



The First Civilizations

The word *civilization* is derived from the Latin adjective *civilis*, which means “political” or “civic.” No matter how else we define civilization, an organized civic entity, known as a *state*, stands at the center of every society we call civilized. A state is a sovereign public power that binds large numbers of people together at a level that transcends the ties of family, clan, tribe, and local community and organizes them for projects far beyond the capabilities of single families or even villages and towns.

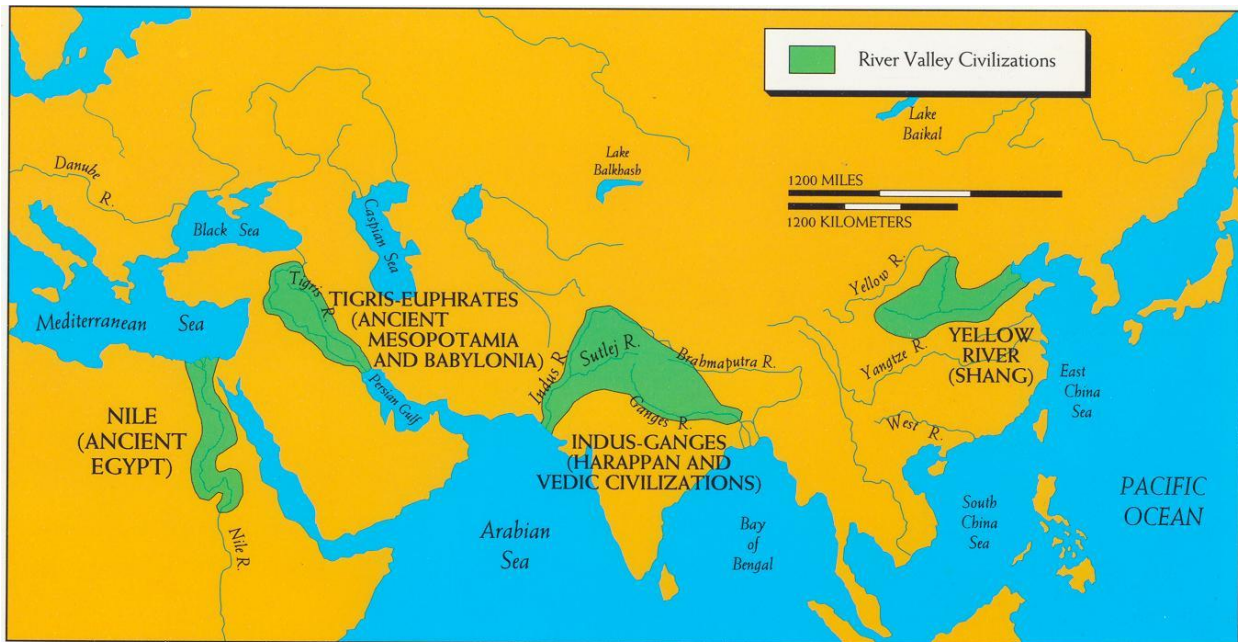
Modern states tend to be *secular*, or of this world, and most rulers today claim no particular spiritual or religious authority. Indeed, many modern states are based on the principle that legitimate power comes solely from the people. The world’s first states were different, inasmuch as they were all sacred states and their rulers claimed to govern by divine mandate. Such rulers either governed in the name of some divine authority or were themselves perceived as gods. Religious beliefs, as well as political and social institutions, varied greatly among the world’s ancient civilizations, but ancient civilized peoples shared a common perception that authority is indivisible because it is divine. In other words, they saw no distinction between the state’s sacred and secular functions.

Rulers and those who carried out their wills — priests, bureaucrats, and soldiers — were a small minority and maintained power by exploiting the many. This was a fact of early civilized life largely because, until recent times, states could produce only severely limited surpluses of resources, due to the narrow agrarian base of their economies. That surplus of goods, which is so necessary for the creation of a state, could only be channeled into state-building activities if rulers kept the majority of their subjects at a fairly low level of subsistence by exacting from them a major portion of the surplus through taxes, labor services, and military conscription. Consequently, the more agreeable benefits of civilization, such as

literature and the other arts, were largely the exclusive property and tools of the few.

Most of the world's first civilizations evolved systems of writing, and in each case the art of writing served, at least initially, to strengthen the authority of rulers. Whether writing was used to record temple possessions or tax obligations, to give permanence to laws, or to provide priests with a coherent body of sacred texts, writing set apart the powerful from the powerless.

Not all of the records left behind by the first civilizations are open to us. Some ancient systems of writing still defy decipherment. Happily this is not the case with the written languages of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. The documentary sources left behind by these three civilizations reveal societies that were strikingly different in perspective and structure, even as they shared characteristics common to all early civilizations.



Mesopotamia: The Land of Two Rivers

According to the eminent historian Samuel N. Kramer, “History begins at Sumer,” and there is a good deal of truth to this judgment. It is in *Sumer*, which lay just to the north of the Persian Gulf in an area encompassed by the southern regions of modern Iraq, that we find the first evidence of human civilization. By 3500 B.C.E. a number of *Sumerian* city-states had emerged, and humanity was embarked on the adventure of civilization.

Generally, we call the Sumerians, and the other peoples who succeeded them in this region of Southwest Asia, *Mesopotamians*. The term, which means “those who dwell between the rivers,” acknowledges the origin of the world’s first known civilization in the valley created by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

By approximately 1800 B.C.E., the Sumerians had been absorbed by waves of infiltrators and invaders and ceased to exist as an identifiable people. Moreover, the cultural center within Mesopotamia had shifted northward to the region of middle Mesopotamia, centering on the city of Babylon.

Despite their disappearance as a people, the Sumerians had set the framework for what proved to be a dynamic Mesopotamian civilization that exercised profound cultural influence throughout West Asia and beyond for about three thousand years. Between roughly 3500 and 500 B.C.E. Mesopotamia was where much of the action was, so far as the history of West Asian civilization was concerned.

That action was both constructive and destructive. The Mesopotamians have been credited with such firsts as the world’s first governments, schools, codes of law, ethical systems, and epic literature. Just as prominent in Mesopotamian life were disasters, both natural and human generated.



The geography of Mesopotamia provided its people with the challenge of harnessing the waters of its two great rivers, and from that necessary cooperative effort civilization arose. Yet those rivers also threatened to destroy the fragile fabric of civilized society because they were unpredictable and could easily turn into uncontrollable torrents. Moreover, most of southern Mesopotamia was covered by either arid wasteland or marsh. Consequently, Sumerian civilization was built upon heroic labor in the midst of a hostile environment.

Another significant geographical aspect of Mesopotamian life, which also proved to be an important factor throughout its history, is the land's openness to incursions. To the north and east lie the hills and mountains of Iran and Armenia, from which wave after wave of invaders descended into the inviting valley of cities. To the south and west lies the desert of Arabia, out of which came countless nomads century after century. In many instances these invaders toppled a preexisting state and then settled down to become, in turn, Mesopotamians.

Whether they came from the desert fringes, as did the *Amorites*, who established the first Babylonian empire around 1800 B.C.E., or were mountain folk, such as the chariot-driving *Kassites*, who conquered Babylon soon after 1700, they all eventually became part of a Mesopotamian cultural complex, with modes of life and thought the Sumerians had set in place at the dawn of human civilization.



The Search for Eternal Life in Mesopotamia



1 ▼ *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

Humans share many basic concerns, and among them two are of primary importance: finding meaning in life and confronting the reality of death. In Mesopotamia, where life and human fortune were so precarious, people deeply probed these issues and made them the subjects of numerous *myths*. The word *myth* derives from the ancient Greek word for “a poetic story.” As understood by modern scholars, however, myths are not just any poetic stories, and they certainly are not deliberate pieces of fiction or stories told primarily to entertain, even though myths do have entertainment value. First and foremost, myths are vehicles through which prescientific societies explain the workings of the universe and humanity’s place within it. Whereas the scientist objectifies nature, seeing the world as an *it*, the myth-maker lives in a world where everything has a soul, a personality, and its own story. For instance, a raging river is not a body of water responding to physical laws but an angry or capricious god. In the same manner, the fortunes of human society are not the consequences of chance, history, or any patterns discoverable by social scientists. Rather, the gods and other supernatural spirits intervene directly into human affairs, punishing and rewarding as they wish, and divine interventions become the subjects of mythic stories. The stories in turn provide insight into the ways of the gods, thereby largely satisfying the emotional and intellectual needs of the myth-maker’s audience.



So far as the issues of the meaning of life and death were concerned, ancient Mesopotamia eventually evolved its classic mythic answer in the form of its greatest work of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. An *epic* is a long narrative poem that celebrates the feats of some legendary hero who is involved in a journey or similar severe test. In the process of his trials the hero gains wisdom and, because of that wisdom, greater heroic stature.

The most complete extant version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was discovered on twelve clay tablets in the ruins of an Assyrian library that dated to the late seventh century B.C.E. Other earlier versions of the epic show, however, that the story, at least in its basic outline, is Sumerian in origin and goes back to the third millennium B.C.E. (2000s).

The hero, Gilgamesh, was a historical figure who ruled the city-state of Uruk sometime between 2700 and 2500 B.C.E. and was remembered as a great warrior, as well as the builder of Uruk's massive walls and temple. His exploits were so impressive that he became the focal point of a series of oral sagas that recounted his legendary heroic deeds. Around 2000 B.C.E. an unknown Babylonian poet reworked some of these tales, along with other stories — such as the adventure of Utnapishtim that appears in our selection — into an epic masterpiece that became widely popular and influential throughout Southwest Asia and beyond.

The epic contains a profound theme: the conflict between humanity's talents and aspirations and its mortal limitations. Gilgamesh, "two-thirds a god and one-third human," as the poem describes him, is a man of heroic proportions and appetites who still must face the inevitability of death.

As the epic opens, an arrogant Gilgamesh, not yet aware of his human limitations and his duties as king, is exhausting the people of Uruk with his manic energy. The people cry to Heaven for relief from his abuse of power, and the gods respond by creating Enkidu, a wild man who lives among the animals. Enkidu enters Uruk, where he challenges Gilgamesh to a contest of strength and fighting skill. When Gilgamesh triumphs, Enkidu embraces him as a brother, and the two heroes set out on a series of spectacular exploits.

In the course of their heroic adventures they insult Ishtar, goddess of love and fertility, and for this a life is owed. The one chosen by the gods to die is Enkidu. As our selection opens, Enkidu, after having cursed his heroic past, which has brought him to this fate, tells Gilgamesh of a vision he has had of the place Mesopotamians knew as "the land of no return."

Extract from the Epic of Gilgamesh

As Enkidu slept alone in his sickness, in bitterness of spirit he poured out his heart to his friend. "It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba¹ and now see what has become of me. Listen, my friend, this is the dream I dreamed last night. The heavens roared, and earth rumbled back an answer; between them stood I before an awful being, the sombre-faced manbird; he had directed on me his purpose. His was a vampire face, his foot was a lion's foot, his hand was an eagle's talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers. He turned his stare towards me, and he led me away to the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness,² to the house from which none who enters ever returns, down the road from which there is no coming back.

"There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness.

I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away forever; rulers and princes, all those who once wore kingly crowns and ruled the world in the days of old. They who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil,³ stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust, to carry cooked meat and cold water from the waterskin. In the house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes, priests of the incantation and of ecstasy; there were servers of the temple, and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to heaven in the days of old.⁴ There was Ereshkigal⁵ the Queen of the Underworld; and Belit-Sheri squatted in front of her, she who is recorder of the gods and keeps the book of death. She held a tablet from which she read. She raised her head, she saw me and spoke: 'Who has brought this one here?' Then I awoke like a man drained of blood who wanders alone in a waste of rushes; like one whom the bailiff has seized and his heart pounds with terror."

¹The giant who guarded the cedar forest and was slain by Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

²Goddess of the Underworld.

³Dead earthly kings. Anu was the supreme king of the gods and the source of all order and government; Enlil was the storm god, who supported royal authority.

⁴A legendary king of the Sumerian city of Kish.

⁵Another name for Irkalla, goddess of the Underworld.

-
- ▷ Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh now realizes that heroic fame is no substitute for life. Facing the reality of his own death, he begins a desperate search for immortality. In the course of his search he meets Siduri, a goddess of wine, who advises him:
-

“Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.”

- ▷ Gilgamesh, however, refuses to be deflected from his quest. After a series of harrowing experiences, he finally reaches Utnapishtim, a former mortal whom the gods had placed in an eternal paradise, and addresses him.
-

“Oh, father Utnapishtim, you who have entered the assembly of the gods, I wish to question you concerning the living and the dead, how shall I find the life for which I am searching?”

Utnapishtim said, “There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between the master and the servant when both have fulfilled their doom? When the Anunnaki,⁶ the judges, come together, and Mam-

⁶Gods of the Underworld who judge the dead.

⁷Goddess of fate.

⁸God of war.

⁹God of irrigation.

metun⁷ the mother of destinies, together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose.”

Then Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Far-away, “I look at you now, Utnapishtim, and your appearance is no different from mine; there is nothing strange in your features. I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but you lie here taking your ease on your back. Tell me truly, how was it that you came to enter the company of the gods and to possess everlasting life?” Utnapishtim said to Gilgamesh, “I will reveal to you a mystery, I will tell you a secret of the gods.”

“You know the city Shurruk, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta⁸ the helper, and Ennugi⁹ watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea.¹⁰ In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath¹¹ warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, ‘Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, hearken reed-house, wall reflect; O man of Shurruk, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. . . . Then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.’

“When I had understood I said to my lord, ‘Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?’ Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, ‘Tell them this: I

¹⁰God of wisdom and providence.

¹¹Apparently an oath to protect humanity, because Ea was the god of life-giving water and good fortune.

have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wildfowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.' . . .

"On the seventh day the boat was complete. . . .

"I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board. . . . The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. . . .

"For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. . . . When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made

a sacrifice and poured out a libation¹² on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice.¹³ Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. 'O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat; these last days I shall not forget.¹⁴ Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.'

"When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wrath and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, 'Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.' Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, 'Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.' Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, 'Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?' . . . It was not that I revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now take your counsel what shall be done with him.

"Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying, 'In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.' Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers."

Utnapishtim said, "As for you, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that

¹²Poured out wine or some other beverage as an offering to the gods.

¹³Many myth-making people believe that the gods gain nourishment from the greasy smoke of burnt sacrifices.

¹⁴The necklace is a rainbow.

you may find that life for which you are searching?”

-
- ▷ After telling his story, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to resist sleep for six days and seven nights. When Gilgamesh fails the test, Utnapishtim points out how preposterous it is to search for immortality when one cannot even resist sleep. Out of kindness, Utnapishtim does tell Gilgamesh where he can find a submarine plant that will at least rejuvenate him. Consequently, the hero dives to the bottom of the sea and plucks it. However, humanity is to be denied even the blessing of forestalling old age and decrepitude, because the plant is stolen from Gilgamesh by a serpent. His mission a failure, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk.
-

The destiny was fulfilled which the father of the gods, Enlil of the mountain, had decreed for Gilgamesh: “In nether-earth the darkness will show him a light: of mankind, all that are known, none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare with his. The heroes, the wise men, like the new moon have their waxing and waning. Men will say, ‘Who has ever ruled with

might and with power like him?’ As in the dark month, the month of shadows, so without him there is no light. O Gilgamesh, this was the meaning of your dream. You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed; he has given you power to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind. He has given unexampled supremacy over the people, victory in battle from which no fugitive returns, in forays and assaults from which there is no going back. But do not abuse this power, deal justly with your servants in the palace, deal justly before the face of the Sun.” . . .

Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb. At the place of offerings he weighed the bread-offering, at the place of libation he poured out the wine. In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed, the son of Ninsun, the king, peerless, without an equal among men, who did not neglect Enlil his master. O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab,¹⁵ great is thy praise.

¹⁵Part of Uruk.

Key Questions for the reading Epic of Gilgamesh

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What was the Mesopotamian view of the afterlife?
2. What is the message of Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh?
3. Consider Utnapishtim's initial response to Gilgamesh's request for the secret of eternal life. How does his message complement what Siduri has said? What do these two messages suggest about the Mesopotamian view of life?
4. Consider the story of Utnapishtim. What do the various actions of the gods and goddesses allow us to infer about how the Mesopotamians viewed their deities?
5. According to the epic, what are the respective roles of the gods and humans? What do the Mesopotamian deities require of humans? What do humans expect of their gods?
6. What wisdom has Gilgamesh gained from his epic struggles? How has he changed as a result of his quest?
7. Despite the apparent failure of his quest for eternal life, has Gilgamesh earned a type of immortality? If so, what is it?
8. Reconsider your answers to questions 2 and 3 in light of the epilogue, where the poet lays out for us the moral of the story. Basing your answer on the entire story, and especially the epilogue, what would you say was the Mesopotamian vision of the meaning of life?