

The Ancient Middle East

From approximately 1500 B.C.E onward, the ancient Middle East witnessed the rise and fall of a number of important civilizations besides the Egyptians and the peoples of Mesopotamia. Many of them made noteworthy contributions.

The Hittites

The Hittites appeared in Mesopotamia around 1700 B.C.E. Their invasion spelled the end of the old Babylonian Empire in Mesopotamia. They dominated the region until 1200 B.C.E. Their empire stretched from Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine. The Hittites assimilated much from the Sumerian civilization. King Suppilulimas (C. 1380-1340 BC) spent most of his time expanding Hittite borders and conquering enemies. The Hittites were a warrior people noted for their ferocity. They developed many siege tactics, which were used by other nations that followed.

The Hittites modified the law code inherited from the old Babylonians. The most extensive literature that the Hittites have left us is, in fact, decrees and laws. These laws were far more merciful than the laws of the old Babylonians. The Hittites adopted many of the gods of the Sumerians and Babylonians. The Hittites seemed to have recognized that all gods were legitimate gods. Whenever they conquered a people, they adopted that people's gods into their religious system. Although they did not invent the science of iron working, they were the first group to make use of iron weapons.

The Assyrians

An even more powerful group was the Assyrians, who created the world's first true empire. It was a large state created by conquest from 911 to 612 B.C.E. They built up an army of 500,000 soldiers; they were equipped with iron weapons and used a new military skill of cavalry (horseback) warfare. The Assyrians took over most of the Middle East, including Mesopotamia and Egypt. They were able to keep their empire together by means of a deliberate policy of ruthlessness and cruelty. This harsh rule was resented by those that were conquered and led to frequent uprisings. The Assyrians sent a large number of people into exile, which helped spread cultural diffusion across the entire region.

They were able to adapt their religion from the Sumerians. One such thing was a new way of writing, on parchment, leather, or papyrus; this was developed by the Arameans and used by the Assyrians. The Assyrians also had other contributions among them were great mathematical inventions; they were the first to invent longitude and latitude in geographical navigation. They also developed sophisticated medical science, which greatly influenced medical science as far away as Greece.

The Neo-Babylonians

The Chaldeans or the Neo-Babylonians controlled the Middle East from 626-539 B.C.E, and ended Assyrian rule. Their most famous ruler was Nebuchadnezzar (C. 605-562 B.C.E), was renowned for building the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the city of Babylon was rebuilt with great splendor; it would eventually become one of the most magnificent human cities in the area of the Middle East and Mediterranean. He rebuilt canals, temples, walls and palaces making the city spectacular. Along with this the Chaldeans were focused on understanding the heavens and their observations contributed greatly to Astronomy. The Chaldeans like others in Mesopotamia were also polytheistic borrowing their gods from old Babylon and surrounding areas.

The Persians

The last group to dominate the Middle East politically before Alexander the Great was the Persians (530-331 B.C.E). In a short time they created one of the largest empires in world history. The Persians

first ruler, Cyrus the Great, conquered present-day Iran in 550 B.C.E. By the end of the reign of the third emperor, Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.E), the empire stretched from Turkey to Libya in the west and India in the east. This was the largest empire to date. They governed with the help of an advanced postal system, an excellent network of roads, a single currency, established a network of spies he called the "Eyes and Ears of the King", and a form of government, in which twenty officials called *satraps* ruled in the emperor's name.

The official religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, but they remained tolerant of other faiths. **Zarathushtra** or Zoroaster in Greek was responsible for this religion. He preached monotheism in a land, which followed an aboriginal polytheistic religion. He was attacked for his teaching, but finally won the support of the king. Zoroastrianism became the state religion of various Persian empires. Eventually this great empire fell to Alexander the Great.

The Hebrews

One of these small kingdoms became through its religion, philosophy, and law one of the most important cultures in Middle Eastern and Western history. This group was known as the Hebrews, later known as Israelites or Jews. Sometime after 2000 B.C.E, this tribe under the leadership of Abraham became the first in the world to practice monotheism, or worship of one god called Judaism. The Hebrews were politically weak during most of their history. They were enslaved by the Egyptians (ca.1400-1200 B.C.E), conquered by the Assyrians (in 721 B.C.E), and taken over by the Neo-Babylonians (587-539 B.C.E). The Jews as they became known managed to keep their identity because they believed they were gods chosen people. Nevertheless, the religious and cultural legacy of the Hebrews, in the form of Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped world history in countless ways.

The Phoenicians

By about 2100 B.C.E, the Phoenicians had settled on the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean, in what is today Syria and Lebanon. The true empire existed from 1200-800 BCE. From their great cities the Phoenicians developed an advanced economy based on the export of timber, cedar, pine, fine linen, embroideries, metalwork, glass, wine, salt, dried fish and highly valued purple dye made from shellfish. They were skilled traders and sailors and they established many colonies along the coast of North Africa. Around 1200 B.C.E, the Phoenicians developed the world's first alphabet, a system of writing in which the signs represent sounds, rather than pictures. These twenty-two letters made writing and reading much easier.

The powers and processes of nature inspired Phoenician religion. Many of the gods they worshiped, however, were localized and are now known only under their local names. A pantheon was presided over by the father of the gods, but a goddess was the principal figure in the Phoenician pantheon. The system of gods and goddesses in Phoenician religion has influenced other cultures.

The Lydians

Lydia was situated in the Western part of Asia Minor on the river Galis with its main city Sardis. Homer first mentioned it in the 8th century B.C.E. It was celebrated for fertile soil and rich deposits of gold and silver. In the 6th century B.C.E. Lydian conquests transformed the kingdom into an empire. Under the rule of King Croesus, Lydia attained its greatest splendor. The empire came to an end however when the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great captured Sardis about 546 BC and incorporated Lydia into the Persian Empire. They existed from 600-500 B.C.E and they invented the first metal coinage that was used as a practical and portable form of currency.

The Ancient Middle East Organizer

Fill out the chart below using the readings on ancient Middle Eastern civilizations

Civilization	Years of Existence	Famous People	Contributions	Religion
1. The Hittites				
2. The Assyrians				
3. The Chaldeans				
4. The Persians				
5. The Phoenicians				
6. The Hebrews				
7. The Lydians				