What do the following excerpts from Hammurabi’s Code tell us about Mesopotamian society under the Babylonians?

117. If a man has contracted a debt, and has given his wife, his son, his daughter for silver or for labor, three years they shall serve in the house of their purchaser or bondsmaster; in the fourth year they shall regain their original condition...
195. If a son has struck his father, his hands shall be cut off.
196. If a man has destroyed the eye of another free man, his own eye shall be destroyed.
197. If he has broken the bone of a free man, his bone shall be broken.
198. If he has destroyed the eye of a peasant, or broken a bone of a peasant, he shall pay one mina of silver.
199. If he has destroyed the eye of a man’s slave, or broken a bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay half his value.
218. If a physician has treated a man with a metal knife for a severe wound, and has caused the man to die...his hand shall be cut off.


PRIMARY SOURCES: HAMMURABI’S CODE
18TH CENTURY B.C.E.

CONTINUITY OVER TIME: THE GREAT FLOOD

The Epic of Gilgamesh, a story that dates back to the 7th millennium, describes an ancient flood, according to Utnapishtim, a former mortal whom the gods had placed in an eternal paradise:

"...the world bellowed like a wild bull...Enlil [a god] heard the clamor and said to the gods in council, 'The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible,' so the gods agreed to exterminate mankind...[Enlil] whispered...‘tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life...Then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures’...I [Utnapishtim] loaded...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...For six days and six nights the winds blew...and flood overwhelmed the world...When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled...I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated...and she did not come back...Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and...he touched our foreheads to bless us...”

In about the 10th century B.C.E. the Hebrew Bible recorded the story, with a main character called Noah, who did the bidding of the monotheistic religion’s one god. During the 7th century C.E. the story was compiled by Islamic scholars for the Qur’an, with Noah communicating with only one God. The details of the story vary in other ways, but it is basically the same story that has been preserved over the eons, surviving the transition from polytheism to monotheism.


on clay tablets. Writers used a wedge-shaped stick to mark the symbols on the tablets, resulting in cuneiform – meaning “wedge-shaped” – that was used for several thousand years in the Middle East. Cuneiform writing was difficult to learn because it involved several hundred signs, so specialized scribes were generally the only ones who knew it, giving them power and status that others did not have. By about 2000 B.C.E. compilers wrote down a famous story—The Epic of Gilgamesh – that had been passed down orally since at least the 7th millennium B.C.E. Gilgamesh, the main character in the story, was a ruler of an early Sumerian city-state, probably Uruk. It explored human friendship, relations between humans and gods, and particularly the meaning of life and death. Gilgamesh went on an epic journey in pursuit of eternal life, which he ultimately did not find. The story was somber, and emphasized the control that gods had over human destiny.

Religious Beliefs

Mesopotamians, like most other people in ancient civilizations, believed that deities intervened regularly in human affairs, and that their very survival depended on their ability to please the gods. Each city had its own god who held higher esteem than all others, and a host of supporting priests devoted their lives to that deity. A temple dedicated to the special god was usually at the center of each urban area. The most distinctive were the ziggurats – large multistory pyramids constructed by bricks and approached by ramps and stairs.

Priests passed their positions and knowledge to their sons, and they enjoyed very high status in most of the city-states. The high priest performed great rituals, and others provided music, exorcised evil spirits, and interpreted dreams. Some divined the future by examining the remains of sacrificed animals. Archaeologists have also found amulets that were probably worn by individuals to protect them from evil spirits. Evidence also supports the regular occurrence of religious festivals in which priests read pleasing stories to the god’s image in front of both nobility and ordinary people.

Gods were associated with various forces of nature, and they often displayed disagreeable human characteristics, such as quarreling and using their power in selfish ways. Gods caused flooding (as reflected in The Epic of Gilgamesh), and the afterlife was seen as full of suffering, an early version of the concept of hell.

CIVILIZATION IN EGYPT

While Mesopotamian civilization was developing on one end of the Fertile Crescent, another was growing on the other end along the Nile River in northeastern Africa. The great Egyptian civilization is arguably the longest lived in world history, stretching from its inception around 3100 B.C.E. until its conquest by the Persians in 525 B.C.E. After that conquest, Egyptian rulers had to bow to more powerful civilizations, but they still participated in the interactions among civilizations for hundreds of years more. For example, the Ptolemaic queen, Cleopatra, was a major player in the struggle for power in Ancient Rome after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E.

The Natural Environment

The natural environments of Mesopotamia and Egypt had many common characteristics. Both were in river valleys and were not a long distance apart, so they shared similar latitudes. The weather was generally hot and dry with mild winters and rainy seasons. Neither could rely on consistent rainfall for their crops, so irrigation was vital to agricultural success. However, one important contrast in geographical locations shaped very different political, economic, and cultural beliefs and practices: Egypt was isolated for much of its existence, while Mesopotamia was at a crossroads of population movements. As a result, Mesopotamia was open to assault from several directions and was repeatedly conquered by invaders, whereas Egypt was surrounded by desert with few groups of people nearby. Additionally, it was protected from invasion along the Nile River from the south by a series of cataracts, or areas where the water was too swift and rocky to allow boats to pass. Another environmental difference was seasonal flooding. Both areas were subject to heavy downpours that temporarily flooded the land. However, flooding in Egypt was regular and predictable, so that farmers and political leaders could take preventative and containing measures. In contrast, flooding in Mesopotamia was irregular and unpredictable, so that people had no choice but to react to, rather than prevent and contain, the damage that was done. Not only did this difference impact economic and political life, it may have led to differences in the way people approached life, with Mesopotamians apparently gloomy and resigned to their fate in life, and Egyptians generally more optimistic about their ability to control their destinies.
Like the Mesopotamians, most Egyptians were farmers, and both economic efficiency became increasingly diverse as time passed. As cities grew, craftsmen refined techniques for making pottery and textiles, and others specialized in woodworking, leather production, brick-making, stone cutting, and masonry. About 3000 B.C.E. Mesopotamian metalworkers invented bronze by alloying copper and tin to make a harder, stronger metal. Bronze was used to fashion military weapons as well as farming tools and plows, giving both warriors and farmers important advantages in their respective occupations. Egyptians did not make use of this new invention until after the 17th century B.C.E. when they were attacked and defeated by the Hyksos (a people from modern day Turkey) who had superior military power because of their bronze weapons. Egypt’s delayed adoption of bronze was partly because their natural environment provided neither tin nor copper, and partly because their physical isolation did not encourage them to experiment with different weapons. After about 1000 B.C.E. Mesopotamians began to develop tools and weapons made of iron with carbon added to control brittleness. By this time, societies were interrelated enough that the technology spread rapidly, including to Egypt.

Another important invention that increased job specialization and economic efficiency was the wheel. No one knows exactly when the wheel was invented, but the Sumerians probably used wheeled carts long before they began to organize into city-states in the mid-4th millennium B.C.E. Wheeled carts and wagons allowed heavy loads of bulk goods to be hauled over long distances, and the technology spread to nearby areas, including Egypt. Both Mesopotamians and Egyptians experimented with maritime travel, with Sumerians learning to navigate in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, and the Egyptians sailing boats in the Nile and the Red Sea. Specialized occupations in ship and boat building appeared in both civilizations.

Increasing job specialization and transportation improvements encouraged long-distance trade. Mesopotamians and Egyptians were already trading by 3500 B.C.E., and by 2300 B.C.E., the Sumerians were trading with Harappa in the Indus River valley (in modern day Pakistan). By the time of the Babylonians (about 1900 to 1600 B.C.E.), Mesopotamians were importing silver from Anatolia in the northwest, cedar from Lebanon in the southwest, copper from Arabia in the south, gold from Egypt, and tin from Persia in the southeast. After 3000 B.C.E. Egyptians traded actively in the Mediterranean, and a few centuries later they established regular trade across the Red Sea and eventually to an east African land they called Punt. Egyptians offered gold, linens, leather goods, dried lentils, and silver, and traded for ebony, ivory, cattle, slaves, cosmetics and myrrh (an aromatic).

Like those of all other ancient civilizations, Egypt’s political system reflected the importance of religious beliefs. At the heart of the government was the pharaoh, who was not considered to be just a king, but also a god. Although Mesopotamians often believed that their kings had special access to the gods, they saw them as purely human, not gods themselves. According to Egyptian legend, the first pharaoh was Menes, who supposedly lived about 3100 B.C.E., although scholars are not at all sure that he actually existed. What is clear is that the middle and lower areas of the Nile were united under one ruler who was followed by an unbroken line of god-kings until about 2500 B.C.E. The pharaohs were believed to be reincarnations of Horus, the sky god, so they were often represented by a hawk, the symbol of Horus. In this role they maintained ma’at, the divinely controlled order of the universe. The pharaoh’s will was law, since he was all-knowing and forever correct as the representation of the almighty gods. His regulations were carried out without question, and as a result, pharaohs enjoyed more power and prestige than almost any other rulers in world history.

The pharaoh was represented throughout the countryside by a group of officials who were responsible only to him. They were usually landed nobility that were trained in writing and law. Governors were appointed for key regions and were responsible for supervising irrigation and great public works. Although the pharaoh usually granted his top bureaucrats a great deal of local authority, the pharaoh’s power was ultimate, and the state remained highly centralized. In contrast, Mesopotamia’s political system was composed of city-states, whose constantly clashing leaders made centralization government very tenuous.

Pharaohs were most powerful during Egypt’s early history, probably because few outsiders challenged their power and economic prosperity was the general rule. Ancient Egypt’s long political history is often divided into three eras:

- **The Old Kingdom (3100-2500 B.C.E.)** – These were the years when pharaohs were most powerful and the economy was the strongest. The success of this era was capped by the construction of the first of the great pyramids as tombs for the pharaohs between about 2600 and 2100 B.C.E., stretching into the years of the Middle Kingdom.

- **The Middle Kingdom (2100-1650 B.C.E.)** – After a period of instability with unknown causes, pharaohs regained their power during this long, relatively peaceful period. During this era, trade with neighbors became more extensive, and a small middle class of officials and merchants developed. Peace and prosperity ended with the invasion of the Hyksos, a people who came from the north to conquer the Nile Delta.
The New Kingdom (1550-700 B.C.E.) – The Hyksos ruled the native Egyptians for almost a century, but they were defeated by princes from Thebes, and the New Kingdom was inaugurated. Even then, the Hyksos often married Egyptians and assimilated Egyptian culture; they were still seen as foreigners, and the new rulers were determined to reassert Egyptian power. Realizing that they no longer had the luxury of ignoring the outside world, pharaohs aggressively expanded control of territory north into Syria and Palestine and south into Nubia. These new territories provided a buffer zone from attackers, and the formerly isolationist Egyptians actively sought to convert their new subjects to Egyptian beliefs and practices. For the first 300 years of this period, Egypt’s armies were generally successful, but military reversals began during the 1300s B.C.E., and by 1100, the pharaoh again ruled only the Nile Valley. After that, the kingdom gradually weakened to foreign invasion, and lost its independence.

Social Distinctions

The modern stereotype of an Ancient Egyptian is generally that of a person with dark, straight hair and clay-colored skin. In reality, even before the New Kingdom, Egyptians ranged from dark-skinned people related to the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa to lighter-skinned people related to inhabitants of southwest Asia. Egyptians tended to think of themselves as superior to other people, so foreigners were generally seen with some suspicion. However, Egypt had less pronounced social divisions than Mesopotamia, where more formal classes emerged. Clearly, though, the pharaoh and his high-ranking officials had superior social status, and lower-level officials – along with priests and other professionals, and artisans – appear to have had higher status than peasants who made up the vast majority of the population. Social mobility (the ability of individuals to change social status) appears to have been possible, since Egypt relied on professional military forces and an elaborate bureaucracy of administrators to serve the pharaoh. As in Mesopotamia, slavery existed on a limited scale, and slaves were often prisoners of war or debtors who were usually freed when their debts were paid off.

Like Mesopotamia, Egypt was a patriarchy dominated by men. However, it is probable that the status of women was higher in Egypt than in Mesopotamia, where women’s position seems to have deteriorated in later days. Egyptian women in the upper classes were respected because marriage alliances were important for preserving the continuity of the pharaoh’s line and those of high officials. Also, Egyptian religion deified its goddesses as sources of great creativity.

Historical Evidence: Ancient Patriarchies

Even though all ancient civilizations were patriarchies, Egypt had at least one female pharaoh, Hatshepsut, who ruled from 1473 to 1458 B.C.E. during the New Kingdom. She served first as regent (a stand-in ruler) for her son, but eventually ruled on her own. She is famous for sponsoring a great naval expedition south on the Red Sea to Punt (probably in eastern Sudan or Yemen) that returned with fine luxury goods, such as myrrh, rare woods, ivory, and exotic African animals. Even so, this female ruler reflected the values of male-dominated patriarchies in two of her behaviors: she often used the male pronoun in inscriptions in referring to herself, and she also wore a fake beard. After her death, her image was defaced and her name blotted out of records, perhaps an act of patriarchal defiance.

Cultural Characteristics

Egypt is of course famous for its pyramids, some of the most impressive monuments ever built. They held religious significance, and they contained impressive art and artifacts in the burial chambers. Egyptians also built large temples and great statues, illustrating that their mastery of stonework was unrivaled among the earliest civilizations. They excelled in other art forms, including frescoes, pottery, fine jewelry, and miniature sculpture.

Mesopotamian achievements in mathematics and astronomy were far more advanced than those of Egypt. The Sumerian system of numbers, based on units of 12, 60, and 360, are used for modern day geometry and for calculating time. Sumerians charted major constellations, and followed the movement of the sun and stars carefully, setting the foundation for the science of astronomy. The Egyptians had fewer mathematical and scientific achievements, but they established the length of the solar year, which they divided into 12 months, each with three 10-day weeks. The calendar was crucial in predicting the Nile floods. They also had knowledge of a variety of drugs, and elements of their medical knowledge were passed down to the Greeks.