**Chavín Civilization**

Chavín de Huántar was a large ceremonial and residential center of the [Chavín culture](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin), one of the earliest complex cultures in ancient Peru. Located in the [Andes Mountains](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin) at 10,530 feet above sea level, Chavín de Huántar's position between Peru's arid western coast and the tropical Amazon basin to the east allowed its involvement in the region's extended trade networks. As the major Chavín center, Chavín de Huántar gave its name to the culture itself; moreover, the relief carvings decorating the site's large temple complexes exemplify Chavín artistic motifs. Chavín de Huántar became a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site in 1985. Ongoing threats to the site include flooding, the collapse of structures' entrances and galleries, and the looting of artifacts.

Chavín de Huántar may have been constructed as early as about 900 [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin). It became one of the largest Andean centers, with a substantial residential area distinguishing it from most other Chavín ceremonial centers, which did not include towns. At its peak, Chavín de Huántar's population reached about 3,000. The site flourished during a period of significant advances in Andean agriculture, architecture, trade, and perhaps political organization. Chavín de Huántar's economy was based on agriculture, likely focused on root crops, as well as trade; the site's proximity to a tributary of the Marañón River further enhanced Chavín de Huántar's access to trade contacts. Obsidian from southern Peru and seashells (often used in rituals) from the region that is now coastal Ecuador were among the valued imports brought to Chavín de Huántar. It is thought that Chavín de Huántar's main contribution to the regional exchange networks was a cultural and artistic diffusion, based on imitation of the styles used in Chavín de Huántar's pottery and artwork, which helped unify Chavín culture.

The main structure at Chavín de Huántar is the religious complex known as the Old Temple. While its date of construction is not known for certain, it is thought that the temple was built early in Chavín de Huántar's history. Composed of rubble platforms and walls constructed of monumental, rectangular stone blocks, the temple contained passageways, subterranean galleries, a drainage system, and a central, sunken circular plaza. Shafts ventilated the complex's labyrinth of galleries; it is thought that the galleries may have been used as ritual sites, living quarters for temple workers, and storage areas. Some of the most important examples of decorated ceramics created by the Chavín culture have been found in the temple's galleries. Outside the temple, stone sculptures of human and animal heads were mounted on the outer walls.

In the Old Temple's central, cross-shaped Lanzón Gallery, a [megalithic](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin) white granite shaft was sculpted in low relief to represent the god El Lanzón. Sometimes called the Smiling God or the Great Image, the statue stands about 15 feet high and portrays an anthropomorphic figure with a feline head and hair made up of serpents. El Lanzón is considered the most important of Chavín deities and was likely the focus of worship in Chavín de Huántar's Old Temple. Scholars speculate that the blend of human and feline features seen in the statue of El Lanzón and in other images at Chavín de Huántar may represent the Chavín religious belief that priests or [shamans](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin) could transform into jaguars through the ritual use of hallucinogenic substances. A similar figure is depicted on the Raimondi Stone, also found at Chavín de Huántar, which contains a low relief carving of a deity known as the "god of the staffs;" similar images of that deity have been found at such other Andean sites as [Tiahuanaco](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1288674?terms=chavin) in present-day Bolivia. Like the El Lanzón figure, the god on the Raimondi Stone has a human body and a feline head with fangs. Another significant monument within the Old Temple complex, a pillar called the Tello Obelisk, contains carvings of animal heads, teeth, and a caiman. In addition to the recurring artistic motifs of jaguars and reptiles, many images of eagles and at least one of a hybrid bird with feline features appear at the site.

Chavín de Huántar's New Temple was built as an extension of the Old Temple and incorporated a section of the earlier structure. The New Temple contained plazas, notably a large, rectangular sunken courtyard, as well as a portal built of black and white stones, a network of galleries, and another statue of the god El Lanzón; its right hand holds a strombus (conch) shell while its left hand holds a shell from a mollusk called a spondylus. Caches found in the New Temple's Gallery of the Offerings include broken pots and a variety of animal bones. Human bones discovered in that gallery are thought to indicate ritual cannibalism.

While little is known about Chavín de Huántar's inhabitants, some information has been acquired from the site's few elite tombs in which such luxury items as dyed textiles and objects made of precious metals were placed to accompany the dead. The contrast between wealthy burials and those of the majority of residents, whose tombs held only minimal grave goods, suggests a large gap between social classes. Other artifacts discovered at Chavín de Huántar, at least some of which likely had ritual significance, include mortars, pestles, bone tubes, spatulas, and trumpets made of seashells.

About the third century BCE, Chavín de Huántar and other Chavín sites entered a decline, perhaps because of changes in trade, agriculture, and social structure. Chavín de Huántar's use was altered at that time, with a village built in the Old Temple's circular plaza, carved stones reused in the walls of houses, and many of the original structures allowed to fall down.

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**Olmec CiIvilization**

The Olmec civilization is often called the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica. The first complex society of the area, the Olmecs developed and formalized many of the great hallmarks of [Mesoamerican](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec) civilization.

The term*Olmec* means "people of the land of rubber." The name was applied by the[Aztecs](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec) to the people living on the southern edge of the Gulf of Mexico—a low-lying, hot, and humid region where rubber trees are native. When [archaeological](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec) sites with colossal heads carved in basalt were discovered in the area, archaeologists thought that they were relatively recent in date. A few scholars, however, argued for a greater antiquity. With the advent of more refined dating techniques like [radiocarbon dating](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec), the debate was settled: Olmec culture dated from about 1200 to 400 [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec).

Many of the most famous Olmec sites are in the steamy lowlands along the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which is where the colossal heads were first found. This area has been called by many scholars the "Olmec heartland," and such sites as San Lorenzo and [La Venta](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/601355?terms=Olmec) are two of the best known and most excavated of all Olmec sites.

In its earliest phases, the Olmec heartland was dotted by small villages and towns whose inhabitants occupied the well-drained river levees and mangrove swamps. Like that of other villages in coastal areas, the environment there provided the Olmec with a rich array of foods. They planted corn and beans in small clearings in the high jungle; gathered wild palm nuts and other plant foods; and captured fish, turtles, clams, and other aquatic life. By 1200 BCE, urban centers began to rise that were too large to call villages. The social life in those centers was much more stratified than in the smaller, more egalitarian villages. A number of centers existed during that time, including San Lorenzo, La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Las Limas. La Venta, Laguna de los Cerros, and Las Limas may have been the larger and more important centers in Olmec times; however, San Lorenzo is probably the best known to people today.

San Lorenzo was occupied and abandoned repeatedly in its 2,500 years of existence, but it flourished between about 1200 and 900 BCE. The city was located in the highest area in the region, where it would be safe from the flooding of the rivers flowing on all sides. That strategic position allowed the inhabitants to control communications, transportation, and trade in the area. By 1200 BCE, San Lorenzo was the main center of the region, with a royal family and various elites, and crafts people, farmers, fishers, and hunters. The immediate center's population was only about 1,000, but there was probably a population in the tens of thousands in the surrounding areas.

The main part of the site was a huge, partly human-built earth mound some 1,200 meters long by 800 meters wide, on top of which were constructed ceremonial mounds, ritual pools, and a stone drainage system. The huge stone heads and other sculptures (carved from boulders dragged from more than 60 kilometers away) were originally set in groups atop the large mound. Some were found to have been intentionally buried in large trenches; some heads were later discovered where they were apparently stored for recarving. About 900 BCE, many of the stone monuments at San Lorenzo were defaced (it was presumably at that time that some were buried in trenches), and the site was largely abandoned. Possible reasons range from internal revolt or external invasion to volcanic activity in the Tuxtla mountains, which altered the ecological balance in the area.

La Venta's florescence followed the decline of San Lorenzo and is dated from about 900 to 400 BCE. By that time, the Olmecs had become master craftspeople in another medium, jade, which then became the most prized commodity throughout subsequent Mesoamerican cultures. The original site of La Venta was large, covering more than 80 acres. Its central architectural feature was the Great Mound or Pyramid. Built atop a platform, the mound was more than 30 meters high. Many of the mythic themes of rulership and relationship to ancestors and caves appear at this site, expressed by a wide variety of stunning sculptures carved in volcanic stone, jade, and serpentine. As at San Lorenzo, sculptors at La Venta carved great heads. La Venta suffered a fate similar to that of San Lorenzo: around 400 BCE, some of its monuments were smashed or defaced, and the site was abandoned.

The Olmec heartland was not the only place where the Olmec peoples flourished. Their presence in the highlands of central Mexico is also attested at dozens of sites. Major highland Olmec sites included Chalcatzingo (ca. 1000–500 BCE), just south of Mexico City, and another named Teopantecuanitlan (ca. 900–600 BCE). Those and many other Olmec sites were strategically located to control important resources and trade and communication routes. The large numbers and sheer volume of imported objects in many such sites clearly offer evidence of the Olmecs' ability to command resources from a wide area.

There are still many unanswered questions regarding the Olmecs. For example, was their widespread presence and influence based on political control, economic power, or the spread of an Olmec religion? All three possibilities have been proposed, but as yet, there are no clear answers.

The Olmecs were wonderful artists and produced the first great art style of Mesoamerica. Their stone carvings great and small, their beautifully made and decorated ceramics, and their surviving paintings all are indicative of a mature and self-confident civilization. Many of their images are portraits of their gods, and major advances have been made in "deciphering" the Olmec pantheon. But other pieces are more personal, from the 20-ton portrait heads of their rulers to the smaller jade masks and other objects that have often been found in large numbers in caches.

What can be called classic Olmec civilization declined around 400 BCE, but the Olmec people survived. One of their achievements in later times was the development of a writing system. Traces indicating the first steps toward developing a script can be seen in monuments from La Venta, but evidence indicates that a full-fledged writing system was not used until near the time of Christ. That script, called epi-Olmec, was deciphered by two American scholars, John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman.

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**Mesopotamia and Sumerian Civilization**

A cradle of human civilization, Mesopotamia was a birthplace of urban society, as well as writing, agriculture, [irrigation](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), and wheeled transportation. Located in the [Tigris-Euphrates river valley](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia) in what is now modern Iraq, Mesopotamia stands as one of the most important regions of human development and history in the world.

The word "Mesopotamia" is Greek for "between the rivers," and that name well describes the region. The bounty of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers allowed for human habitation of Mesopotamia beginning at least 12,000 years ago. Those reliable sources of irrigation, coupled with favorable weather patterns and fertile soil, allowed the earliest inhabitants of Mesopotamia to create successful agricultural settlements, domesticate animals, and eventually establish village social structures. Without those elements, the civilizations of Mesopotamia could not have been created.

Expanding trade networks—both by land and by river routes, as well as sea trade via the Persian Gulf—and successful agricultural surpluses allowed Mesopotamians to establish the world's first-known cities by the dawn of the fourth millennium [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia). Such wide-scale urban living required strong legal authorities, usually represented in the form of a king who claimed divine authorization. Mesopotamian cities, such as [Babylon](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), [Ur](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), and [Larsa](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), were also important religious centers. Indeed, spiritual beliefs were another unifying force in Mesopotamia. Based in animist ideas, [Mesopotamian religion](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia) included patron deities for the cities of the region, as well as natural forces and geological landmarks.

Another factor that assisted the development of urban life in Mesopotamia was the invention of abstract writing. With the creation and implementation of [cuneiform](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), Mesopotamians were able to codify key aspects of their social mores, like legal codes, religious beliefs, and historical narratives. Writing allowed for vast [bureaucracies](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia) to evolve and made it possible for governments to collect regular taxes, as well as hold citizens accountable for the laws of the land. Indeed, one of the most influential legal codes in world history emerged from ancient Mesopotamia. The Code of Hammurabi was published on a massive stone [stela](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia) in the cuneiform script. Babylonian king [Hammurabi](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia) was able to expect obedience to his laws from the populace because of its codification.

The creation of bureaucratic documents was not the only use for codification, however. Millions of cuneiform sources reveal rich literary, theological, scientific, and cultural traditions in Mesopotamian society. Literacy also allowed for the exchange of personal and business correspondence. Everyday items, like grocery lists and shopping receipts, have also been uncovered, shedding light on the everyday experiences of Mesopotamians, as well as their formal and official lives.

Several important civilizations ruled over Mesopotamia, including the [Sumerians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), the [Akkadians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), [Babylonians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), Hurrians,[Kassites](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), [Assyrians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), [Chaldeans](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), [Persians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574776?terms=mesopotamia), and Mitannis. Each group brought its own distinct cultural elements to the region, but all were equally influenced by the environment of Mesopotamia and the societies that came before them.

**Sumer:**

The cradle of one of the most ancient civilizations known to human history, Sumer was the birthplace of written language and the notion of a city. Located in the [Tigris-Euphrates river valley](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia), the Sumerians were the first in a long line of [Mesopotamian](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) peoples to dominate the Near East in the ancient world.

Sumer was located in modern-day southern and central Iraq, a region that in ancient times was dense with marshlands between the Persian Gulf and the area of modern [Baghdad](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia). Although non-Semitic peoples drained many of the marshes before the establishment of Sumerian culture, it was the Sumerians who brought immense prosperity to the region. Scholars believe the Sumerians migrated to Mesopotamia from [Asia Minor](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) ca. 3300 [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia). Within 300 years, they established all of the tools for building the first major collection of cities tied together by a single culture and economy: surplus agriculture, extensive trade in manufactured goods, and a consolidated religious belief system based on animist beliefs that illustrated the dramatic natural world around them.

Between 3000 and 1900 BCE, the Sumerian city-states struggled for political power among themselves. Such cities as Kish, [Ur](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia), Erech, Lagash, and [Larsa](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) dominated the region for several centuries, combining military prowess with economic dominance to better their neighbors. Trade was an important vehicle for success among the Sumerians. Goods such as leathers, metal wares, and pottery were traded extensively. Construction was also an important business in Sumerian lands. Annual floods and regular seismic activity made sturdy construction important, and fine masons were valued for their work.

The Sumerians used their written language, expressed in [cuneiform](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia), to establish [bureaucracies](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) previously unknown in scale. Indeed, cuneiform, the oldest-known written language in human history, rose in prominence with the fortunes of Sumer and made the art of the scribe a highly prized skill. The wedge-shaped symbols of cuneiform allowed for abstract expression previously unknown, making it possible for the Sumerians to officially record everything from tax records to literary works to shopping lists. Because of its value to government and religion, the written language of the Sumerians spread relatively widely and was eventually adopted as the script of many other Mesopotamian cultures.

Fighting between various Sumerian city-states in the period after 2500 BCE weakened unity among the Sumerians and the local economy, and a series of invasions from their neighbors took place. [Elamites](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) and [Akkadians](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) both took control of Sumer over the subsequent centuries. These conquerors adopted many aspects of Sumerian society, however, including the cuneiform script and the building of [ziggurat](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574755?terms=mesopotamia) complexes.

By 1900 BCE, the Sumerians no longer considered themselves unique but had been subsumed into the cultures of their conquerors. However, their reign over the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, which lasted more than 1,000 years, laid the foundation for many civilizations to come, particularly because of their writing system, their centralized bureaucracies, and their extensive manufacturing and trading knowledge.

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**Harappan/Indus River Valley Civilization**

The Indus River Valley was the location of a great urban civilization of the third and second millennium [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley). Like ancient [Egypt](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) and Mesopotamia, civilization in the Indus River valley was built around large cities, with a well-developed trading system, agriculture, and metalworking. Unlike the other two cultures, that of the Indus River valley was unknown to modern [archaeologists](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) until chance discoveries led them to the key locations in the 20th century [CE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley).

The civilization of the Indus River valley is known as the [Harappan civilization](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley), the Indus civilization, or the Indus Valley civilization. Radiocarbon dating indicates that it arose ca. 2500 BCE in the greater Indus River valley of Pakistan and northwest [India](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley). The two major cities of the culture were[Harappa](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) and [Mohenjo-Daro](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley). The existence of a prehistoric civilization in the Indus River valley had not been known, so the discovery of square seals during the 19th century CE in northwest India caused British archaeologists some puzzlement. The [hieroglyphics](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) found on the seals could not be read by the archaeologists, so a search for more [artifacts](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley)continued. In 1921, Sir John Marshall, the director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, sent his colleague, Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni, to excavate the ruins at Harappa. At around the same time, Rakal Das Banerji of the Archaeological Survey of India was digging at Mohenjo-Daro, 400 miles away. When Banerji and Sahni discovered similar seals at the two sites, the archaeologists realized that they represented the remains of a unique civilization. By 1924, Marshall could announce the discovery of a previously unknown civilization. For nearly a decade, intensive digging occurred at both sites, as well as at others that were discovered later.

Archaeologists realized that the Indus River valley civilization spread over a large part of modern Pakistan and northwest India. Settlements were found that dated back to 2800 BCE. Between 2600 and 2500 BCE, a great social change occurred. Urban centers that had not existed before came into being. The people survived on a mixed agricultural economy. They grew barley and wheat, with possible evidence of rice cultivation as well. They also cultivated chickpeas and field peas. The fruits and seeds of various wild plants were also gathered, including grapes and jujube. Some of the earliest known use of cotton dates to the Indus River valley civilization as well. In addition, the people of the Indus River valley raised a species of humpbacked cattle. Other animals that they raised included sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs, and chickens were domesticated. Fish were an important part of their diet, and evidence indicates that urban centers near the sea traded fish to inland centers.

Trade played an important role among the Harappan people. Besides trading food products among themselves, they also maintained trading relations with the people of Central Asia. Raw products, like gold, silver, and copper, and various minerals and precious stones were obtained. They produced metal products, like copper goods, and ceramics and pottery. Information about trade with the people of the [Persian](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) plateau is uncertain, but a thriving trade was carried on with the cities of Mesopotamia. The [Mesopotamian](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) trade was carried on through ships, and Mesopotamian records refer to Meluhha, their name for the Indus River valley people. Products sent to Mesopotamia include agricultural goods and carved stones and different artistic items, including statues.

The hieroglyphic writing of the Indus River valley people remains undeciphered. Archaeologists have studied the drawings that have been recovered, however, and have developed theories about the religious life of the people. Their gods appear to have animal characteristics as well as plant characteristics. The idea of gods with these characteristics is one that became common in [Hinduism](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley), causing many to speculate that the Indus River valley religion played a role in the origin of that religion.

Water also played an important role in the Indus River valley civilization. Among the huge public buildings at Mohenjo-Daro was a public bath, known as the [Great Bath](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley). Many of the private homes in the urban centers surveyed also included bathing facilities. Bathing and cleanliness appear to have played a religious role in the Indus River valley civilization.

By ca. 1750 BCE, the Harappan civilization had begun to decline. Many cities had been abandoned, or their population had declined to a very small number. One explanation offered for this was that the surrounding countryside had been devastated by the deforestation caused by a population and building explosion. Other explanations, like a devastating flood or destruction caused by invading [Aryan](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/596681?terms=indus+river+valley) tribes, have been disputed. Further details about the civilization remain to be discovered by further investigations of the relics of the Indus River valley civilization.

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**Huang He River Valley Civilization – Shang dynasty**

The [Bronze Age](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) culture of the [Shang dynasty](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) (ca. 1766–1122 [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley)), which emerged out of late Neolithic [China](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) (ca. 2000 BCE), represents a watershed in the development of Chinese civilization. Centered on the middle valley of the [Yellow River](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) in northern China, Shang civilization occupied a relatively small territory, one comprised of parts of such modern provinces as Hebei, Henan, Shandong, and Shanxi. Its influence, however, spread beyond the borders of its political sovereignty. More significantly, Shang civilization introduced what was to become the dominant form of Chinese government: a strong, centralized state governed by a stable, socially stratified, political and religious hierarchy presided over by a monarch. This was also the period in which writing emerged that developed into the Chinese logographic system in use today.

**The Shang Dynasty Rises**
The Shang succeeded the [Xia dynasty](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) (ca. 2200–1750 BCE), an intervening culture once considered legendary, and which centered upon the site of Erlitou in the city of Yanshi, thriving between the Longshan culture and the Shang. The connections between these cultures helped establish that Shang China's development was indigenous and not dependent upon outside influence for its social structure or most of its [technology](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley). For example, the commonalities between the design of Xia and Shang buildings, and between Neolithic pottery and Shang bronzes, indicates a certain amount of continuity. Certain elements of Shang culture, however, may have been imports, in particular the horse-drawn chariot that played such an important role in military enterprises.


Large administrative centers were the core of Shang society. Later historians believed that the Shang had five successive capitals, and those few that have been located and excavated, like Zhengzhou and Anyang, reveal impressive centers of government, religion, and industry. Cities grew up around palaces, [altars](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley), and temples, which normally resided on raised platforms of rammed earth. Surrounding those centers were industrial areas and the homes of [bronze](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) workers, stone carvers, potters, and other craftsmen. Beyond that were small houses belonging to the general populace, some of which were built partially underground. At the outermost section of the city were graveyards. Royal tombs are especially impressive—the ability to construct such large grave sites indicates the ability to command a large labor force. Many of those tombs are comprised of large wooden frames and filled in with earth, some as deep as 40 feet. The large walls of Zhengzhou attest to the size, power, and centralized nature of the Shang.

**The Omnipotent King**

As the pattern of Shang cities suggests, the king was at the pinnacle of society, responsible not only for political matters, but also religious rites, the line between them never being very sharply drawn. War was a major occupation, and bronze weapons and two-horse [chariots](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley), the latter of which appear after 1200, helped the Shang expand their power. The king commanded large armies, often in the thousands, although he also used less violent ways to spread his influence. Shang monarchs were great builders as well. New towns were not the result of piece-meal migration, but an act of state. Once a site was selected, the king ordered the building of the town through an official decree and appointed people to live there.

The king also served as the chief priest in state worship, communing with his deceased predecessors and the god Di, and making sacrifices. Officials called "diviners" helped prepare such items as [oracle bones](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley), but it was the king who read them and interpreted the will of the spirit world. These specially prepared bones or tortoise shells were heated until they cracked; the king would then read the cracks to determine their meaning.

Many of these oracle bones have survived; they constitute the earliest clear source for Chinese writing and establish that the language spoken today is related to that of the Shang. Around the turn of the 20th century, Chinese pharmacists were selling these "dragon bones" as medicinal ingredients. Not long afterwards, scientists were able to trace the source of these inscribed bones to Anyang, one of the ancient Shang capitals. The ritual formulas on them tend to fall into patterns. Some ask about weather, others about natural disasters, the king's luck, and about propitious times to start certain projects. In addition, they reveal details about Shang society—the values, concerns, even the lifestyle of the elite. For example, incidental comments in the inscriptions written by state [scribes](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) reflect stratification in Shang society—that is, the differences between [aristocrats](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) and commoners. The inscriptions also indicate that hunting was a popular sport.

The oracle bones obviously provide some indication of Shang religious practices, but they are not the only evidence. Excavations at Zhengzhou, an early capital that probably began as a cult center, and at Anyang, from which Shang kings ruled for 200 years, bear witness to the importance of sacrifice in Shang life. At Zhengzhou, for instance, early tombs are often accompanied by the remains of several sacrificed people and animals. The placement of the sacrifices is significant. In one tomb, the sacrificial remains of three people were found in various spots, like between the inner and outer coffins, and on the roof of the chamber. The number of victims increased significantly during the later Shang period. The most famous example is tomb 1001 at Anyang (ca. 1200). Here, a king was joined in death by 90 followers, 74 additional people (possibly prisoners of war), and 23 horses and dogs. Some victims had associated grave goods, some did not; many had been ritually mutilated as well. Archaeologists believe that sacrifice was a way that the Shang attempted to honor and appease the gods.

Instrumental in such rites were the fabulous bronze vessels found in so many Shang sites. Derived from Xia prototypes, Shang bronzes reveal a high level of craftsmanship and technology. Early bronzes were small and seem to mimic the sheet metal versions that preceded the cast versions, but over time, those vessels grew in size. Most were made via casting molds and prefabricated parts. By the late Shang period, some bronzes weighed more than 200 pounds. These containers took various forms, like cups and cauldrons, and often boast intricate decoration. Many of these bronze vessels are believed to have been used in religious and sacrificial rites, though many were used for more mundane purposes as well.

Even after the [Zhou dynasty](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1185087?cid=41&terms=yellow+river+valley) replaced them as the dominant kingdom in China, the structure of Shang government and writing survived, ultimately becoming the foundation for Chinese government down to the modern era, and, via language, the vehicle of early Chinese culture.

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**Ancient Egypt – Nile River Valley Civilization**

Egypt is one of the most intriguing and influential nations in the Arab world. Its long history and rich culture helped shape its strong political identity. The name Egypt is derived from the Greek word Aegyptus, which comes from the ancient Egyptian term*Kik up tah*("house of the spirit"). Vast [archaeological](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) discoveries have inspired worldwide fascination with the nature and development of Egyptian civilization. Many sites, particularly along the Nile [delta](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), have not yet been explored, which has raised hopes that new evidence will fill gaps still remaining in Egypt's past.

Ancient Egypt spanned 31 dynasties from 3500 [BCE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) until [Alexander the Great](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) appeared in 332 BCE. Many communities of [Paleolithic Age](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) hunters and gatherers lived in the [Nile River](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) Valley and across Egypt's[savannas](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) well before 5000 BCE. As rainfall decreased, especially after 4000 BCE, savannas turned to deserts, and people moved to the fertile Nile Valley, which is where more than 90% of present-day Egyptians live. Neolithic life in northern Egypt can be traced to Merimdeh and Fayoum, where strong agricultural and [artisan](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) communities thrived. Less is known of southern Neolithic life, but two distinct, highly civilized cultures, Tasian and Badarian, existed in [Lower Egypt](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization).

[Upper Egypt](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) and Lower Egypt united around 4000 BCE, which was a development believed by many scholars to signal the true beginning of Egyptian history. Agricultural surplus created an elite class that controlled valuable resources, like copper and precious metals. Larger river ships were built to accommodate expanding trade along the Nile, as foreign countries (largely Assyria and [Palestine](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization)) grew in influence during 5000–3100 BCE. By 3000 BCE, southern culture had spread north, which fostered social as well as political unity.

The age of the great pyramids (2680–2565 BCE) was followed by a long period of political obscurity despite cultural and economic growth. The 18th and 19th dynasties (1570–1200 BCE) were known as the [New Kingdom](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) and represented Egypt's golden age, which included the rule of [Tutankhamen](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) toward the end of the 14th century BCE. The king created Egypt's first law codes and enforced them through courts. Architecture reached its zenith in the ancient capital of[Thebes](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), from where the priesthood virtually ruled the country as a [theocracy](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) for the next 450 years. The Ramses dynasties (1342–1200 BCE) were succeeded by a 200-year Libyan dynasty and by a short-lived [Nubian](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) dynasty, until[Assyrian](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) invaders launched an era of foreign domination in 712 BCE.

[Persia](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) invaded in 525 BCE. Alexander the Great made his conquest and ended the last native dynasty in 332 BCE. Shortly after founding [Alexandria](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), the Macedonian king was succeeded by his general, [Ptolemy I Soter](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization). Alexandria became the intellectual center of the [Hellenistic](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) world as the Ptolemies maintained a formidable empire. They wielded great power in the Mediterranean for two centuries. However, [Rome](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) came to overshadow Egypt, and in 58 BCE, it seized power. Queen [Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), Ptolemy XII Auletes' daughter, tried to save Egypt from Roman annexation through [Julius Caesar](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) and [Mark Antony](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization). Failing, she committed suicide in 30 BCE. Ethnic-based massacres among large [Jewish](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) and Greek populations dominated most of the second century [CE](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), during which Coptic [Christianity](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) became the national faith.

Roman rule prevailed until Arab [caliphs](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) conquered Egypt in 639 and ruled for more than eight centuries. They made Egypt an integral part of the [Muslim](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) world. Greek and Coptic languages fell out of use, and Arabic became the official language. (The [Fatimid dynasty](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) founded [Cairo](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) in 969.) The [Turks](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) later absorbed Egypt into the [Ottoman Empire](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), which was overrun by Napoleon I's armies in 1798. Napoleon opened the country to European collectors and scholars, which led to important collections of Egyptian antiquities in the Louvre, the [British Museum](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization), and the museums of Turin and Berlin. A more important result of Napoleon's invasion was the chance discovery of the [Rosetta Stone](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) with its Greek and Egyptian inscriptions that enabled French scholars to make a breakthrough in deciphering [hieroglyphics](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574988?terms=nile+river+valley+civilization) in 1822.

**Further Reading**

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