The Spread of Civilization: The Great River Valleys
Focus Questions

- WHY DID intensified agriculture lead to cultural differences?
- WHERE DID the first great river-valley civilizations develop?
- HOW CAN we account for the similarities and differences in political institutions, social structure, and ways of life in the four great river valleys?
- HOW DID the river-valley states expand?
- IS WRITING a defining characteristic of civilization?
- WHY IS cultural divergence one of the main themes of human history since the beginning of agriculture?
Why focus on Egypt, Mesopotamia, Indus Valley, and China?

- Earliest large populations
  - Vertical (allegiances) and horizontal (class) organization of society
- Development of monumental architecture:
  - Ziggurats (Mesopotamia), Pyramids (Egypt), Brick constructed cities (Indus Valley), Palace/Tombs (China)
  - Defensive fortifications: walled cities, citadels
- Development of writing
  - Social/economic relationships can be better understood
  - Religious beliefs
  - Political/legal systems become clearer
  - Different systems: Cuneiform, Hieroglyphic stone/papyrus, cylinder seals, oracle bones
Ziggurat of Ur
Pyramids at Giza, Egypt
Ecologies of Regional River Systems

- **Nile**
  - Regular annual flood, black earth
  - Abundant sunshine, few storms
  - Natural boundaries

- **Tigris and Euphrates**
  - Irregular flooding, carries rich soil from Armenia
  - Violent, unpredictable storms
  - Region open to invaders

- **Indus and Saraswati**
  - Two periods of flooding annually, two crops possible
  - Monsoon, productive/destructive aspects
  - Natural boundaries, large expanse (half million square miles)

- **Yellow and Yangtze Rivers**
  - Irregular floods, devastating
  - Loess (silty sediment) in river replenishes soil
  - Isolation -- desert and mountain boundaries
  - Diversity of millet and grain crops (Yellow River) and rice (Yangtze River)
Tigris/Euphrates
Indus River Panorama
Yellow River Plateau, China
Characteristics of New Societies

- Economic, occupational specialization
  - Farmers, craftsmen, priests, rulers, scribes, merchants

- Technological development:
  - Metallurgy: agricultural implements, tools, weapons, jewelry
  - Food processing, storage
  - Trade: writing & accounting
  - Travel: ships, early wheeled chariots
  - Architecture: early temple complexes
  - Systems to sustain large populations: hydraulic, markets, residential centers
  - Need for uniformity

- Cultural developments
  - Food customs: (importance of bread, beer in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Mideast)
  - Religious, ceremonial customs & rituals
  - Literature: myths & history: *Epic of Gilgamesh*
  - Art: bronze, gold sculpture, jewelry
“Cuneiform” was a script whose name derives from the wedges (“cunei” in Latin) impressed into soft clay tablets to form characters. The clay was then fired, and the result was the earliest known form of writing in the world. The example here, from ancient Sumer, about 2039 BCE, concerns the wages due to supervisors of day laborers.
Drawings of obelisks found at Cairo, Egypt, inscribed with hieroglyphics. The names of the pharaohs are inscribed in a circle, or “cartouche”.

Chinese oracle bone writing, Shang Dynasty, 2000-1000 BCE
Cylinder seal, Mesopotamia

Indus Valley Script
What do we mean by “cultural divergence”?

- Differences in political structure, religion, trade, writing, social structure
Connections Between Ecology and Culture

- **Egypt**
  - God-kings, population spread along Nile River, wealthy from trade, developed writing and literature, rigid social/economic classes, no written laws (moral codes), belief in afterlife
  - Stable culture, government
  - Regular changes in government and culture

- **Mesopotamia**
  - Kings govern rigidly stratified urban societies, developed writing and literature, wealth from trade (but need for imported goods), written laws, belief that afterlife is bad

- **Indus Valley**
  - Political organization unknown, writing undeciphered, urban societies (independent city-states?), religious beliefs(?), trade with Mesopotamia, highly organized cities with social stratification
  - Cities collapsed in early 2000-1700 B.C.E.

- **China**
  - Kings control religion/rituals, developed writing, feudal control over expanding territory, internal trade and wealth from abundant agriculture, social stratification
  - Stable culture, government
One panel of an object known as the “Royal Standard of Ur”, created in Sumer around 2750 BCE. The object is composed of two mosaic panels, made from lapis lazuli, limestone, and shell. These mosaics are generally known as “War” and “Peace”. Shown here is the “Peace” panel. The king is the seated figure on the top right. Guests enjoy libations and music while below servants bring various livestock to be slaughtered and consumed.
Tutankhamun reigned 1333-1323 BCE
Detail of throne
Hammurabi receives law code from god Shamash, c. 1750s BCE
Thematic Question:
What connections can we make between environment and the diverse cultures that developed during the 3rd to 2nd millenniums, B.C.E.?
What characteristics helped maintain stability, and what led to instability?

Consider:
- the effects of agriculture, irrigation, herding in transforming the environment
- the role of leaders-rulers, governments in transforming the environment
- the role of religion and priests/ritual experts
- the role of environmental catastrophes: droughts, floods, earthquakes, storms, etc. in different regions
- the role of climate and weather patterns
Thematic Question:

Is hierarchy necessary in complex human societies?

Consider

- Hierarchy in early complex societies responded to deficiencies in communications technology and from differential control of scarce resources.
- Today, productive resources are sufficient to overcome scarcity.
- Today, global communications via the Internet can theoretically link everyone together.
- Modern political theory vests sovereignty in “the people” and respects the rights of all individuals.

- Have we created the conditions in which it is possible to put modern theory into practice and do away with hierarchical leadership?
- What useful functions do leaders still serve?
- Can we at least make access to leadership more equitable and restrict the abuse of power more effectively?
Mesopotamian & Egyptian Epic/Myths

- **Gilgamesh (Mesopotamia) & Isis & Osiris**: As Leaders/Exemplars
  - Role of Gods, humans, semi-divine beings (see introduction, pp. xxxvii and after)
  - Gilgamesh--1/3rd man, 2/3rds god--father Lugalbanda, mother--Ninsun, goddess
  - Gender roles: men and women, divine/mortal beings
  - Humans and nature:
    - Relationship of gods to nature: nature functions to feed/sustain the gods
    - Relationship of humans to nature: humans work, produce food and goods to sustain gods
    - Role of magic, supernatural: to interpret dreams, omens, through which the gods speak
  - Humans and gods: gods control forces which determine human fate
  - Central role of immortality in stories

- **Role in History and Literature:**
  - *Gilgamesh* - cuneiform tablets, found in ruins of royal library of Ninevah (near Mosul, Iraq), from Assyrian Empire ruled by King Ashurbanipal
    - Written in Akkadian--Babylonian
    - 73 manuscript versions survive
    - Gradual transformation of story: “Surpassing All Kings…” to “He Who Saw the Deep”
    - Most versions date from 1000-700 BCE with early versions dating to 2500 BCE
  - *Isis and Osiris*: earliest versions dates from 2500 BCE,
    - inscriptions on Palermo Stone, Pyramid texts (also inscribed on sarcophagi & pyramids for use of pharaoh only)
    - Central importance of Isis/Osiris festivals in Egypt, rituals
    - Connection to Greek & Roman mythology, cults
Gilgamesh, the story --content and themes

- Main characters: Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Shamhat, Ninsun, Humbaba, Shamash, Ishtar, Shiduri, Ur-shanabi, Uta-napishtiti
- Location: Ur, a city-state in Sumeria, the Forest of Cedar
- Topics: (see glossary, p. 222 for explanation of terms)
  - ongoing battle between humans, gods, nature (involving Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Ishtar, Humbaba, Bull of Heaven)
  - quest for immortality by Gilgamesh, coming to terms with mortality
  - The gods role limit human lifespan after the flood (p. xlv)
  - the central importance of serving the gods through sacrifice, obedience
  - The gods role in creating kings/priests to civilize humans, teach them skills, arts, crafts
  - The responsibility of kings/leaders to their communities: p. xliii & following pages
  - Uta-napishti’s advice to Gilgamesh: on the proper role and behavior of kings: “…let him wear royal robes, the dress fitting his dignity!” see also p. 85 where he contrasts Gilgamesh with a fool.
THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Mesopotamia, Egypt & the Mideast Cultural and Economic Development
Egypt, Middle Kingdom 204-1640 BCE
THE FIRST EAST ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS