person blinded another person’s eye, their own eye would be blinded in return.

The Code of Hammurabi included ideas that are still important in laws today. It was strict but these rules were intended to make sure people were treated fairly and to stop them from seeking revenge. It protected people who were not very powerful at the time, such as women. The code said that a person was innocent until they were proven guilty. It also said that it was wrong to falsely accuse someone and that judges who acted wrongly would face strong punishments. Nevertheless, while the code aimed to bring justice to all, the punishments varied according to a person’s social class or status.



One of the steles, or pillars, carved with the Code of Hammurabi.

The Assyrian Empire

Assyria was a culture in the northern part of Mesopotamia. The Assyrians created a strong military and used it to build an empire around 900 BCE. They had iron weapons, which were stronger than the bronze weapons that others used. Assyrian engineers built ladders, ramps, and tunnels to help their soldiers capture walled cities. After the Assyrians conquered a city, they ruled harshly. They also forced the people of the city to give them money in the form of **tribute**. Although other rulers in Mesopotamia were also harsh, the Assyrians are remembered for being especially cruel.

Vocabulary

tribute, n. payment of money or goods to a ruler from conquered people

The Assyrian Empire lasted for three hundred years and reached far and wide. It extended east from Egypt to the Persian Gulf and north to Asia Minor in what is now Turkey. The main city, called Nineveh, was in the center of the empire, near the Tigris River.

Nineveh was home to one of the world's first libraries.

The remains of this Assyrian library have provided historians with a lot of knowledge about ancient Mesopotamia. A special treasure found in the library's ruins was a set of clay tablets.

These tablets had the oldest written story ever found, called the ***Epic of Gilgamesh***. This story of the hero Gilgamesh is important for historians because it reveals what Mesopotamia was like, what its people cared about, and what they imagined.

Vocabulary

epic, n. a long, complex tale that tells the stories of a hero's adventures



In the epic named for him, Gilgamesh is described as strong enough to carry a lion.

The Assyrians ruled their large territory by breaking it into smaller regions, or provinces. They put leaders in charge of each province to make sure rules were followed and taxes were paid. They built roads to connect provinces, making travel and trade easier. Along the roads were stations for travelers to rest and switch their horses. Soldiers were stationed at these rest stops to protect travelers from enemies and thieves.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire

Around 650 BCE, the Assyrian Empire began having trouble. Individual cities wanted to break away from the empire, and the leaders were fighting each other. In southern Mesopotamia, a leader named Nabopolassar led a revolt. He captured the city of Nineveh and burned it down, ending the Assyrian Empire.

Nabopolassar became king and built an empire based in the city of Babylon. Historians call this the Neo-Babylonian Empire because it was the second empire based in Babylon.

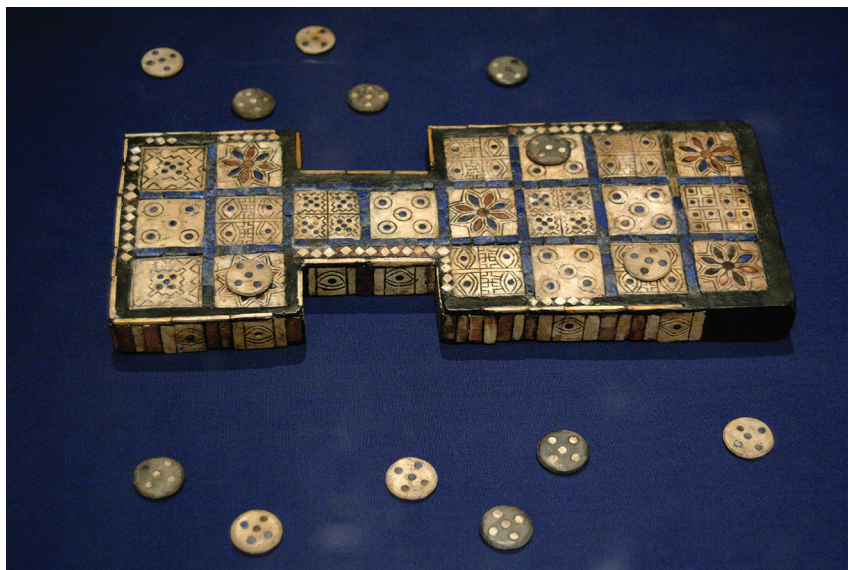
Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar, made Babylon into a beautiful city. At the center of the city was a tall, gold-covered ziggurat dedicated to the god Marduk. There were also grand palaces and temples. At the entrance to the city was a fancy gate dedicated to a goddess named Ishtar and other Babylonian gods. People would gather in the city for parades and festivals on a street surrounded by decorated walls.

After Nebuchadnezzar died, the Neo-Babylonian Empire became weaker and was taken over by the Persian Empire. The people of Mesopotamia continued to progress under Persian rule. For example, they made more advances in math and science. They figured out how to calculate the position of the planet Jupiter. They also made a clay tablet with the rules for a popular board game, the Royal Game of



The Ishtar Gate was the main entrance to Babylon.

Ur, recorded on it. This tablet is the oldest known set of rules for a board game in the world. Such accomplishments are examples of the creativity and influence of the Mesopotamian civilizations.



The Royal Game of Ur

Mesopotamia remained an area of conflict and conquest for centuries. Later, it was also conquered by Alexander the Great, who spread Greek culture throughout the area. After the Persians and Greeks, other people took over Mesopotamia. This included Islamic conquerors, who arrived in 637 CE.

Trade routes continuously connected Mesopotamia to Europe, Africa, and many other parts of Asia. One important trade route was the Silk Road, which went between Mesopotamia and China. As they passed through the region, people from different civilizations were influenced by Mesopotamia's art, buildings, and stories. Other civilizations also learned from their science, math, and technology. Even now, archaeologists and historians are still discovering new things about the civilizations between the rivers.

PRIMARY SOURCE: EXCERPTS FROM THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

If a man rents a field for cultivation [farming] and does not produce any grain in the field, they shall call him to account [hold him responsible], because he has not performed the work required on the field, and he shall give the owner of the field grain on the basis of the adjacent [neighboring] fields.

*

If a man rents his field to a tenant for crop-rent and receives the crop-rent of his field and later Adad [the Storm God] inundates [floods] the field and carries away the produce, the loss falls on the tenant.

*

If a man owes a debt and Adad inundates his field and carries away the produce, or, through lack of water, grain has not grown in the field, in that year the man shall not make any return of grain to the creditor. He shall alter his contract-tablet and he shall not pay the interest for that year.

*

If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye.

*

If a man knocks out the tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.

Chapter 2

Ancient Israel

Origins of the Israelites

The ancient Israelites practiced a religion that became what is now called Judaism. Their first stories tell about leaders in difficult times and how

important their religion was to them. As time went on, their culture and influence spread throughout the area between the Mediterranean Sea and Mesopotamia. Thousands of years later, as Jewish people moved to other places, their culture became part of the fabric of those communities, too.

The Framing Question

What ideas influenced the culture of the Israelites?

Long ago, the Israelites lived in a place Europeans would later call the Levant. This region is where countries such as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria are today. The name *Levant* comes from a French word that means to rise. People in Europe thought of the Levant as a place to the east of them, where the sun rises. The Levant is part of a region that Europeans called the Near East or Middle East. This shows that when learning about history and geography, it is important to remember



The Israelites eventually settled in Canaan, between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

that these subjects are taught from someone's point of view. For much of the world, the Levant has never been "to the east."

Around the year 1200 BCE, life started to change in the Levant. An Egyptian empire fell, and new kingdoms appeared. One of those kingdoms belonged to the Israelites. Israelites were nomadic at first, but they eventually settled in a place called Canaan. The city of Jerusalem was the capital of their kingdom and would later become very important to Jewish culture.

Religion of the Israelites

The religion of the Israelites was a form of **monotheism**, meaning they believed in only one God. This was different from other groups in Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent at the time, who believed in many gods.

Throughout early Israelite history, people wrote down important stories, traditions, and beliefs to keep these ideas safe. This information was later collected into a book called the **Tanakh**, also called the Hebrew Bible. The word *Bible* comes from a Greek word meaning scroll or book.

Vocabulary

monotheism, n. the religious belief in only one God

Tanakh, n. the collection of Jewish holy writings; sometimes called the Hebrew Bible

The Tanakh has stories that tell about the beginning of the world, the first people, and their relationship with God. It has a story about a powerful flood that almost destroyed the world. Another story is about a man named Abraham, whom God told to go to a new land and become the leader of a new people. Abraham believed in God and led his family to Canaan. The Tanakh describes



The Tanakh was written on scrolls that also had illustrations.

how God and Abraham made each other promises. Abraham promised to be faithful to God and not worship any other gods. God promised to protect Abraham and his descendants, and to lead them to a place where they could settle and do well.

The story of Abraham is important in three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. People in each of these religions believe they are descendants of Abraham and share some beliefs from the Tanakh.

The Journey to the Promised Land

The Tanakh also tells the story of how the Israelites were forced to leave their home in Canaan because of **famine** and go to Egypt. In Egypt, the Egyptian king enslaved the Israelites. One of the enslaved persons was Moses. Moses became a **prophet** for

Vocabulary

famine, n. an extreme shortage of food that results in widespread hunger

prophet, n. someone chosen by God to bring a message to people

the Israelites and helped them escape from slavery. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years before returning to the promised land of Canaan. This story is called the **Exodus**. It holds special meaning for many people around the world today.

Vocabulary

Exodus, n. the story of the Israelites' escape from ancient Egypt; a departure of a large group of people, especially migrants

In addition to having led the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses is also known as a lawgiver. While the Israelites were wandering in the desert, God gave Moses ten rules for the Israelites to follow. These rules were written on two large stones and called the Ten Commandments. They told the Israelites how to live, how to worship God, and how to treat others. Today, the Ten Commandments are still important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.



The Tanakh describes how Moses received the Ten Commandments, a set of rules that have influenced modern laws.

According to the Tanakh, Moses did not enter Canaan after passing on the Ten Commandments. It was a new leader, named Joshua, who led the Israelites back into the promised land of Canaan. But the Israelites found that others were living there.

One of these groups was the Phoenicians, with whom the Israelites would later trade and sometimes form alliances. The Phoenicians lived in and around Canaan beginning around 3000 BCE. They were skilled at building and sailing ships, and they became great traders. They sailed their ships to faraway places like Greece, Africa, and even India and the British Isles.

Another group, the Philistines, were a people the Israelites viewed as enemies. Their powerful army had strong tools and weapons made of iron. Philistines settled in the region around 1200 BCE.

The Israelites in Canaan

The Israelites believed that God had sent them to Canaan and that it was their special home. They wanted to live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, which runs between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Israelites eventually conquered the region of Canaan. Following Abraham's and Moses's teachings, they worshipped one God and followed the Ten Commandments. They had a special tent called the tabernacle, where they would go to feel close to God. Inside the tabernacle, was a box called the Ark of the Covenant, where the Ten Commandments were stored.

The Tanakh explains that Israelite society was led by judges, but the people wanted their leaders to name a king. Saul became the first king of the Israelites. He won many battles, but when he

disobeyed God, he was killed in battle.

The next king was David. David brought all the tribes of Israel together under his rule. He made the city of Jerusalem the center of the kingdom.

According to the Tanakh, David's son Solomon became the next king of Israel.

Under Solomon, the kingdom grew wealthier and more powerful. Solomon is remembered as a wise leader. The Tanakh describes how Israel built a large temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant during Solomon's reign.



A story from the Tanakh tells of David's victory over a giant Philistine named Goliath.

Challenges for the Israelites

The Tanakh explains that after Solomon died, the Israelite tribes began to argue. Eventually, they split into two kingdoms, called Israel and Judah. The city of Jerusalem was in Judah.

The Assyrians conquered Israel and forced the Israelites to leave. Then, in 597 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Judah. He destroyed Jerusalem and sent all the Israelites to Babylon. This period is called the Babylonian captivity or the Babylonian

exile, and it was a hard time for the Israelites. During the Babylonian captivity, the exiled Israelites started some new religious practices. They had lost their temple, so they began worshipping in synagogues. Additionally, the Sabbath became a day for rest and worship. It is after this time that the Israelites begin to be known as Jews.

Vocabulary

exile, n. the state of being made to live outside a place as a form of punishment

Later, the Persian Empire took over Babylon and Judah. The Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judah. Over the years, many different conquerors took over the places where Judaism was established. But Jewish people preserved their communities. They traveled to many regions, taking their religion and customs with them. Leaders called rabbis devoted their lives to studying and teaching Jewish law and beliefs. They collected many of these laws in a book called the Talmud. Like the Tanakh, the Talmud is a key text of Jewish belief.

Israelite Achievements

The ancient Israelites had many accomplishments that helped shape the world even as it is today. They were skilled farmers and traders, and they built strong cities and towns. They were also known for their creativity in arts and music. The Israelites' laws continue to influence lawmaking in many countries around the world today. Perhaps their most important contribution to the world was combining their faith in God with their understanding of right and wrong in their practice of the first monotheistic religion. Many of the Israelites' ideas are reflected in beliefs of the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam.

Chapter 3

Ancient Egypt

Land in the Desert Like the area around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia, the Nile River valley was home to another cradle of civilization—Egypt.

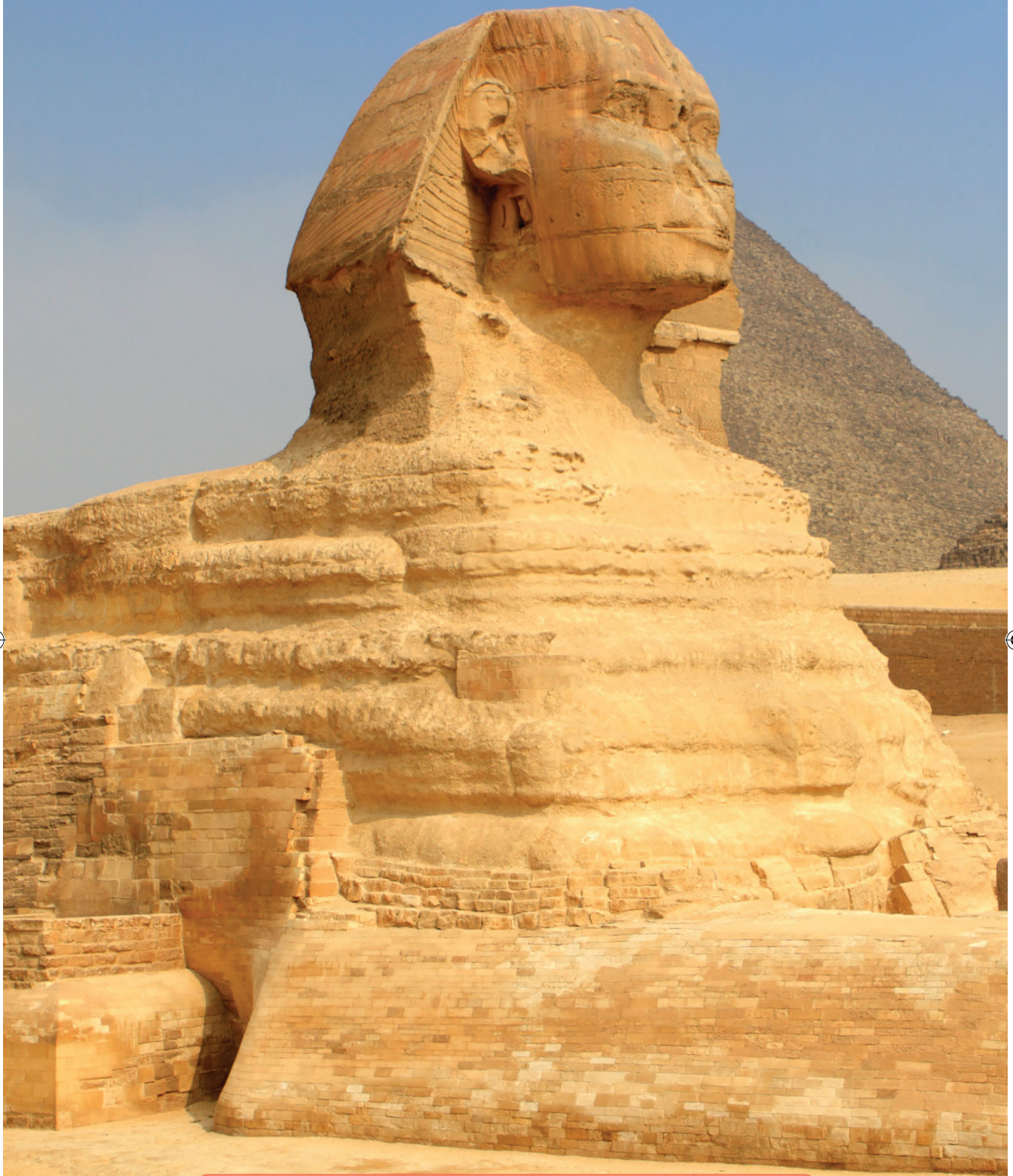
People from ancient Egypt built enormous structures, created ways to write, and made beautiful objects to showcase their complex society.

Around the same time that Mesopotamian civilization arose, another very large civilization was beginning near the Nile River in Egypt. This civilization was heavily influenced by both its access to the Nile and the vast Sahara desert that surrounded it.

The Sahara covers a large part of North Africa. In the northeast corner, the Nile River flows north to the Mediterranean Sea. On either side of the Nile, there is harsh, barren desert.

The Framing Question

What do objects from ancient Egypt reveal about its civilization?



The Sphinx, with the head of a human and the body of a lion, is one of the most famous sculptures remaining from ancient Egypt. Ancient Egyptians believed it would guard nearby tombs.

The Nile River is one of the longest rivers in the world, with a length of more than four thousand miles (6,450 kilometers). It starts in two different places, in present-day Tanzania (the White Nile) and Ethiopia (the Blue Nile). These two rivers join in the country of Sudan. Here, the water becomes shallow and rough as it quickly passes over boulders and cliffs, creating **cataracts**. North of the cataracts, sailing is easy. Ancient Egyptians used this part of the river for travel. However, most boats cannot travel through the cataracts, so these shallow areas formed the border of ancient Egypt. At the end of the Nile, where it meets the Mediterranean Sea, the river spreads out into a large **delta**. This wet, fertile area leads to the sea.

The Nile was an important water source for people living in ancient Egypt's hot and dry

Ancient Egypt



The Nile River in Egypt flows south to north through an enormous desert region.

Vocabulary

cataract, n. a shallow area of a river where the water moves fast over rocks or other obstacles

delta, n. land created by silt deposits at the mouth of a river

climate. As in Mesopotamia, flooding brought rich soil to the river valley. After the floods, people would plant crops, harvesting them in a following season.

The floods in Egypt were caused by rain and melting snow flowing from distant mountains. This made flood season somewhat more predictable than in Mesopotamia. However, despite planning and preparations, flooding could still be very destructive. This helped shape Egyptian ideas about why and how things happened in the universe—including how a leader and the gods might influence events.

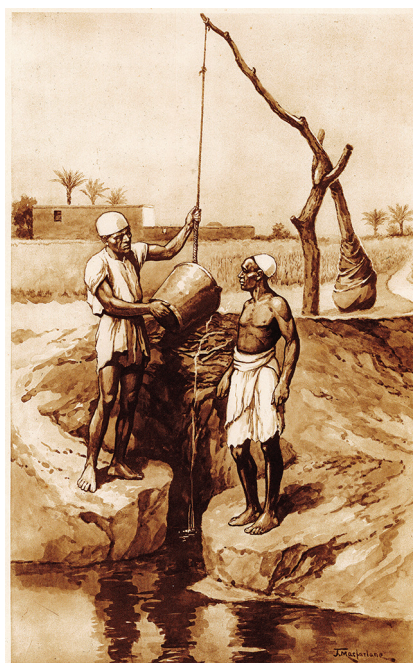
Gifts of the Nile

Egypt became the largest and strongest civilization to arise in the Nile River valley. Egyptians called their land Kemet, or Black Land, because of the dark, rich soil that the flooding left behind. The Nile helped Egyptians produce food and resources. They used the Nile to become prosperous. The Egyptians were very powerful for more than three thousand years.



This tomb painting shows an ancient Egyptian farmer using a plow.

Egyptians moved into Egypt and settled there around 6000 BCE. They started to grow grains like wheat, barley, and flax. They also grew fruits, vegetables, and beans. They developed wooden tools and plows pulled by animals. They also dug canals to direct water to their fields. Farmers invented the shadoof, a bucket attached to a long pole, to water crops.



Egyptian shadoof

Egyptians used cows, oxen, goats, and other animals for work. Sometimes they used them for food, too. Some Egyptians also hunted certain animals, such as birds and even lions and hippopotamuses.

Egypt Under the Pharaohs

Over time, two areas developed in ancient Egypt: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Sometime after 3000 BCE, a leader from Upper Egypt named Narmer conquered Lower Egypt. He chose the city of Memphis as the capital of the united kingdom.

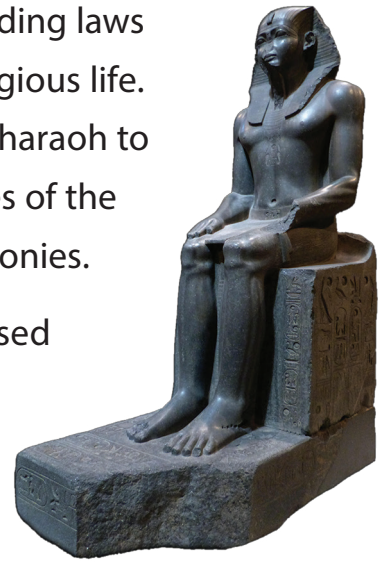
Narmer became the first in a long line of powerful leaders called **pharaohs**. The word *pharaoh* means great house and refers to the ruler's palace. The pharaohs ruled Egypt for three thousand years.

Vocabulary

pharaoh, n. a political and religious leader of ancient Egypt

Pharaohs oversaw nearly everything, including laws and trade. They led both the army and religious life. People believed that the gods chose the pharaoh to rule. Pharaohs were seen as representatives of the gods, and they guided worship and ceremonies.

The role of pharaoh was hereditary, or passed down in a family. Pharaohs often married to make friends with powerful families outside of Egypt. Many pharaohs were members of long-lasting dynasties.



Pharaohs were very powerful. The ancient Egyptians considered their ruler to be a human connection to the gods.

Egyptian Society

Most Egyptians lived near the Nile River in towns or cities. As in most societies, a small number of people were rich and powerful and some were comfortable, but most people had to work hard to survive.

Most people in Egypt were farmers whose lives were closely connected to the Nile's floods. They did not own the land they farmed and had to pay the owners to use it. Most did additional work to help their households. They grew extra food in their gardens and made things to use and sell, such as cloth. The richest people in Egypt had big, elaborate houses, but most had simple homes made of mud bricks.

Egyptian society also had other roles besides farming. The highest class after the pharaohs and their relatives included priests, scribes, advisers to the pharaoh, and soldiers. A class below them included merchants, craftspeople, builders, and artists, but these roles were for men.

Egyptian women in the upper and middle classes usually had the responsibility of managing their households.

Farmers and servants were in a lower social class. Servants were people who worked for upper-class people and families. At the bottom of society were enslaved people. They had to do hard work and were not paid. People could be enslaved as punishment for a crime. Prisoners of war might also be enslaved. Some enslaved people could eventually regain their freedom.

In ancient Egypt, men and women were not treated equally. Women could choose whom to marry, but they could not be head of the household. However, they could do some things that women in other ancient societies could not do, such as own property.

Egyptian Religion

Like the Sumerians, and unlike the Israelites, people in ancient Egypt followed a form of polytheism. Different Egyptian gods had special jobs or powers. Gods might be male or female. Many gods were depicted with a human body and an animal head.

Egyptians thought the world was created to be fair and just, and they tried to act that way, too. They believed that when people died, their hearts would be weighed to determine if they were good or bad. If they were good, they would have a good afterlife, or existence after death. But if they were bad, they would be punished in the life to come.

To the Egyptians, gods were active in the world, and priests could ask them for favors. Egyptians worshipped their gods at temples by praying and taking part in ceremonies. The pharaoh organized

special ceremonies for the whole society to honor the gods.

Ancient Egyptians believed that after people died, their souls could not go to the afterlife unless their bodies were in good condition. Egyptians developed a way of preserving bodies as mummies, in a process called mummification. Making a mummy was a religious ritual and a physical process. It involved removing organs, drying out the body with special salts, stuffing it, wrapping it in linen, and placing it in a casket.



Mummies were placed in special cases, such as this highly decorated one.

Mummification was only for the rich because it was very costly. The poor were given a ceremony to help their souls pass on, but their bodies were simply wrapped and buried in the desert.

Mummification helped the Egyptians understand the human body better. They also learned about medicine and surgery. They wrote down this knowledge, which is some of the oldest medical writing in the world. Egyptians thought that gods or evil spirits caused disease, so prayers were an important part of treatments.

Pyramids and Monuments

Pharaohs, their families and advisors, and other rich Egyptians built monuments and tombs to keep the bodies and valuables of the dead safe. They wanted their wealth and possessions buried with them so they could use them in the afterlife. The very first rulers were buried

in tombs called *mastabas*. But the pharaoh Djoser wanted something better. He had a priest named Imhotep design his monument. Imhotep stacked six mastabas on top of one another. Each mastaba was smaller than the one below it, making the building look like stairs going up. This created a step pyramid.



The pharaoh Khufu's Great Pyramid is one of several large pyramids in Giza.

Several decades later, around 2600 BCE, the pharaoh Sneferu wanted a true **pyramid** for his tomb—not with steps but with smooth, steep sides. After failing twice, he succeeded in building his pyramid. Sneferu's son, Khufu, built the Great Pyramid at Giza. It was the tallest building in the world for four thousand years. Khufu's pyramid had secret rooms and tunnels to access special rooms for burials. After 4,500 years, it is still standing. Many pharaohs believed that these huge, expensive tombs might allow them to continue their work for ancient Egypt from the afterlife.

Vocabulary

pyramid, n. a tomb with triangle-shaped sides

Many historians used to think that enslaved people built the pyramids, but that is not true. Most workers were free people and were paid for their work. Up to nearly twenty thousand people worked on each pyramid over many years. Pyramid building was how many people made their living and left their mark on the world. Some farmers also worked at the pyramids when the Nile River flooded their fields.

The temple at Karnak was another impressive project. It was built in the city of Thebes to honor the god Amun and the pharaoh. Pharaohs added to the temple for more than two thousand years, making it very large—more than one-third of a square mile (about nine-tenths of a square kilometer).

Hieroglyphics

In ancient Egypt, tombs were not only filled with valuables. Their walls were also covered with writing. Egyptians wrote both on stone and on a kind of paper made from the **papyrus** plant, which grew in the Nile River. In fact, our word *paper* comes from *papyrus*.

Egyptian **hieroglyphics** was a system of writing that used pictures to

Vocabulary

papyrus, n. a tall plant that ancient Egyptians used to make paper; the paper made from the plant of the same name

hieroglyphics, n. a system of writing based on pictures rather than letters



Hieroglyphics often appeared on the walls of tombs and other buildings.

represent words, ideas, or sounds. There were many different symbols—about seven hundred in all. Egyptians wrote stories about the gods and everyday life. As time passed, people made simpler versions of hieroglyphics for everyday writing. The ability to read hieroglyphics was eventually lost. Then, in the late 1700s CE, a stone was discovered that had text written in three different languages, including hieroglyphics and Greek. This stone, named the Rosetta Stone, was the key to understanding hieroglyphics once again.

The New Kingdom

In the 1600s BCE, the Egyptian civilization grew weaker as rich Egyptians fought each other for power. A group called the Hyksos came from western Asia. Armed with iron weapons, the Hyksos took over northern Egypt. Meanwhile people of the kingdom of Kerma (in what is today the country of Sudan) came from the region of Nubia and took over southern Egypt.

But in 1560 BCE, a warrior named Ahmose from Upper Egypt fought against the Hyksos and won. He became the pharaoh, beginning a period in ancient Egyptian history known as the New Kingdom. Ahmose's dynasty eventually conquered the kingdom of Kerma and spread Egyptian culture and religion into Nubia. Later pharaohs continued to make Egypt bigger and more powerful. Some built magnificent tombs in a place called the Valley of the Kings. Many of the pharaohs whose names people still know today were from this period, such as Hatshepsut, Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti, King Tutankhamun or King Tut, and Ramses the Great.

Hatshepsut

When the pharaoh Thutmose II died, his son was still far too young to rule. For a time, Thutmose II's wife Hatshepsut ruled in his place. This made some people uncomfortable because the pharaoh was expected to be a man. Hatshepsut had statues made of herself in the appearance of a man. After seven years, Hatshepsut



Hatshepsut

had herself crowned as pharaoh in 1479 BCE. She worked hard to make Egypt strong again. She encouraged trade to gain resources, ordered new building projects, and added to existing temples. She may have even led military campaigns in Nubia.

After Hatshepsut died, her stepson Thutmose III became pharaoh. He ordered the destruction of Hatshepsut's statues and monuments to make his reign seem more powerful. But historians were able to learn about Hatshepsut and her amazing reign, even though Thutmose III attempted to erase that part of history.

Akhenaten and Nefertiti

In the 1350s BCE, Amenhotep IV became pharaoh. Amenhotep IV believed that priests had too much power. To reduce the priests' power, he changed the focus of Egyptian religion. Amenhotep promoted what had been a minor god, the sun god Aten, to the main god of the Egyptians. But Amenhotep IV's worship of one

main god among many other gods was very different from the Israelites' monotheism. He created a new capital dedicated to the worship of Aten. He even changed his name to Akhenaten, which means servant of Aten. He had artists create pictures of him and his wife Nefertiti that indicated their closeness to Aten. At the same time, he paid little attention to existing temples or ceremonies for other gods. As a result, Akhenaten, not the priests, was seen as the main connection to Aten. Many historians believe that Egyptians did not support these changes to their religious practices.

Tutankhamun

Today, a pharaoh named Tutankhamun, or King Tut, is probably the most famous ancient Egyptian. Tutankhamun became king when he was only ten years old. His birth name was Tutankhaten, and he was most likely the pharaoh Akhenaten's son. Akhenaten had upset Egyptians by changing the religion. When he died and Tutankhaten became pharaoh, Egypt was troubled. The boy-king tried to restore trust. He changed his name to honor the old gods, had the old temples repaired, and moved the capital back to Thebes.



The pharaoh Tutankhamun's solid gold burial mask was one of the many artifacts discovered in his tomb.

Tutankhamun ruled for only ten years, but he became very famous after he died. When his tomb was found in 1922, it was filled

with ancient, valuable **artifacts**, including food, clothes, weapons, and furniture. The treasure demonstrated the pharaoh's wealth and importance.

Vocabulary

artifact, n. an object used during a past period in history

Ramses II and the Golden Age

Ramses II, known as Ramses the Great, was pharaoh during a time of great success in the history of Egypt, called a golden age. He lived to be over ninety and ruled for sixty-six years, until 1213 BCE. Ramses II worked hard to convince people that he was the greatest and most powerful person in the world. He led the Egyptian army in battle to expand Egypt's rule. However, he met an opponent that could not be conquered: the Hittite empire to the east. After a difficult battle, Ramses II and the Hittites agreed to a peace agreement.



This art found in the Great Temple of Ramses II illustrates a battle scene between Egyptians and Hittites. In the image, Ramses II is in a chariot at the Battle of Kadesh.

Both sides stated they would not fight each other again. It is the oldest known international peace treaty. Afterward, Ramses added a large room to the temple at Karnak. Pictures on the walls feature his famous battle.

After Ramses II's death, Egypt grew weaker. Various invaders were able to take control of Egypt at different times. Hundreds of years later, the Macedonian leader Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. He founded the city of Alexandria there. Later, the Romans took control of Egypt. Egypt's history and artifacts were important even to those who conquered its lands.

The Rise of Nubia

Throughout ancient Egypt's history, Nubia was a powerful and important neighbor to the south. Nubia had rich soil and enough rain, so it depended less on the Nile's floods. Nubians grew rice and yams and raised cattle. They were skilled at using bows and arrows for hunting and for fighting. Soon, their complex kingdom, named Kerma, began to trade with Egypt and other places in Africa. In exchange for Egyptian goods, such as

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This painting from an Egyptian tomb shows a group of Nubians, who lived farther south along the Nile River.

grain and linen, the people of Kerma offered things such as gold, ivory, pottery, and timber. Timber was one of the most important goods that Kerma traded. The kings in Kerma were buried similarly to the pharaohs in Egypt, in pyramids and with many expensive belongings.

Kush

Egyptians used the name *Kush* for the kingdom of Kerma. In the years before the New Kingdom, when the Hyksos ruled Egypt, Kush expanded north. But when powerful Egyptian leaders took over again, they controlled the lands of Kush, spreading Egyptian religion and culture through the area.

Around 745 BCE, Kush invaded and conquered Egypt. Their leader Piye became pharaoh. Kushite pharaohs ruled Egypt and Kush for more than one hundred years. They had some things in common with the Egyptians, but they also had their own practices. Some Kushites adopted fashions and customs from southern Africa. For example, they began wearing long earrings and patterned fabrics.

When Assyrians from Mesopotamia took over Egypt in 666 BCE, the Kushites moved their capital to Meroë. There they found iron and started making tools and weapons. This helped them trade and become even stronger. Kush remained rich and powerful for a long time and traded with faraway places such as India and Rome. They built two hundred small pyramids in Meroë, as well as temples and places to store water. But in 350 CE, a kingdom called Aksum conquered Kush and destroyed Meroë. Kush was gone, but people still remember it as one of the great civilizations of Africa.

PRIMARY SOURCE: THE WEIGHING OF THE HEART



Glossary

A

artifact, n. an object used during a past period in history (39)

C

cataract, n. a shallow area of a river where the water moves fast over rocks or other obstacles (28)

chariot, n. a carriage with two or four wheels, pulled by horses or other animals (9)

city-state, n. a self-governing city that controls the land around it (6)

cuneiform, n. an ancient form of writing that used symbols carved into wet clay tablets (9)

D

delta, n. land created by silt deposits at the mouth of a river (28)

dynasty, n. a series of rulers who are all from the same family (11)

E

empire, n. a group of countries or territories controlled by a single leader (11)

epic, n. a long, complex tale that tells the stories of a hero's adventures (13)

exile, n. the state of being made to live outside a place as a form of punishment (25)

Exodus, n. the story of the Israelites' escape from ancient Egypt; a departure of a large group of people, especially migrants (22)

F

famine, n. an extreme shortage of food that results in widespread hunger (21)

fertile, adj. able to support the growth of many plants; capable of producing new life (2)

H

hieroglyphics, n. a system of writing based on pictures rather than letters (35)

L

levee, n. a wall or barrier built to prevent flooding (6)

M

monotheism, n. the religious belief in only one God (20)

P

papyrus, n. a tall plant that ancient Egyptians used to make paper; the paper made from the plant of the same name (35)

pharaoh, n. a political and religious leader of ancient Egypt (30)

polytheism, n. the religious belief in many gods (8)

prophet, n. someone chosen by God to bring a message to people (21)

pyramid, n. a tomb with triangle-shaped sides (34)

R

reed, n. a tall, thin grass used to draw on clay tablets (9)

S

scribe, n. a person whose job is copying written information (11)

silt, n. small particles of rock, minerals, and soil carried in water (5)

society, n. the system of how people interact and live together in a community (8)

T

Tanakh, n. the collection of Jewish holy writings; sometimes called the Hebrew Bible (20)

tribute, n. payment of money or goods to a ruler from conquered people (13)

Z

ziggurat, n. a Mesopotamian temple with a pyramid shape and staircases on the outside walls (8)





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Rosie McCormick

Ilene Goldman

in partnership with



Subject Matter Expert

Nadine Brundrett

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