Chapter 2
Early Societies in Southwest Asia and the Indo-European Migrations

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Few historical events rival the significance of the rise of the first complex societies in southwest Asia, particularly in Mesopotamia. Although these early Mesopotamian societies relied on an agricultural foundation, they also developed true cities and lived a thoroughly urban existence. Mesopotamia developed sophisticated political, religious, and social structures that influenced their neighbors and have survived the millennia since.

Some Indo-European peoples had direct contact with the Mesopotamians while others probably never heard of them. Even those peoples, however, were influenced by Mesopotamian inventions such as metallurgy and wheels. The simple fact that even in these early times peoples of different societies interacted is a crucial one.

THEMES

Urbanization and the quest for order. As neolithic villages increased in size and specialization, conflicts between residents led to the creation of city-states and governments. These institutions administered social and political life not only in urban areas but also in surrounding agricultural regions. Over time, complex legal codes combined with military conquest to encourage cultural unity throughout Mesopotamia.

Trade and growth development of a multi-directional trade network between Mesopotamia, Asia, Africa and Europe encouraged considerable accumulation of land, wealth, and eventually social stratification.

Patriarchy as social norm. Concerns over wealth protection and paternity led to increasing restrictions on women's social and sexual freedom by the second millennium B.C.E., creating a set of social and cultural norms that spread throughout southwest Asia and the Mediterranean.

Written cultural traditions appear. Commercial and tax records became writing systems, that evolved further into cuneiform, a system of written communication that led to huge expansions in philosophical and scientific knowledge.

Mesopotamian influence. Developments in Mesopotamia were soon adopted by border cultures such as Hebrews and Phoenicians, and were also rapidly adopted by Indo-European migrants from the Eurasian steppes, leading to the development of a Eurasian culture invigorated by cross-cultural interaction.

LECTURE STRATEGIES

The Mesopotamians and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

Arguably the single best approach for understanding the Mesopotamian world is to make use of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Few works in all history have more completely expressed the worldview of a society in the way that *Gilgamesh* does for the Mesopotamians. It is a remarkably mature and expressive literary representation of the glory and tragedy of the Mesopotamians' fight for survival. The nature of the struggles and the eventual failure of Gilgamesh display a sophisticated and heroic, yet understandably somber, view of life and the inevitability of death. The appearance of Utnapishtim allows for an introduction of the subject of mythological motifs such as the flood story, while the differences in these stories tell the students much about the nature of the various societies of the ancient world. (You can access the full text of a 1920s translation through Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org, or you may choose to have students purchase a paperback copy. There are several recent translations available in paperback for less than ten dollars.)

Hammurabi's Code

Most students have likely heard of Hammurabi's laws in an earlier history course, but it is equally likely that they have never read an extensive selection of the laws. A brief selection is included in this chapter of the text, and the PSI includes a translation of the full text. (Note that the translations are different; that in itself could be the basis of an interesting discussion of the variations in historical sources.) There are several different ways to instigate an interesting dialogue here. You could focus on the laws that address women and list the transgressions that would result in death, as well as those which had lesser punishments, and compare them to those for which men could be put to death. Or you could focus upon the sheer range of punishments described in the laws (such as being "thrown into the water"). What were the worst offenses in this society? Another suggestion is to focus on the laws that address marriage, divorce, dowries, and inheritance. What can we discern about this society based upon an examination of those laws?

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The Complexities of Hebrew Monotheism

The monotheism of the Hebrews is obviously a topic for discussion. Polytheism was the norm in the ancient world and, with the brief exception of Akhenaten in Egypt, the Hebrews produced the only monotheistic religion. There are several ways to approach the topic. You could focus on the complexity of the subject. In some ways polytheistic religions are more logical: something bad happened to you because one of the gods took a dislike to you. If there is only one God, then the perplexing question of why bad things happen to good people becomes an issue. Certainly the Jews struggled with the question of Yahweh's nature. The Book of Job is a great source here, especially when it is compared to the Mesopotamian *Righteous Sufferer*. The Old Testament provides many other great examples to show the evolution of thought in regard to the nature of God. Early passages stress the importance of the Hebrews' having no other gods before Yahweh. By accepting Yahweh's elevated status, were the Hebrews accepting polytheism? Later sections

spell out much more clearly the Hebrews' belief that Yahweh was the only God. The complex personality of Yahweh is also an interesting topic. Yahweh was at once powerful and personal, jealous and just. It's also useful to ask the students if there is a disadvantage to monotheism. If there is only one God, then the possessor of that God has a monopoly on the divine. What does that leave everyone else? You can also ask the students to compare Judaism to Christianity and Islam.