Invaders, Traders, and Empire Builders

Through thousands of years of war and peace, the peoples of the Middle East built great empires and made long-lasting innovations. The region became a vital crossroads where warriors and traders met, clashed, and mingled. Many of the beliefs and ideas of the ancient Middle East survived to shape our modern world.

First Empires Arise in Mesopotamia

Again and again through time, nomadic peoples or ambitious warriors descended on the rich cities of the Fertile Crescent. While many invaders simply looted and burned, some stayed to rule. Powerful leaders created large, well-organized empires, bringing peace and prosperity to the region.

Sargon Builds the First Empire

About 2300 B.C., Sargon, the ruler of Akkad, invaded and conquered the neighboring city-states of Sumer. He continued to expand his territory, building the first empire known to history. He appointed local rulers, each of whom served as king of the land he oversaw. However, the world’s first empire did not last long. After Sargon’s death, other invaders swept into the wide valley between the rivers, tumbling his empire into ruin.

Hammurabi Brings Babylon to Power

In time, the Sumerian city-states revived, and they resumed their power struggles. Eventually, however, new conquerors followed in Sargon’s footsteps and imposed unity over the Fertile Crescent. About
1790 B.C., Hammurabi (hah muh RAH bee), king of Babylon, brought much of Mesopotamia under the control of his empire. Hammurabi’s most ambitious and lasting contribution was his publication of a set of laws known as Hammurabi’s Code. Most of the laws had been around since Sumerian times, but Hammurabi wanted to ensure that everyone in his empire knew the legal principles his government would follow. He had artisans carve nearly 300 laws on a stone pillar for all to see. Hammurabi’s Code was the first important attempt by a ruler to codify, or arrange and set down in writing, all the laws that would govern a state.

Establishing Civil Law One section of Hammurabi’s Code codified civil law. This branch of law deals with private rights and matters, such as business contracts, property inheritance, taxes, marriage, and divorce. Much of Hammurabi’s civil code was designed to protect the powerless, such as slaves or women. Some laws, for example, allowed a woman to own property and pass it on to her children. Another law spelled out the rights of a married woman, saying that if she was found to be blameless for the problems between herself and her husband, she could leave the marriage. If she were found to be at fault, however, the law instructed that she be thrown in the river.

In general, Babylonian civil law gave a husband both legal authority over his wife and a legal duty to support her. The code also gave a father nearly unlimited authority over his children. The Babylonians believed that an orderly household was necessary for a stable empire.

Defining Crime and Punishment Hammurabi’s Code also addressed criminal law. This branch of law deals with offenses against others, such as robbery, assault, or murder. Earlier traditions often permitted victims of crimes or their families to take the law into their own hands. By setting out specific punishments for specific offenses, Hammurabi’s Code limited personal vengeance and encouraged social order.

By today’s standards, the punishments in Hammurabi’s Code often seem cruel, following the principle of “an eye for an eye and a life for a life.” For example, if a house collapsed because of poor construction and the owner died as a result, the house’s builder could be put to death. Still, such a legal code imposed more social order than existed when individuals sought their own justice.

Other Accomplishments Made by Hammurabi Although most famous for his code of laws, Hammurabi took other steps to successfully unite his empire. He improved the system of irrigation, organized a well-trained army, and ordered many temples to be repaired. To encourage religious unity across his empire, he promoted Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, over older Sumerian gods. In time, Marduk became the chief god of Babylonian worship.

ıklı Checkpoint How do civil law and criminal law differ?

Civilizations Expand As new civilizations took control of Fertile Crescent lands, their empires expanded but stayed near the two large rivers. Many elements of shared culture existed among these civilizations, including worship of Marduk (above), who became the region’s chief god.
Conquests Bring New Empires and Ideas

Later empires shaped the Middle East in different ways. Some conquerors, such as the Hittites, brought new skills to the region’s people. Other conquerors uprooted the peoples they defeated, which had the side effect of spreading to new regions the ideas of those forced to move.

Hittites Learn the Secret of Ironworking

The Hittites pushed out of Asia Minor into Mesopotamia in about 1400 B.C. They brought with them a major advancement—the knowledge of how to extract iron from ore. The tools and weapons they made with iron were harder and had sharper edges than those made out of bronze or copper. Because iron was plentiful, the Hittites were able to arm more people at less expense.

The Hittites tried to keep this valuable technology secret. But as their empire collapsed in about 1200 B.C., Hittite ironsmiths migrated to serve customers elsewhere. The new knowledge thus spread across Asia, Africa, and Europe, ushering in the Iron Age.

Assyrian Warriors Expand Ancient Knowledge

The Assyrians, who lived on the upper Tigris, also learned to forge iron weapons. They had established an empire by about 1350 B.C., and by 1100 B.C., they began expanding their empire across Mesopotamia. Over the course of 500 years, they earned a reputation for being among the most feared warriors in history.

Historians are unsure why warfare was so central to Assyrian culture. Was it to keep others from attacking, or to please their god Assur by bringing wealth to the region? Whatever the reason, Assyrian rulers boasted of their conquests. One told of capturing Babylon. He proclaimed, “The city and its houses, from top to bottom, I destroyed and burned with fire.”

Despite their fierce reputation, Assyrian rulers encouraged a well-ordered society. They used riches from trade and war loot to pay for splendid palaces in their well-planned cities. They were also the first rulers to develop extensive laws regulating life within the royal household. For example, women of the palace were confined to secluded quarters and had to wear veils when they appeared in public.

At Nineveh (NIN uh vuh), King Assurbanipal (ahs ur BAH nee pahl) founded one of the world’s first libraries. There, he kept cuneiform tablets that he ordered scribes to collect from all over the Fertile Crescent. Those tablets have offered modern scholars a wealth of information about the ancient Middle East.

Nebuchadnezzar Revives Babylon

In 612 B.C., shortly after Assurbanipal’s death, neighboring peoples joined forces to crush the once-dreaded Assyrian armies. In their absence, Babylon—which a king named Nabopolassar had reestablished as a power in 625 B.C.—quickly revived under its aggressive and ruthless second king, Nebuchadnezzar (neb yuh kud NEZ ur). The new Babylonian empire stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.
Technological advances such as the use of iron to build powerful weapons were key to the success of conquering empires. From the Hittites, other peoples picked up the use of iron and began building new tools and weapons. In the same manner, the Hittites modified a military technology invented by others—the horse-drawn chariot—to increase their own firepower capabilities.

Thinking Critically

1. Synthesize Information How did Hittite modifications to the chariot increase their firepower capabilities?
2. Draw Conclusions How do you think the addition of a third man might have hindered a chariot?
After nearly a thousand years of the city facing decline and destruction, Nebuchadnezzar oversaw the rebuilding of the canals, temples, walls, and palaces of Babylon. During his reign, the city became one of the largest and most highly regarded in the history of ancient Mesopotamia.

Nebuchadnezzar surrounded Babylon with a defensive moat and a brick wall that was 85 feet (26 meters) thick. Nine solid gateways dedicated to important gods allowed people to pass through the wall. The most famous one today, the Ishtar Gate, was made of bricks glazed bright blue and covered in lions representing the goddess Ishtar, dragons representing the god Marduk, and bulls representing the god Hadad. At the center of the city, Nebuchadnezzar enlarged and decorated the city’s ziggurat to the gods and restored the temple honoring the city’s chief god, Marduk.

Although their remains have not yet been found, Nebuchadnezzar may have built the famous Hanging Gardens—known as one of the “seven wonders of the ancient world”—near his main palace. The gardens were probably made by planting trees and flowering plants on the steps of a huge ziggurat. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar had the gardens built to please his wife, who was homesick for the hills where she had grown up.

**Checkpoint** Name a significant contribution made by the Hittites, Assyrians, and Babylonians after each group’s conquest in the Middle East.
The Persians Establish a Huge Empire

The thick walls built by Nebuchadnezzar failed to hold back new conquerors. In 539 B.C., Babylon fell to the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great. Cyrus and his successors went on to build the largest empire yet seen. The Persians eventually controlled a wide sweep of territory that stretched from Asia Minor to India, including present-day Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In general, Persian kings pursued a policy of tolerance, or acceptance, of the people they conquered. The Persians respected the customs of the diverse groups in their empire.

Darius Unites Many Peoples The real unification of the Persian empire was accomplished under the emperor Darius I, who ruled from 522 B.C. to 486 B.C. Darius set up a bureaucracy, or a system of government through departments and subdivisions administered by officials who follow set rules. The Persian bureaucracy became a model for later rulers. Darius divided the empire into provinces, each called a satrapy and headed by a governor called a satrap. Each satrapy had to pay taxes based on its resources and wealth. Special officials visited each satrapy to check on the satraps.

Darius adapted laws from the peoples he conquered and, like Hammurabi, drew up a single code of laws for the empire. To encourage unity, he had hundreds of miles of roads built or repaired. Roads made it easier to communicate with different parts of the empire.

Vocabulary Builder

successor—(suk S3s ur) n. somebody or something that follows another and takes up the same position
Improving Economic Life  To improve trade, Darius set up a common set of weights and measures. He also encouraged the use of coins, which the Lydians of Asia Minor had first introduced. Most people continued to be part of the barter economy, which means they exchanged one set of goods or services for another. Coins, however, brought merchants and traders into an early form of a money economy. In this system, goods and services are paid for through the exchange of some token of an agreed value, such as a coin or a bill. By setting up a single Persian coinage, Darius created economic links among his far-flung subjects.

A New Religion Takes Hold  Religious beliefs put forward by the Persian thinker Zoroaster (ZOH ruh as tur) also helped to unite the empire. Zoroaster lived about 600 B.C. He rejected the old Persian gods and taught that a single wise god, Ahura Mazda (AH hoo ruh MAHZ duh), ruled the world. Ahura Mazda, however, was in constant battle against Ahriman (AH rih mun), the prince of lies and evil. Each individual would have to choose which side to support.

In the end, taught Zoroaster, Ahura Mazda would triumph over the forces of evil. On a final judgment day, all individuals would be judged for their actions, as described below:

“Then the assembly . . . will meet, that is, all men of this earth will stand. In that assembly, every person will see his own good deeds and evil deeds. The righteous will be as conspicuous [obvious] amongst the wicked as a white sheep among the black . . . . They will then [carry] the righteous to the abode of harmony [heaven], and cast the wicked back to the wicked existence [hell] . . . . Then [the last savior] Soshyant by order of the Creator will give reward and recompense to all men in conformity with their deeds.”

—Bundahishn, Zoroastrian scripture

Vocabulary Builder  emerged—(ee MURJD) vi. arose, appeared, or occurred

Two later religions that emerged in the Middle East, Christianity and Islam, also stressed ideas of heaven, hell, and a final judgment day.

**Checkpoint**  What are two steps that Darius took to unite the Persian Empire?
Contributions of Phoenician Sea Traders

While powerful rulers subdued large empires, many small states of the ancient Middle East made their own contributions to civilization. The Phoenicians (fuh NISH unz), for example, gained fame as both sailors and traders. They occupied a string of cities along the eastern Mediterranean coast, in the area that today is Lebanon and Syria.

Expanding Manufacturing and Trade The coastal land, though narrow, was fertile and supported farming. Still, because of their location near the sea, the resourceful Phoenicians became best known for manufacturing and trade. They made glass from coastal sand. From a tiny sea snail, they produced a widely admired purple dye, called “Tyrian purple” after the city of Tyre.

Phoenicians traded with people all around the Mediterranean Sea. To promote trade, they set up colonies from North Africa to Sicily and Spain. A colony is a territory settled and ruled by people from another land. A few Phoenician traders braved the stormy Atlantic and sailed as far as Britain. There, they exchanged goods from the Mediterranean for tin.

Establishing an Alphabet Historians have called the Phoenicians “carriers of civilization” because they spread Middle Eastern civilization around the Mediterranean. One of the most significant Phoenician contributions to culture was their alphabet. Unlike cuneiform, in which symbols represent syllables or whole words, an alphabet is a writing system in which each symbol represents a single basic sound, such as a consonant or vowel.

Phoenician traders developed an alphabetic system of 22 symbols that stood for consonant sounds. Later, the Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet and added symbols for the vowel sounds. From this Greek alphabet came the letters in which this book is written—that is, the alphabet we use today.

Checkpoint How has the Phoenician development of an alphabet been a lasting contribution to civilization?