

The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt
By Bernard Knapp

A Book Review

By Ann Yonan-2006

In this very interesting book, Bernard Knapp outlines the chronology of man's history, beginning with the rise of civilization between 10,000-9,000 B.C. all the way to the Judeo-Christian era. After a brief discussion of the Paleolithic age and the development of permanent settlements and domestication of animals and plants, Mr. Knapp begins to focus on various historical regions that contributed to our civilization, beginning with Mesopotamia, then Egypt, the Levant, and the Aegean, which together constitute Western Asia.

Bernard Knapp defines Mesopotamia as that land which encompasses modern Syria and Iraq that lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates, which historians named the Fertile Crescent, insofar as it is where agriculture flourished and irrigation was invented due to unpredictable rainfall. He maintains that during the spread of agriculture from the Taurus-Zagros foothills to Northern Mesopotamia, three distinct cultures emerged: the Hassuna, (around 6000-5000 B.C.) the Samarra, (about 5500-5000 B.C.) and the Halaf, (about 5500-4800 B.C.) Although agriculture was the primary source of their economies, they still engaged in hunting. These cultures shared the origins of the early Mesopotamians, contributing to the development of the first mud-brick buildings, temples, crude weapons, tools, pottery, and other technological advances and organizational skills. Most of the early settlements of Mesopotamia were established along the two rivers, the same as the early Egyptian cultures developing along the Nile, except that the Nile served as a unifying force, whereas the Tigris and the Euphrates somewhat contributed to the destabilization of early Mesopotamian cultures,

forcing them to forge independent history of one another due to the unpredictability of the Tigris and the Euphrates. These two rivers were prone to flooding, but the Nile's stability contributed to the permanence of the Egyptian settlements and cultures, and a very stable agricultural industry. Both Syria-Palestine and Anatolia lacked rivers as magnetic as the Tigris and the Euphrates, or as stabilizing and unifying as the Nile, which is most likely why the Levant population moved toward the coastal areas. The Anatolians, like the Levant people, did not depend on their rivers or on irrigation, due to ample rainfall. It seems that many features of the first Mesopotamian cultures were not only inherited by succession, but transferred to the Levant, Anatolia, and Egypt. Even the concept of temple building, Gods, and the religious beliefs of the Mesopotamians transferred to other cultures through contact and trade. Similarly, writing began in Mesopotamia and spread to all the other regions in the same manner.

Urbanization came to all these regional cultures in the same way. As the settlers became sedentary agriculturalists, establishing temples and priestly culture by which to sustain their rituals, ceremonies, and food distribution, these temple compounds became important facilitators of urban centers. This centralization and organization needed an accounting system, hence writing was invented to keep records of all sorts of inventory stored in the temple compounds.

In response to the cultural complexities of these ancient societies, writing was simplified and made easier and more accessible, so that by the end of the fourth millennium B. C. the prehistoric societies of Mesopotamia and Egypt had transitioned to historic eras, which is how we came to possess recorded inscriptions of these ancient cultures.

With the advent of the Sumero-Akkadian ruling dynasties, in the latter half of the third millennium B. C., the characteristic of the Mesopotamian political structure had shifted from localized city-state rule to territorial or federalized nation-state rule. But this back

and forth alternation between decentralization and centralization would be repeated throughout Mesopotamian history. In later periods however, centralization and territorial expansion led to a concentration of political powers within a single ruling city-state. This trend reached its peak under the Assyrians and the Persians and this in turn led to the formation of empires.

Early dynastic Sumer was a loose-knit collection of territorially small city-states, whose association with one another ranged from vassalage to equality, but never unity. The last member of the ruling dynasty at Lagash had introduced legislation intended to restore the balance between the wealthy and the poor, and to shore up the authority of the temple, which by now was linked to secular authority, but in fact, when Sargon of Akkad usurped the Sumerian kingship and installed himself king of Sumer, he had to be careful not to offend the priests or the citizens of Sumer, who were immersed in deeply-held religious ideologies and social and political positions. Sargon of Akkad reigns for 56 years and is succeeded by his sons, Rimush and Manishtushu, both of which inherit their father's political problems of internal rebellions and palace revolts. Sargon's grandson, Naramsin, (2250-2220) brings the Akkadian empire to its greatest height.

Naramsin's victory stele celebrates his defeat of some of the many Zagros mountain tribes which typifies the repeated invasion of the Mesopotamian plain and the growing vulnerability of the Akkadian state. Shortly after Naramsin and his successor's death, the Akkadian rule ceased to exist, but by this time, Sumerian renaissance replaced the Akkadian language.

Pressure from Amorites in the northwest and the Hurrians in the north and northeast contributed to the decline of Ur's power and dominion. Although the political and

administrative structure shifted to the rule of the city-state once more, Sumerian cultural practices persisted into the new era. The cuneiform script continued to be used and Akkadian became the language of the land. Ziqqurats continued to house the Mesopotamian gods and became permanent fixtures in the people's lives. Each city-state was protected by its own deity, and the concept of a master-servant relationship between the divine and the human fostered individualism of all Mesopotamian city-states, and forever.

It is interesting to learn how many tribes invaded Mesopotamia and usurped power to establish their own rule and that of their heirs, some of them ruling Mesopotamia for hundreds of years, and all of them adopting the Sumero-Akkadian culture and language in order to legitimize their power. It seems that each tribe contributed to the intricacy that wove the Mesopotamian fabric.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the pharaohs came to be divine, and their rule absolute and eternal. The Egyptian religious system was nearly identical to the Mesopotamian one to the extent that each city-state had its own patron God. Local Gods gained prominence and made it to statehood, and depending on the political climate and which Pharaoh was in power at the time, Ptah would replace Re, and some pharaohs would even invent their own Gods.

Egypt's isolation did not last long, luring the nation into trade and commerce with other countries, and it was this interaction that eventually made Egypt susceptible to invasion, war, rebellion, uprising, and all the other elements that an empire must contend with. Just like the Dynasty of Ur, the Akkadian dynasty, the Babylonian dynasty, and the Assyrian empire, Egyptian monarchs were constantly facing palace uprisings, treacherous betrayals from within, and invasion from neighboring tribes.

Egypt developed its own writing system out of the earlier hieroglyphs, which were different from the early Mesopotamian pictograph, but the author does not make it clear whether or not Egypt eventually adopted the Mesopotamian cuneiform, or even the Phoenician alphabet. down the line.

This book is a good general reference tool for beginner historians, to be used to understand how all the various Mesopotamian, Persian, and Egyptian dynasties played out their drama, and how civilization actually began, but the book has many weaknesses. For example, the book does not address how the Aramaic language was adopted by the ancient Near East, and in what time period it became the Lingua Franca. Moreover, if the author is going to define Mesopotamia as that area which encompasses Syria and Iraq, then he should have discussed the Arameans and their rise to power in more detail, to show how these pastoralists became so influential to the extent their language and culture became dominant in the Middle East.

The author's discussion of the Sea People, (The Greeks, the Phoenicians, and the Aegean culture) in relation to the Middle East is a very interesting framework which shows how invaluable these trading posts and shipping ports became to ancient Western Asia and the ways in which these people contributed to the overall development of those regions, especially the Levant. It is simply remarkable to know that it was sheer necessity that forced some of the various cultures to depend on one another for existence, and this book was instrumental in bringing that message to the reader.

Equally remarkable is how much ancient Western Asia has influenced our modern civilization and culture. Not only did Mesopotamia give religion to the world, but writing, language, libraries, scientific discoveries, astronomical knowledge, mathematical

calculations, technological advancements, agriculture and irrigation, laws, ethics and government was all invented in Mesopotamia. They had already solved the universal issue of time and space, using the hexagesimal system to divide months, weeks, hours, and minutes, and to establish a lunar calendar, leaving us to invent nothing but gadgets with which to simplify our increasingly complicated lives.