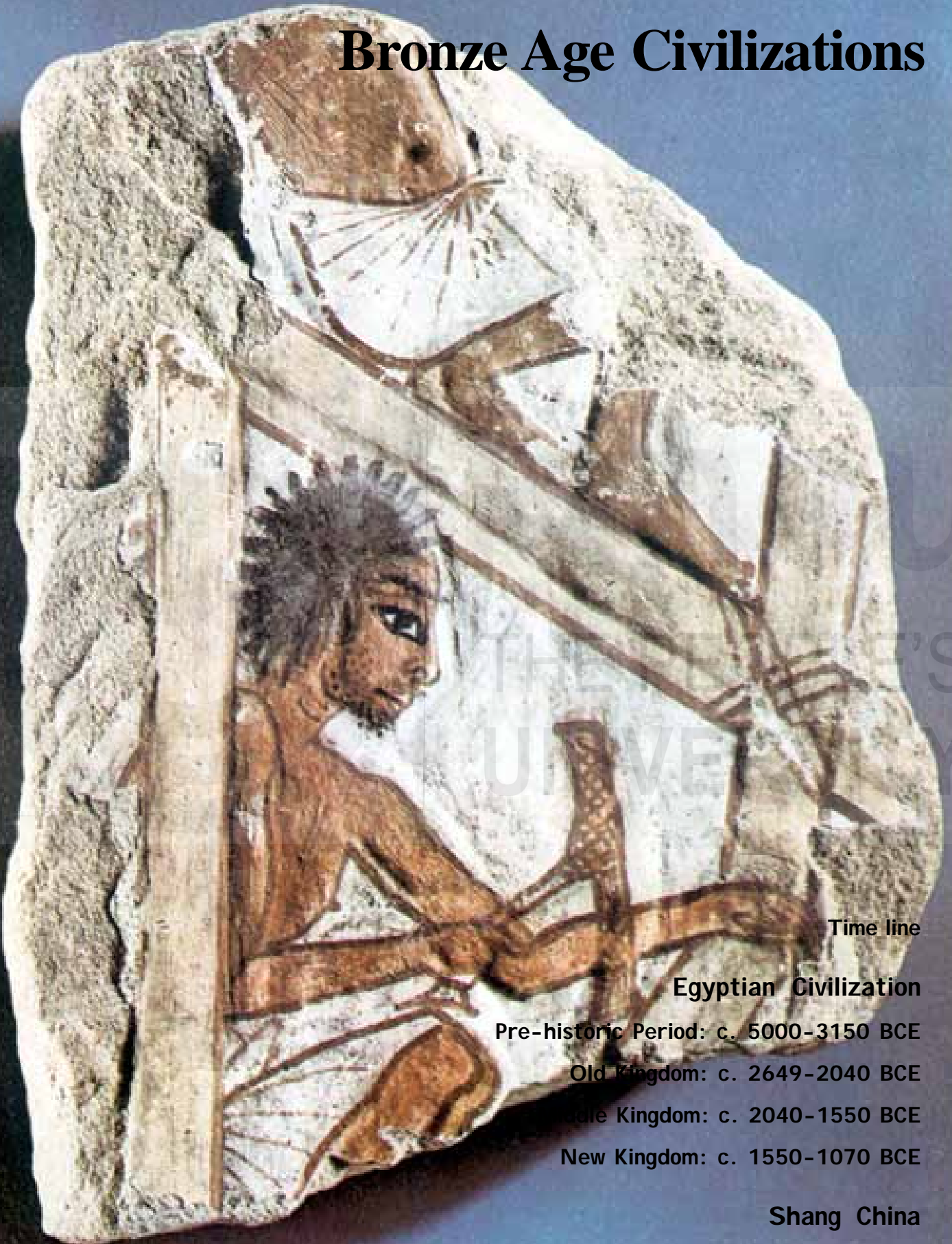


# Theme III

## Bronze Age Civilizations



Time line

### Egyptian Civilization

Pre-historic Period: c. 5000-3150 BCE

Old Kingdom: c. 2649-2040 BCE

Middle Kingdom: c. 2040-1550 BCE

New Kingdom: c. 1550-1070 BCE

### Shang China

Erlitou Culture: 1900-1500 BCE

Shang China: 1600-1046 BCE



**Photograph:** Egyptian Carpenter

**Credit:** n.e.r.g.a.l

**Source:** [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian\\_Carpenter.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_Carpenter.jpg)

---

## UNIT 7 BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATIONS: MAIN FEATURES\*

---

### Structure

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Sources for the Bronze Age
- 7.4 Space and Time in the Bronze Age
- 7.5 Metal in the Bronze Age
- 7.6 Urbanism
- 7.7 Surplus and the Appropriation of Labour
- 7.8 Writing
- 7.9 Long-Distance Contacts
- 7.10 Bronze Age Society
- 7.11 Summary
- 7.12 Key Words
- 7.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 7.14 Suggested Readings
- 7.15 Instructional Video Recommendations

---

### 7.1 OBJECTIVES

---

In this Unit, we will study a period that archaeologists and historians call the Bronze Age, a period that saw major developments in human history, in terms of settlement, technology, as well as social and economic complexity. Through this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain what is meant by the term ‘Bronze Age’;
- Relate the Bronze Age to the concept of civilization; and
- Identify the implications of the important social formation represented by the Bronze Age in the area of urbanization, writing and long-distance contacts.

---

### 7.2 INTRODUCTION

---

The Bronze Age comprises ‘an inordinately short period’, in the words of V. Gordon Childe, in terms of human history, yet was immensely important for the development of society. Much of what we can recognize around us now, such as the cities we live in, or the crafts we practice, or technologies of transportation, or the fact that we use writing as a means of recording, originated roughly 5000 years ago. It was also a period that saw the culmination of technologies that had been introduced before the Bronze Age. Agriculture or animal breeding, for example, were the results of a roughly two thousand-years long experimentation of humans with domesticating plant and animal species. However, it was the increased levels of productivity in certain areas that were to eventually lead to more complex social structures.

---

\* Prof. Jaya Menon, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

We need to take cognizance of two terms: 'Bronze Age' and 'Civilization' in order to begin. Ostensibly, the term 'Bronze Age' implies an Age when humans used bronze to make their major tools. The implication here is of a sequence of materials' use when humans first used stone, followed by copper-bronze, and eventually made the shift to iron. While it may be true that bronze came to be used for making major tools, the real significance of the term 'Bronze Age' lies in its correlation with a particular social formation, marked by urbanism and state societies, in other words, of civilization.

The term 'Civilization' here is not used in the sense of being refined or sophisticated. This, according to Shereen Ratnagar, 'refers to a stage of social development, from one-room huts to the architecture of complex buildings, from oral traditions to literacy, from rural households to city life, and from reliance on stone to metals and stone' (Ratnagar, 2001:13). 'Civilization' also refers to geographical scale, to a number of groups using the same (1) writing system; (2) art codes; (3) metallurgy and (4) sets of craft techniques. Archaeologically, these similarities will manifest as regularities over a large geographical area. This combination of material regularities comprises what the archaeologists call 'cultures'. Cultures, in an archaeological sense, are similar categories of artefacts in assemblages found from a restricted geographical area and period of time. An example of a Bronze Age 'culture' in South Asia would be the Harappan civilization.

Bruce Trigger (2003), who undertook a comparative analysis of early civilizations, noted that 19<sup>th</sup> century discussions of civilization focused on writing as a key attribute, as it enabled recording and complex commercial transactions. However, subsequently, Gordon Childe (1950) preferred to spell out a list of ten attributes for early civilizations or urban societies. These comprised: (1) large dense population; (2) non-agricultural population supported through surpluses; (3) primary producers paying surpluses to a deity or a ruler; (4) monumental architecture; (5) a ruling class; (6) systems of recording; (7) the development of exact sciences; (8) monumental art; (9) long distance trade and; (10) resident specialist craft workers controlled by an elite. While, Gordon Childe's list can be recognized as a first step in understanding the concept of civilization, such kind of traits' list tend to produce contestations rather than agreements on categorizations of societies.

Trigger (2003: 44) notes: 'A more useful characterization of early civilizations must instead be framed in terms of the general sorts of social, economic, and political institutions and the associated types of knowledge and beliefs that were required for societies of that degree of complexity to function... Technology, settlement patterns, art, and architecture can be understood only in terms of the roles they played in materially supporting such institutions, facilitating social interaction, and promoting the ideological objectives of various segments of society.'

---

### **7.3 SOURCES FOR THE BRONZE AGE**

---

We get to know about the Bronze Age both from the available written records and the material remains of those societies. The Bronze Age is a period marked by the use of writing for various purposes. Thus, Mesopotamian writing is called '**cuneiform**', while '**hieroglyphs**' were the form that Egyptian writing took. While writing constituted a major material evidence, other forms of material or archaeological evidence comprise monuments, art, and a myriad range of objects of everyday use (such as pottery, ornaments, tools). One constraint regarding material remains revolves around their nature: whether a material is organic or inorganic. In most situations, organic materials (such as cloth, reeds, wood) do not survive, unlike inorganic materials like stone, metal, and

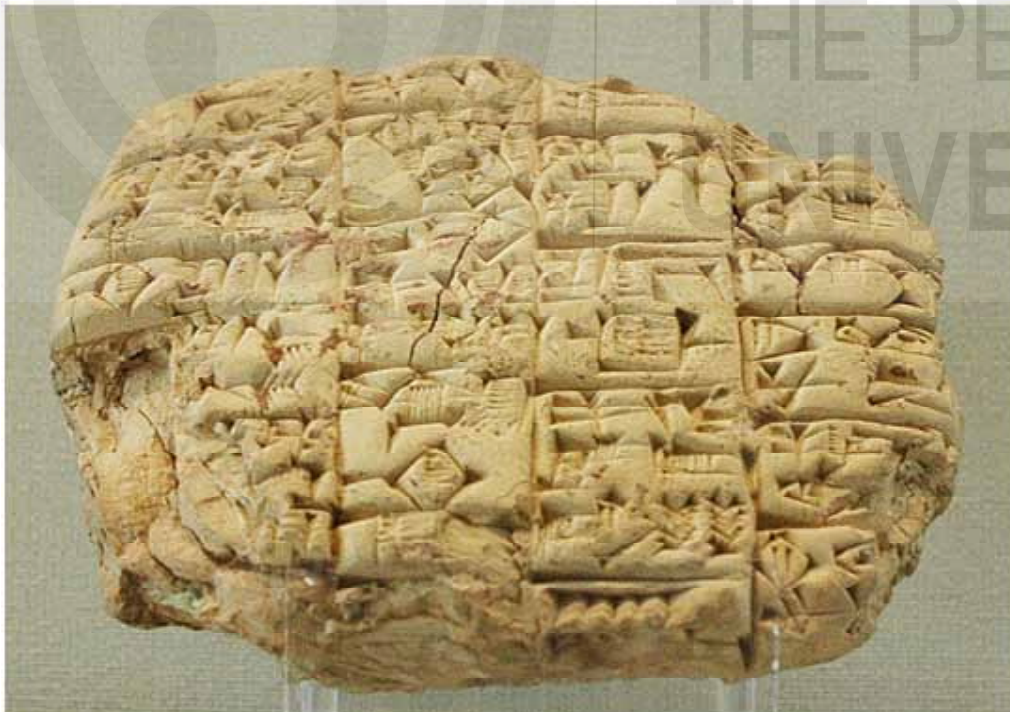
clay. However, in the extremely dry conditions of Egypt, organic materials such as wood, reeds and cloth, do survive, and hence inform us regarding the pervasive use of these materials in the everyday lives of people.



**Figure 7.1 : Egyptian Hieroglyphs from the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I (Pharaoh of the New Kingdom of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt) located in Valley of the Kings in Egypt.**

**Credit:** Jon Bodsworth, 2007

**Source:**[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Hieroglyphs\\_from\\_the\\_tomb\\_of\\_Seti\\_I.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Hieroglyphs_from_the_tomb_of_Seti_I.jpg)



**Figure 7.2 : Letter on a clay tablet sent by a high-priest named Luenna to the king of Lagash c. 2400 BCE which shows the earliest writing in cuneiform script from Mesopotamia.**

The tablet is currently displayed at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

**Credit:** Jastrow, 2005

**Source:**[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Letter\\_Luenna\\_Louvre\\_AO4238.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Letter_Luenna_Louvre_AO4238.jpg)



The histories of the civilizations of both Mesopotamia and Egypt have been based largely on the texts that survive, since writing has been deciphered in these regions. At the same time, the wealth of the Egyptian pyramids as well as the temples, palaces, and royal graves at certain Mesopotamian cities have for long consumed the bulk of archaeological attention. Both writing and wealth recovered from burials have informed us regarding the lives of the elite sections of society. It is only more recently that other sections of society are beginning to be understood through archaeological work on houses, and objects of everyday nature.

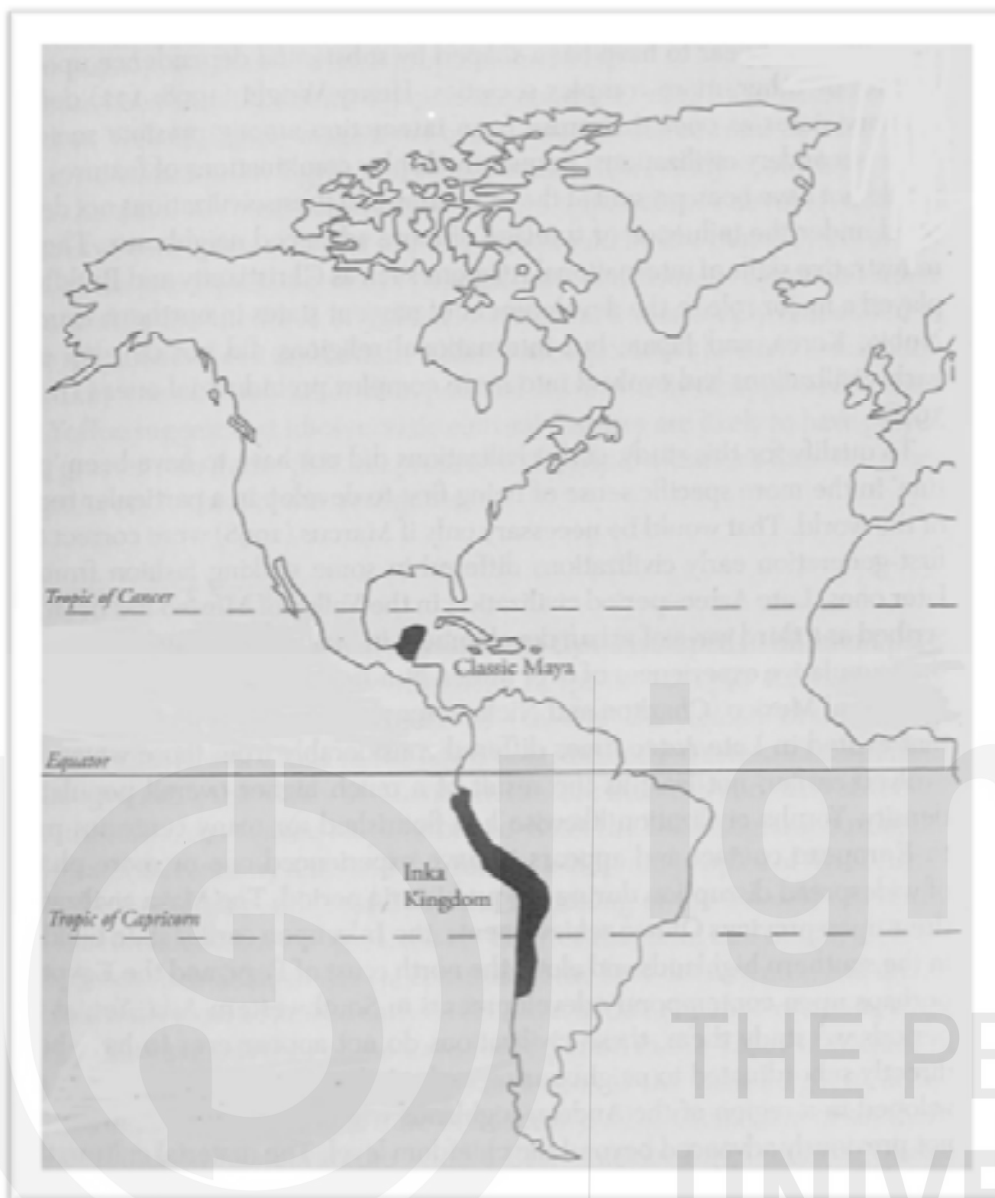
## **7.4 SPACE AND TIME IN THE BRONZE AGE**

The major Bronze Age civilizations are those found in the river valleys of the Euphrates (Mesopotamia), the Nile (Egyptian), the Indus (Harappan) and the Yellow River (Shang) (see **Map 7.1** for their location on Map). Unit 8 will deal with the Egyptian civilization, while the Shang civilization will form the focus of Unit 9. However, Bronze Age and civilization are two separate aspects. Not every part of the world went through a Bronze Age, yet if we were to look at other civilizations, there are several that come to mind, such as the Classic Maya (250-800 CE), the late Aztecs (early 16<sup>th</sup> century CE) and the Inkas (early 16<sup>th</sup> century CE) (though these were later in time than the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Harappan, and Shang) (see **Map 7.2** for their location on map). Civilizations are sometimes categorized as 'primary' and 'secondary'. Primary civilizations are those with distinct features seen for the first time (such as urbanism, writing, and socio-economic hierarchies among the people) that developed in parts of the Old World. Areas to which civilization is considered to have spread are called as secondary civilizations. Implied in the concept of secondary civilization is the idea of diffusion, or spread. However, in many regions earlier understood as areas of secondary civilizations, scholars are beginning to trace indigenous developments that negate the idea of diffusion.



**Map 7.1 : Locations of Early Bronze Age Civilizations**

Adapted from Bruce Trigger, 2003: 31



**Map 7.2 : Location of Classic Maya and Inka Kingdoms**

Adapted from Bruce Trigger, 2003: 30

The location of early civilizations in river valleys is not coincidental. Civilizations and early state structures relied on high productivity that could be achieved only in the fertile soil of the alluvial plains. These valleys were deficient in most other required raw materials, like good quality timber, metals, and stone.

The earliest civilizations in the Old World (Mesopotamia and Egypt) can be roughly dated to the fourth and third millennia BCE. In South Asia, the Harappan Bronze Age is dated to the second half of the third millennium BCE. The Shang civilization in China is still later and is dated to the second half of the second millennium BCE.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-1**

- 1) Explain the meaning of the term 'Bronze Age'. Outline its relation with the term 'Civilization'.

.....

.....

.....

- 2) List the major sources for understanding the Bronze Age.

- 3) Match the river in Column A with its associated civilization in Column B

<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>	
<b>River</b>		<b>Civilization</b>	
a)	Euphrates	i)	Mesopotamia
b)	Indus	ii)	Shang China
c)	Yellow River	iii)	Egyptian
d)	Nile	iv)	Harappan

## 7.5 METAL IN THE BRONZE AGE

The first use of copper as a new material goes back prior to the Bronze Age, to a period generally termed as 'chalcolithic', or a period when both copper and stone were used as the major materials for tools. Copper (or even bronze) was not necessarily more efficient than stone as the primary material for tools. The advantages of stone were its durability, strength, as well as the ease of obtaining it, and manufacturing tools from it. However, the primary advantage of copper and bronze was the ability to fashion more complex shapes from the material, through the technique of casting. This meant that the metal could be liquefied and poured, such that the liquid metal would take the shape of the receptacle into which it was poured. The primary material out of which the major tools were made in the Bronze Age was copper, and usually, its alloy, bronze. Bronze is an admixture of two metals, most usually copper and tin, but also copper and lead, as well as copper and arsenic. The addition of tin made the alloy harder than pure copper, which proved to be an advantage for tool production. The technique of alloying meant that metallurgical skills had developed to such an extent that two metals could be combined to produce a new material. Gordon Childe notes that metallurgical techniques required intimate knowledge of the radical transformation of the physical properties of the substance by heating. Due to the nature of these skills, he conceived of the 'smith' (metal worker) as being possibly one of the earliest specialists.

The dependence on tin-bronze in the Bronze Age had far-reaching implications. Copper is rare and tin even more so. Requirements of these two metals would have meant bringing them into the alluvial valleys which were the centres of the civilizations. It was more likely that crafters such as smiths would have travelled to the source of ores, smelted these and carried the metals back in a purified form for working. The craft would, thus, have necessarily entailed a certain amount of mobility.



Through the Bronze Age, metal as a raw material for tools did not totally supplant or replace stone. In South Asia, the Harappans continued to fashion blades out of a good quality **chert** available from the outcrops at Rohri along the Indus in Sind. Archaeologically, we also find stores of broken and folded copper tools and objects, possibly kept for recycling.

The advantage of copper and bronze being recycled was possible due to the nature of these materials that lent itself to be melted and cast into new forms. The stores of copper tools and objects also indicate the importance of metal to that society, as well as the probable rarity of the material; hence the need to preserve it for reuse.

---

## 7.6 URBANISM

---

One of the primary characteristics of the Bronze Age world was its association with urbanism. Gordon Childe saw the development of urbanism in terms of a revolution, which he termed the 'Urban Revolution'. We have seen earlier that he identified urbanism in terms of certain archaeological attributes. Even if one may not completely agree with a trait list of attributes for urbanism, it is clear that the locale of the Bronze Age was the city. Several cities, such as Ur and Uruk in Mesopotamia and Mohenjodaro and Harappa in South Asia, epitomize the Bronze Age city. We can identify some of Childe's traits in them: monumental architecture, writing, art, systems of measuring, agricultural surplus enabling growth of non-agricultural occupations and specialists, social inequities, and long-distance trade.

Urbanism depends on a secure agricultural base. We must note that the northern mountainous regions of the Fertile Crescent (the area stretching in an arc from the Levant to Iran) were those that witnessed the beginnings of farming and animal breeding, much earlier from between 10,000 and 8000 years ago. These were, however, not the areas where cities developed. People had to move into the vast alluvial plains of south Mesopotamia for urban development to take place. This was a gradual movement, first from the mountainous regions into the northern alluvium in the region of modern Baghdad. Further large-scale movement of population from the northern part of the alluvium to the southern alluvium began in the Early-Middle Uruk period (4000–3400 BCE) but a marked shift was apparent only in the Late Uruk period (3400–3200 BCE).

Robert Adams (1972), who has written on urban development in Mesopotamia, considers the growth of cities in the southern alluvium as a possible result of a combination of factors: of large numbers of villagers moving southwards as well as the settling down or sedenterization of people that had been nomadic earlier. Hence, this led to the burgeoning of populations in cities such as Uruk in the southern alluvium. This growth of population can be seen in the increase in the physical size of just one city: from a figure of 70 hectares in the Early Uruk period, Uruk grew to 100 hectares in the Late Uruk period, and finally to a massive 400 hectares in the Early Dynastic period (3000–2350 BCE). A similar movement of population can be seen in South Asia, from the hills of the Baluchistan region to the valley of Indus. Early Harappan settlements in the hilly flanks were necessarily much smaller, as were early forays and settlements in the valley, until people occupied the valley regions in the Mature Harappan period. Mohenjodaro eventually was to grow to more than 100 hectares in size (For details, see **Unit 7 in BHIC-101: History of India-I**). In both cases, large-scale increase in agricultural productivity could not take place in the smaller hill valleys but in the extensive plains of the great rivers.

Agricultural productivity was closely linked with the silt deposited by perennial rivers that annually and regularly flooded their banks. Agricultural productivity was also

dependent on the technology of ploughing. Mesopotamian agriculture was marked by the technological innovation of the seeder-plough, that enabled even planting, less wastage of seed, and resulted at the best of times in a very high seed:yield ratio of 1:76. It is very likely that the high agricultural productivity of Mesopotamian agriculture resulted in the hyper-urbanism that we see, for instance, in the case of Uruk reaching a size of 400 hectares in the beginning of the third millennium BCE.

Why was agricultural productivity so important for early Bronze Age societies? Much like at present, high agricultural productivity provided a sound economic base for the support of people performing other specialized, but non-agricultural tasks. A Bronze Age society that functioned in the absence of coined money could only do so because its productivity enabled non-agriculturists to subsist on it without participating in its production. Cities are primarily known for their secondary occupations, being locations of specialists such as scribes, merchants, crafters, and ritual practitioners. These occupations could flourish in cities due to the surplus coming from the primary producers also located within, and on the peripheries of the urban centres.

---

## **7.7 SURPLUS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF LABOUR**

---

Two of Childe's criteria for early cities, surplus and a ruling group, are significant. Surplus is not just the extra over and above the minimum required for subsistence, but implicit in surplus is a political authority that enables the accumulation of surplus. We can see the large public institutions in Mesopotamia (such as the temple, palace, and estates belonging to public officials or elite groups) being mechanisms through which surplus was produced and accumulated. Susan Pollock (1999: 118) describes these estates as an integral part of an *oikos*-based economy. Temples, palaces and estates are termed as '**oikoi**' (from the Greek word for 'households') or rather 'great households'. These were large socio-economic units with a dependent force, usually of non-kin, personnel in managerial positions, along with flocks of animals, pastures, fields, orchards, storage facilities, and artisans' workshops. The *oikos* represented a shift away from an economy dependent on tribute from the community to one where the *oikos* had its own varied and large workforce.

Thus, the necessities (food, oil, cloth) produced by the *oikos* were used to sustain non-agricultural productive activities of the personnel located within the institutions, as well as those who came to work for these institutions. This cycle, of the redistribution of surplus by the state to non-agricultural specialists, was integral to the Bronze Age economy. It is through these distributions of surplus that we can visualize Bronze Age monumental architecture, such as the temples and palaces in Mesopotamia, the pyramids in Egypt, and the specialized architecture on the citadel mound at Mohenjodaro, being built. Not only that, Mesopotamian temple records inform us that scribes, potters, and other crafters, herders, and merchants worked for and were located within the temple. Workforces were highly specialized and terms of service varied from part-time and contractual, to permanent labour obligations.

Barry Kemp (1991) explains, in the context of Egypt, that temple staff was divided into groups that probably worked at different times, with each subdivision serving for one month out of ten. The rest of the time they worked at agriculture and other tasks in their villages, but gave their labour to the temple for the prestige involved and were also compensated in kind, in the form of food and drink. '...(T)he practical consequence was a massive sharing out of jobs by the state. The number of employees required was multiplied by many times, hugely increasing the numbers of people receiving partial

support from the state. Because the system was only part-time, the system itself was not clogged by the presence of unnecessary personnel' (Kemp, 1991: 113). What we are seeing here is a massive appropriation of labour by the institutions of rituals and state. Thus, the Bronze Age economy, with its high level of specialization could only function in the absence of money through such a system of labour appropriation.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) What were the advantages of the use of copper and bronze over stone?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What is Urbanism? Describe three important features of urban cultures.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What was the function of 'great households' in the Bronze Age economy?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) In the absence of money, how did the Bronze Age economy function?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## **7.8 WRITING**

---

The appropriation of labour and the maintenance of large institutions and estates made practices of recording necessary. Even though early societies would have had simple systems of counting, methods of recalling categories and recording when, where, and what kind of transactions took place would have necessitated more complex notational

systems. Writing developed in the Bronze Age, for keeping records of varying kinds by the large estates: of the outputs of fields; of numbers of animal herds; of raw materials being allocated for crafting; of the outputs of crafters; of raw materials being brought in by merchants, and so forth.

From an early use for recording purposes, the scope of writing seems to have enlarged to include myths, hymns, foundation stories, royal inscriptions, and eventually legal codes. It is unlikely that literacy was widespread, with a small section of society having the ability to read and write. We can assume that with this ability also came great power.

Writing took different forms in different Bronze Age societies. For example, in Mesopotamia, writing developed in a cuneiform script (see the box below for details). For the historian and the archaeologist, early forms of writing had to be deciphered as they were no longer in use. Objects made of stone and clay with writing on them present important historical information through what is written down. From these early written evidences, we get to know about earlier societies, their transactions, their social relationships, their rulers and gods, their customs and rituals, and the language(s) they spoke.

#### **Cuneiform Script**

- The earliest writing was found from levels of around 3200 BCE from the Eanna Temple precinct in the city of Uruk.
- Writing was primarily found on clay tablets that varied in size.
- Clay was useful as it was abundant in the alluvial environment and could be prepared easily into tablets (See **Figure 7.2**).
- The form that writing took is called ‘cuneiform’ or wedge-shaped writing, from the form of the letters.
- The wedge shape of the letters arose from the writing stylus (or pen) that was pressed into the wet clay to produce the signs.
- Cuneiform was used to write various languages such as Sumerian and Akkadian.
- The earliest uses of writing were for administrative purposes of recording transactions taking place within the large public institutions such as the temple and the palace.
- Writing was also used for preparing what are called ‘lexical lists’, lists of words of the same categories, for example, *The Standard List of Professions* records about 120 terms of various professions.
- From the mid-third millennium BCE, writing began to be also used for recording transfers of rights over land, houses, and slaves, as well as for royal inscriptions and literary texts.

(Source: J.N. Postgate, 1992)

## **7.9 LONG-DISTANCE CONTACTS**

The alluvial river valleys of Bronze Age civilizations were deficient in metals, wood, and most varieties of stone. The dependence on copper and tin and their rarity within the alluvial valleys meant that these metals had to be procured, often from considerable distances. The Bronze Age world was, thus, an expansive one. Frontiers were often in the form of physical features such as rivers or hill ranges, but were usually demarcated, maintained, and contested by states in different territories. Thus, required materials were brought in through various mechanisms. States organized expeditions to procure raw materials, such as the Egyptians in the Sinai for stones and metal. Mesopotamian temples requiring good quality timber for construction and ship-building, and semi-precious stones for decoration depended on rulers for organizing the inflow of these

materials. Some of this information is obtained through myths or stories. Thus, one story is about Enmerkar, the ruler of Uruk and his negotiations with the ruler of a land, called Aratta beyond the seven ranges of mountains, to get lapis lazuli, carnelian and other precious materials for decorating the temple of Inanna. Messengers go back and forth, and in time, a consignment of precious goods is exchanged for a donkey caravan of grain. An excerpt of the story reads as:

The lord then opened his main storehouse...the barley for the granary he measured out in full, adding (even) for the locust-tooth. After having loaded the pack donkeys – the reserve donkeys, having placed them at their sides – the king, the lord of broad wisdom, the Lord of Uruk, the Lord of Kulaba, dispatched them directly to Aratta. The people like ants out of their crevices, in their entirety were moving onto Aratta...After the emissary reached Aratta, the people of Aratta stepped up to wonder at the pack donkeys. In the courtyard of Aratta the emissary measured out in full the barley for the granary, adding (even) for the locust-tooth. As if from the rains of heaven and shining sun Aratta was filled with abundance. As when the gods reclined together on their couches, Aratta sated its hunger (cf. Postgate,1992).

Similarly, a myth about the semi-mythical king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, tells us about him going far north to the ‘Cedar Forest’ in present-day Lebanon, to obtain cedar trees for a temple. The heroic nature of the task – usually completed in six weeks – taking him only three days is typical of myths, but illustrates the procurement of raw materials through an expedition-like venture.

#### **Epic of Gilgamesh**

- Stephanie Dalley (1989) writes: ‘The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the longest and greatest literary composition written in cuneiform Akkadian. It narrates a heroic quest for fame and immortality, pursued by a man who has an enormous capacity for friendship, for endurance and adventure, for joy and sorrow, a man of strength and weakness...’
- The earliest written version is dated to about 2150 BCE, but, like many other stories, probably circulated in oral form in earlier periods.
- It is considered as an epic because it features the heroic exploits of a semi-historical and partly mythical figure with gods and goddesses on the margins playing various roles.
- Gilgamesh inherited divinity as two-thirds of his nature from his mother Ninsun, the goddess Lady Wild Cow.
- Gilgamesh is considered as a historical figure as his father has been named in the Sumerian King list as Lugalbanda, King of Uruk.
- The historicity of Gilgamesh, also may be read from the fact that Gilgamesh is claimed as the ancestor of rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur, suggests that versions of the epic circulated in different cities. The great king of Ur, Shulgi, ruling from 2150 – 2103 BCE took a keen interest in the stories of Gilgamesh. He claimed Ninsun as his mother, and that would have made Gilgamesh his brother.
- There were clearly many small stories that were woven together into an epic. One of these is Gilgamesh and Huwawa (or Humbaba), a monster who was guarding the Cedar Mountain, that the Sumerian and Akkadian versions place to the east in the Zagros Mountains and to the west in Lebanon respectively. These again indicate the many versions of the stories that must have been prevalent.
- The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has many facets to it: the motif of friendship (Gilgamesh and Enkidu), the search for materials (the expedition to the Cedar Mountain, an important source of the excellent timber), and the quest for immortality (Gilgamesh’s distress over Enkidu’s death).



**Figure 7.3 : Neo-Assyrian clay tablet (number 11) of the Epic of Gilgamesh with one of its story called the ‘Story of the Flood’.**

The tablet is also known as the ‘Flood Tablet’.

The tablet is currently preserved at the British Museum, London.

**Credit:** BabelStone, 2010

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7a/British\\_Museum\\_Flood\\_Tablet.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7a/British_Museum_Flood_Tablet.jpg)

Mesopotamian cuneiform records inform us of contacts with far-flung areas, such as Dilmun (identified with the Island of Bahrain), Magan (identified with Oman), and Meluhha (associated by most scholars with the Harappan region). These records tell us about the kinds of materials that were coming into Mesopotamia, such as copper, semi-precious stones, diorite, as also manufactured items. In the Bronze Age, many of these materials that travelled across borders seem to have been in the nature of luxuries or for consumption by the large institutions within the cities.

Such long-distance contacts suggest the movement of more than just goods. It is quite possible that with people also travelled ideas, technologies, myths, languages, and customs.

---

## **7.10 BRONZE AGE SOCIETY**

---

Louis Wirth (1938) defines the city in social terms, as a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement occupied by socially heterogeneous individuals. We must remember



that people often in-migrate and come to live within a city. Looking at Adams' theory of urbanization in Mesopotamia, we can recognize heterogeneity in the cities. Cities in the southern alluvium were places to which people migrated and we see that a large-scale movement of villagers and people who were formerly nomadic were beginning to settle in the cities. People gravitated to these early cities for various reasons, as we have discussed in the previous section. This would have led to a situation where not everyone knew each other, and people and communities were different. What city dwellers were probably confronted with was anonymity, relationships between strangers, who came face to face with each other in the confines of the city.

Trigger (2003: 44) points out that 'the basic principle governing social relations was not kinship but a hierarchy of social divisions that cut horizontally across societies and were unequal in power, wealth, and social prestige.' Whether these hierarchies represented classes is not so clear. However, there does appear to be a strong correlation between wealth, power, and prestige in these societies. We know there were individuals and families that had political power, as also those occupying ritual roles, with both categories exhibiting high status and wealth. It is also likely that those who worked for the large institutions, such as the temple and the palace, on a permanent basis would have immense power and prestige, as well as access to wealth.

The question arises regarding the source of wealth: was wealth seen in terms of land and its ownership? While land may have been under the control of communities probably linked through kinship, it does also seem that higher-ranking individuals may have begun to obtain access to larger plots of land. In contrast, several individuals may not have had any access to land but they participated in the economy through their labour. The latter were often dependent members of an oikos. Yet other completely dependent and low status individuals may have been prisoners of war, particularly women and children.

Despite the social hierarchies, what marks Bronze Age societies are the enduring vestiges of kinship. We have seen above that kin-based communities survived in the context of landholding. Early Mesopotamian societies followed the practice of collective ownership which was probably practical as individual ownership would have led to increasing fragmentation of cultivable land. Joint control of land also meant that the best lands (for example, those closest to the rivers or irrigation channels) would be rotated and not always be farmed by the same families. In Egypt, communities of people came to offer labour, for short periods, on large construction projects for the state, such as building the pyramids. It is quite likely that the state made arrangements for their stay, and food and drink was provided through daily allotments of rations.

Bronze Age societies were also strongly influenced by religion. Bruce Trigger (2003: 409) points out that 'the Egyptians had no word for "religion". Religion was inseparable from daily life... All aspects of state activity, everyday life, and material culture in ancient Egypt were coloured by religious beliefs and symbolism.' The importance of religion can be seen in the emphasis on prophecies, beliefs in numerous deities and, the central locations of temples dedicated to a city's presiding deity. Temples were also the heart of a city and the lives of city dwellers largely revolved around the temples. There seems to have been a belief in multiple deities, with each city having its patron deity who could be a god or a goddess, but also temples devoted to other deities. Much significance was attached to temples and materials for the building and construction of places of worship were often procured from great distances.

Large temples in Mesopotamia were institutions in their own right, as we have seen above. It is quite possible that power was concentrated in the hands of temples and their personnel, with deities perceived as the owners of all lands and fields and offerings

including grain, curds, fish and other food items being made to them. Temples, thus, would have served as reservoirs of food for the community. By the mid-third millennium, the authority of the temples was however tempered by the rise of kingship in the Mesopotamian city states. As it is said, 'Kingship came down from Heaven.' Power that had earlier been in the hands of individuals and families who had sacred as well as secular authority was now bifurcated. Endemic warfare between city states, and the rise of gifted war-leaders are some of the factors that led to the emergence of secular power centres.

We can also find the king playing a ritual commemorative role on certain occasions, such as initiating the building of a temple, or at the beginning and end of the cropping seasons, at times of sowing and harvesting. These are vestiges of an earlier time in antiquity, when the same person performed both secular and ritual roles, with a gradual divergence, over time, of these roles into separate personnel. The king was, in all likelihood, seen as the personification of God on earth.

Apart from the religious inclination, one of the important social rituals is that of death. This can be investigated through archaeology, as in the Bronze Age people followed the practice of burying the dead. Burial practices are useful not only in understanding aspects of ritual but also show how social hierarchies played out. The pyramids in Egypt, for instance, reflect ritual spaces where the upper sections of society were buried as contrasted with the simple pits in which commoners wrapped in shrouds were buried (For details, see Unit 8 of this Course). The construction of the pyramids and the wealth they contained are also illustrative of immense means at the disposal of the upper sections of society, wealth that could be disposed of with the dead. The royal cemetery at Ur in Mesopotamia too, reflects a similar massive incarceration of wealth with the dead.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-3**

- 1) Discuss the factors that necessitated the development of writing.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Name the script of ancient Mesopotamia. Describe how it was written.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Was the Bronze Age economy self-sufficient? How did it meet its metal requirements?

.....

.....

- 4) Discuss the role of temples in Ancient Mesopotamia.

---

## 7.11 SUMMARY

---

The Bronze Age world was, thus, a complex one, with diverse populations in many cases located within urban centres. This was a world that interestingly also illustrated the significance of kin ties among its people, even while these populations came face to face with each other in anonymous situations in urban spaces. The dependence on copper and tin, as well as other required raw materials necessitated wide-ranging interactions across different regions and diverse communities. The Bronze Age world was an expansive one, far more than its predecessors or its successors. As a social formation, the Bronze Age is thus important for its emphasis on urbanism, far-flung contacts, social heterogeneity, archaic political structures, specialized economies, and civilizational nature.

---

## 7.12 KEY WORDS

---

<b>Chert</b>	: a fine grained sedimentary rock composed of materials such as microcrystalline or cryptocrystalline silica.
<b>Cuneiform</b>	: writing in the form of wedge-shaped signs formed by tools made from the cut ends of reeds. Cuneiform script was one of the earliest systems of writing, invented by the Sumerians.
<b>Hieroglyphs</b>	: a character of the ancient Egyptian writing system. It was a stylized picture of an object representing a word, syllable, or sound.
<b>Oikoi</b>	: an ancient Greek word encompassing three related but distinct concepts: the family, the family property, and the house.
<b>Polytheistic</b>	: belief in more than one God.

---

## 7.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

---

### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 7.2

- 2) See Section 7.3
- 3) a (i); b (iv); c(ii); d(iii)

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) The ability to fashion more complex shapes, beneficial in tool production, possible emergence of specialised smiths, mobility. For details, see Section 7.5
- 2) Section 7.6
- 3) Section 7.7
- 4) Discuss appropriation of labour. See Section 7.7

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-3**

- 1) For keeping records of varying kinds by the large estates. List the various elements noted in the initial records. See Section 7.8
- 2) See the Box in Section 7.8
- 3) No, the Bronze Age economy was not self-sufficient. In the answer, discuss long-distance trade. See Section 7.9
- 4) Section 7.10

---

## **7.14 SUGGESTED READINGS**

---

Adams, Robert McCormick.1972. 'Patterns of urbanization in early southern Mesopotamia', in P.J. Ucko, R. Tringham and G.W. Dimbleby, eds., *Man, Settlement and Urbanism*, London: Duckworth. 735-749.

Childe, V.G. 1930. *The Bronze Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Childe, V.G. 1950. 'The Urban Revolution'. *The Town Planning Review*. 21 (1): 3-17.

Childe, V. Gordon.1957. 'The Bronze Age'. *Past and Present*. 12 (November): 2-15

Dalley, Stephanie. 1989. *Myths from Mesopotamia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kemp, Barry. 1991. *Ancient Egypt*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pollock, Susan. 1999. *Ancient Mesopotamia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Postgate, J.N.1992. *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ratnagar, S. 2001. *Understanding Harappa Civilization in the Greater Indus Valley*. New Delhi: Tulika.

Trigger, Bruce G. 2003. *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wirth, L.,1938. 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'. *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1): 1-24.

PDF:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/503771.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aa01af96041a8c040f1a2a8a8c8b5fbb3>

---

## 7.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

---

**Bronze Age  
Civilizations:  
Main Features**

### **Bronze Age Miniseries Part 1-3**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt1aWllpChs> (Part 1)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLhJc3gS-BQ> (Part 2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvH2q0q4iDs> (Part 3)

### **Bronze Age Collapse: National Geographic Documentary, 2010**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6\\_VGLy2gKM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6_VGLy2gKM)



---

## UNIT 8 EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION\*

---

### Structure

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Introduction
- 8.3 Pre-Dynastic Egypt
- 8.4 The Rule of the Dynasties
- 8.5 Kingship and State
  - 8.5.1 Administrative Units
  - 8.5.2 Justice
  - 8.5.3 Military and Warfare
- 8.6 Society
- 8.7 Economy
- 8.8 Religion and Temples
- 8.9 Settlements and Architecture
- 8.10 Decline of Egypt
- 8.11 Summary
- 8.12 Key Words
- 8.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 8.14 Suggested Readings
- 8.15 Instructional Video Recommendations

---

### 8.1 OBJECTIVES

---

In this Unit, we will study the Egyptian Civilization. After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the sources for the study of Egyptian civilization;
- Explain the factors that led to the rise of this civilization;
- Identify the social, economic, legal and religious structure of this civilization; and
- Analyze the causes for the decline of the Egyptian civilization.

---

### 8.2 INTRODUCTION

---

The fertile lands of the Nile helped in the origin and growth of the Egyptian Civilization. Herodotus has termed Egypt as 'the gift of Nile'. However, the Nile civilization was not the first civilization of Egypt. Settlements and human movements were recorded much before the rise of the Egyptian civilization. The Badarian graves form a major source for documenting the history of the pre-dynastic age. The Egyptian history before the Hellenistic (Ptolemaic) period c. 323-31 BCE is divided into dynasties with the prehistoric period c. 5000-3150 BCE mostly called 'pre-dynastic' period. The great civilization as we know, developed on the banks of the river Nile. The riverine regions provided settlements with sources of food, resources and economic prosperity. The unification of the Upper and Lower Valley under the leadership of Pharaoh Menes in the early



dynastic period led to the development of the great civilization. The Egyptian Civilization can be divided into three historical periods — the Old Kingdom (c. 2649-2040 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1550 BCE) and the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1070 BCE) (Kennet, 2008: 5-6).

### 8.3 PRE-DYNASTIC EGYPT

Before the advent of agriculture, Egyptians lived a peripatetic life based on the collection of seasonal resources. These resources were collected in storage bins which according to archaeologists sowed the seeds of the future Egyptian civilization. The storage bins first discovered in 1920s could have held 800 weights of cereals, mixed mostly of wild seed, **emmer wheat** and two and six-rowed barley, crops that with a low yield would have required two to three acres of land to fill a single bin. The seeds were mostly planted in October and November before the onset of the winter and they ripened during the following months of growth and maturation.

The lack of evidence from the pre-dynastic period fails to give a complete picture of the period. The graves discovered from Lower Egyptian sites indicate an egalitarian society based on family units. In Lower Egyptian sites social uniformity is not displayed. The small village of Merimde (c.4300-3800 BCE) mostly consisted of small family units engaged in farming, while the occupants of Fayum A (c.4600-c.4000) mostly participated in hunting and gathering.

Unlike the Lower Egyptian belt, the Upper Egyptian belt indicates social hierarchies as early as Badarian period (4500-3800 BCE). The Badarian graves show variation in their size and wealth indicating that different levels of status were accorded to the deceased (Wilkinson, 1999: 23, 25). Burial practices often reflect aspects of society and according to the graves discovered, certain individuals enjoyed higher positions and had more access to wealth and resources than the others.

As Egypt evolved towards statehood (approximately during the Early Dynastic Period, i.e. c. 3100-2686 BCE), social differences and hierarchies became more prominent in the mortuary evidence. The elites, for instance, were distinguished with enormous and architecturally ornamented graves containing large quantities of grave goods including pottery, metal tools, weapons and personal goods. By the end of the pre-dynastic era, local elites were able to monopolize the economic resources. The construction of massive tombs indicates the presence of enormous resources both in terms of labour and finances. The elites had the power to obtain goods through long distance trade and to employ skilled craftsmen in the



**Figure 8.1 : Ushabti Figurine from Ancient Egyptian Tomb, circa 1260 BCE.**

This dark gray stone ushabti, belonged to Amen-em-ipet, the Chief of the Doorkeepers.

**Credit:** Henry Walters, 1923

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Egyptian\\_-\\_Ushabti\\_Figure\\_of\\_Amen-em-ipet\\_-\\_Walters\\_22177.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Egyptian_-_Ushabti_Figure_of_Amen-em-ipet_-_Walters_22177.jpg)

construction of tombs and graves. The pre-dynastic era bore the seeds of the Egyptian state with its social differences, distribution of wealth and division of labour. The signs of hierarchies were already there.

---

## 8.4 THE RULE OF THE DYNASTIES

---

Unlike many ancient societies, Old dynasty left behind historical and archaeological sources. The historical sources especially those authored by the Greek historians and Manetho (an Egyptian priest) claim that the first Kings of Egypt had divine origins. Like many other early civilizations and ancient Kingdoms, the early Egyptian Kings called themselves 'Shemsu' or servants of the Gods. Menes is regarded as the first King of the First Dynasty (c. 2180-2040 BCE). The contemporary writings trace his origins from the 'semi-divine spirits'. They, in turn, had been preceded by the Creator 'Re' (Frankfort, 1978:15).

Manetho's writings serve as one of the most important frameworks for studying Egyptians Kings and Kingship. He described thirty dynasties of Kings from the unification of Egypt by Menes (c.3100/3000 BCE) to that of the conquest of Egypt by Alexander (332 BCE). The political and cultural impact of rule of Menes were enormous. Menes had played a crucial role in unifying Egypt. The rise of the First Dynasty brought along introduction of writing, by the technological advance of the large-scale use of metal tools. The introduction of metal tools like chisel helped in writing on stones and pyramids. This brought in permanent documentation as the previous form of writing on **papyrus** (form of a paper made from the stem of a water plant) did not have a durable life. The Egyptian kingship emerged from the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. The unification helped in the better utilization of resources and manpower required for the rise of the Egyptian Civilization.

The King's name in the first three dynasties was not ornamental, and in visual depictions, the King's name was surrounded within a façade (*serekh*) which was identified by the Horus, son of Goddess Osiris. The first two dynasties can be studied and differentiated to some extent from the subsequent period by the form and place of local burials (*mastaba* tombs at Abydos). The third dynasty witnessed the first step towards the construction of royal tombs in the form of pyramids and with their introduction, the royal cemetery site of earlier dynasties at Abydos ceased to be a burial ground. The first three dynasties are often known as the foundation stone of the Egyptian Civilization and are often also known as the Early Dynasty.

These were succeeded by the Old Kingdom, which includes Dynasties IV (c. 2613-2494 BCE) to Dynasties VIII (c. 2173-2160 BCE).<sup>1</sup> From the Fourth Dynasty onwards, the royal names became more elaborate and the Kings' name was encircled in a 'cartouche' whose oval shape symbolizes everything encircled by the sun. Chaos and confusion followed for next hundred years in the state system and is often known as the 'First Intermediate Period'. It however ended by paving way for a strong central authority from the Ninth Dynasty (c.2160-2130 BCE). The phase between the Eleventh Dynasty to early Thirteenth Dynasty (c. 1803-1649 BCE) is known as the period of the Middle Kingdom. Earlier historians and archaeologists believed that between the first and the Middle dynasties, structural changes had occurred in the Egyptian civilization. This notion has changed vastly with the current discoveries and studies. Historians now believe that although there were definite changes in the Egyptian society and economy with the introduction of new technologies and complexity of administration in the period of the Middle Kingdom, but signs of continuity from the Early to the Middle dynasties

---

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars also include Dynasty III in the Old Kingdom.



**Figure 8.2 : Mastaba Tomb**  
Credit: Jon Bodsworth, 2007

**Source:** <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ab/Mastaba-faraoun-3.jpg>

can also be seen especially in the concept of *Maat*, kingship and religious beliefs which are detailed later in the Unit.

The Middle Kingdom was followed by the 'Second Intermediate Period' (XIII to XVII Dynasty) lasting for almost two hundred years. This period saw the rule of Kings of foreign origins and was called the period of 'Hyksos' dynasty. The next five centuries formed the New Kingdom (XVIII to XX dynasties) followed by the 'Third Intermediate Period' (XXI to XXV Dynasty) for four hundred years. This period was followed by the rule of the Dynasty of Saïtes (XXVI Dynasty). In 525 BCE Egypt was conquered by the Persians and became a part of the Achaemenid empire. Egypt was conquered by Alexander of Macedonia in 332 BCE.

Period	Dynasties	Dates
Pre-Dynastic Period	—	c.5000-3100 BCE
Early Dynasty	I-II	c. 3100-c.2686 BCE
Old or Early Kingdom	III-VI VII-X	c.2686-c.2181 BCE
First Intermediate Period	late XI-early XIII	c.2180-c.2040 BCE
Middle Kingdom	Early XIII	c.2040-c.1730 BCE
Second Intermediate Period	XIII-XVII	c.1730-c.1550 BCE
New Kingdom	XVIII-XX	c.1550-c.1080 BCE
Third Intermediate Period	XXI-XXV	c.1080-c.664 BCE
Saite Period	XXVI	664-525 BCE
Late Period (including Persian domination)	XXVII-XXXI	525-332 BCE
Capture of Egypt by Alexander	—	332 BCE

**Source:** Kuhrt, 1995: 124

## 8.5 KINGSHIP AND STATE

The unification of Egypt formed the basis of the Egyptian civilization. In Egypt, there was no word for the state. Monarchy was embedded in the concept of divinity. The sacrosanct nature of the Egyptian monarchy symbolized both the King and his administration. As a God, the King of Egypt had absolute power over the land of the country and also its inhabitants. In the polytheistic society, it was important for the King to establish relationships with different deities. The term son of 'Re' (an Egyptian God) which was often used to designate the **Pharaoh** was meant to establish a relationship between the King and the God. Thus, the King is also identified with the falcon Horus and as the 'son of Osiris' or 'son of Isis'. The latter title was significant particularly during the First Dynasty as it helped the rulers to claim legitimacy.

The biological parents were not given great importance in the contemporary texts. The decision that who should become the successor to the throne was in the hands of the King. This could have led to factions in the court as well as the royal household. The King could not act arbitrarily but only according to *maat* or the right order. The concept of *maat* advocated stability and unchanged order of matters within the society and its culture where the Pharaoh was the representative of God. The *maat* was expected to be re-enacted with every new King (Manuelian & Scheide, 2015: 2).

### 8.5.1 Administrative Units

Egypt was divided into villages, smaller towns and royal estates. These were grouped into administrative units or *nomes* which were under the control of a local governor or *nomarch*. Upper Egypt was divided into 22 *nomes* and the Lower Egypt was divided into 19 *nomes* (Kuhrt, 1995: 151). The officials were appointed from the royal families who by virtue of their high birth were qualified as best suited for the specialized royal functions. They were believed to possess King's divine qualities to some extent (Morenz, 1960). Even the families of the previous Pharaohs were considered to be eligible for the post in the government. The royal family occupied the highest position. The burial ground of the highest officials of Early Dynasty at the city of Helwan comprises of more than 10,000 graves showing the vastness of early administration (Wilkinson, 1999: 96). The lower ranks of the Early Dynasty were open to the non-royal individuals.

The administration was governed by the members of the royal household. Government activity and the royal office was originally an expansion of the functions of the royal service. The most important official designations were that of the vizier or 'steward of the whole land' and 'counsellor of all orders of the King'. Men in charge of mining and foreign trade were called 'Treasurers of the God'. The post of vizier was considered to be the most important official post as the vizier had access to the Pharaoh and was instructed to give the King an audience in the morning and acted as his chief executive. Initially, the post was occupied by members of the royal family, but later commoners also became vizier. In the Old Kingdom, royal administration was based on the economic and fiscal offices. The fiscal offices were divided into granaries (*snwt/snwtj*) and treasury (*pr hd/prwy hd*). The important posts were that of state granary official, state treasurer, and overseer of the great courts of justice.

The officials were required to have certain level of literacy. In Early Dynasty, writing was used as a tool for political control and all administrators took upon the role of scribes. This had helped the early Egyptian Dynasty's supervision and control over the economy. Egypt witnessed a major change in statehood during the third and fourth dynasties of the Old Kingdom. The state became a complex machinery and the royal family was not able to manage all the components of the state alone. Power was thus

distributed to the non-royals who were given positions in the administration sometimes as high as that of vizier. The offices were not based on hereditary claims, and the posts, at least theoretically, depended on the performance of the official's public duties such as helping the poor and giving fair judgments.

The seals act as one of the most important evidence of the Egyptian Dynasties. The seals from the Early Dynasties however do not throw much light on the provincial administrations and mostly talk about the royals and the elites. These early archaeological pieces of evidence also do not throw light on the military and the political authorities. In the later period, the most commonly used seal type was *scarab*. Spiral motifs and titles of officials on these seals are characteristic of the Middle Kingdom. The inscriptions on such seals sometimes refer to places and deities. The *scarabs* often bore the royal names, particularly those from the Eleventh Dynasty to the Late Period. The names of the Hyksos dynasts had been largely deciphered from the *scarabs*.



**Figure 8.3 : Seal bearing the name of the Hyksos pharaoh Apophis**

**Credit:** Keith Schengili-Roberts, 2007

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a2/ScarabBearingNameOfApophis\\_MuseumOfFineArtsBoston.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a2/ScarabBearingNameOfApophis_MuseumOfFineArtsBoston.png)

### 8.5.2 Justice

The justice system of the Egyptian culture was rooted in religion. Legislative powers were vested in the Kings and he was responsible for making the *hp* or laws, *wd* or decrees and *tp-rd* or the regulations, and to ensure law and order in the country. There was no distinction between the executive officials and the judiciary. The concept of *maat* formed the core of the Egyptian justice system which was defined and guaranteed by the King. There were few codified laws in ancient Egypt as the Pharaoh was considered to be the highest judge and all the laws emanated from him. The judicial officials including the viziers, from the Fifth Dynasty, took charge of the legal matters and bore the title of 'priests of *maat*'. One of the most important duties of a vizier was thus fulfilling the role as the highest judge of Egypt. This initial incorporation of justice in religion remained throughout the Egyptian history and even the queens and officials were taken to vizier's office for a fair trial by a trusted official (Garcia, 2003: 10).

### 8.5.3 Military and Warfare

In ancient Egypt, the use of violence or warfare was dependent on the sanctions of the royalty. From the Middle Kingdom, the mastery of specialized weapons, the organizations of manpower, leadership and battle experience were basic features of any claims to the throne. The soldiers were sent out from their towns or *nomes* for state service to the Egyptian fortresses in Nubia, where the soldiers were controlled by the city administrators and the Guardsmen or retainers. The soldiers were known after their Egyptian hometowns. During the wars of the Second Intermediate Period, the Upper Egyptian governors and town commanders defended their territory by deploying local armed forces. The militia changed from this period onwards as professional soldiers were introduced in Egypt. The deployment of mercenaries and inducting the prisoners of war was however common throughout the Egyptian history (Gnirs, 2003: 640-642).



Facilitated by the increase in economic resources, the army and militia experienced an expansion during the New Kingdom.

**Check Your Progress Exercise-1**

- 1) How did the Pre-Dynastic era pave the way for the rise of the Egyptian Civilization?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) What were the different components of the administration in ancient Egypt?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Write a note on *Maat*.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Describe the Egyptian military structure.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## **8.6 SOCIETY**

---

The Egyptian society was based on the ideals of equal justice with the King being the epitome of judgment. Life for the commoners was hard in Egypt. It is not known for sure if the people were attached to the land and subjected to forceful recruitment for undertaking public works. The construction workers were however mostly paid in grains, barely sufficient for them to survive. Rarely do we come across evidence of monetary remuneration for labourers engaged in construction works.

The market scenes occasionally depicted in the inscriptions, give a picture of simple local market, where the items being exchanged were mostly food items and drinks, manufactured goods like the wooden headrests (used instead of pillows by the Egyptians), jewels, cloth, fish hooks and spindle-whorls. The presence of market for the exchange of necessary commodities indicates the circulation of exchanges apart from the royal grain system.



The earliest literature and philosophy were based on religion. A gradual introduction of secular literature occurred in the later phase. The Egyptian love poetry is one such genre. The evidence of stage play suggests the presence of drama. It is believed that masks of Gods were made as props used in the drama. Masks were also used by the priests while carrying on the religious ceremonies (Wolinski, 1987: 22).

Language though initially sufficed as elementary, became complex and the concept of grammar came into being. Like Egyptian literature, science also had its roots in religion. Natural death, for instance, was perceived as a message from God. Medical treatments were often associated with magic and myths. The profession of medicine was initially associated with priesthood and was often steeped in religious rituals. Like medical science, other branches of science were also associated with religion. Astronomical observations played an important part in the funeral rites, to create connection between the living and the dead.

#### **Writing System**

The first written objects in Egypt were painted or incised potsherds of about 3100 BCE. The writing was 'cursive' and recorded the names of chiefs or rulers, or deliveries of goods to their tombs/houses. Egyptian 'hieroglyphic' writing began a little later, on votive objects i.e. objects offered in fulfillment of a vow, deposited in temples, on the walls of the temples and tombs of chiefs and rulers, and on small ivory tags tied to objects deposited in tombs. It was used to make notations on highly symbolic reliefs depicting royal feats, on stone palettes, and ceremonial maces. At Hierakonpolis, the first capital of an inchoate Egyptian state, many inscribed objects were found in a cache of old things ritually buried in a temple. The signs of the second kind of writing were pictures, mainly of recognizable objects, but also the names of persons and deities. While the cursive writing, for humdrum record keeping, was written with a few strokes, the unique quality of Egyptian hieroglyphic or formal writing was its aesthetic property. Equipped with cakes of soot and red ochre, occasionally other colours as well, the scribe was an artist using reed pens, thin and thick brushes, and pointed erasers. Signs were closely spaced, and their forms standardized, living things having to be shown in profile, but horns and eyes frontally, and so on. In some cases, writing blends into what we would call relief or painting. Sometimes hieroglyphic writing occurred together with painting on a temple or tomb wall, as an adjunct to art. It is the cursive form that changed over time, whereas the formal and aesthetic hieroglyphic script, used concurrently, changed little.

**Source:** Shereen Ratnagar, 2017 (reprint), 'Writing and Artistic Expression', in **Block 2: Bronze Age Civilization, MHI-01: Ancient and Medieval Societies**, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Open University: 34-35.

## **8.7 ECONOMY**

The institution of the treasury was involved with goods like linen, wine and oil. The granary, on the other hand, acted as storage for grains. Local and private granaries and treasuries were also present. In the Old Kingdom, land taxation appears to be the most important source of revenue. Mining and quarrying projects also delivered mineral wealth to the central government. Contemporary evidence shows that the state took part actively in the mining activities of ancient Egypt. Wealth in third millennium BCE was not measured in money, as currency system was not introduced. The barter system was widely used as the medium of exchange. The economy was based on the exchange of foodstuffs, grains, cattle, bread, beer and linen (Warden, 2014: 233). The value of commodities was expressed in quantities of copper, silver or grain. The copper or *dbn or deben* which weighed .91 grams appeared to be a prominent mode of exchange in the New Kingdom. Silver appears only in the early years of Ramesses III's reign (c. 1187-56 BCE). However, grains were used to express the value of inexpensive objects like baskets. Copper was weighed as 1 *khar* (48 kg approx.) of grain.

The Egyptians grew staple food grains like the wheat and barley and commercial crops like flax and papyrus. Each year the flooding of the river Nile acted as a curse for the Egyptian farmers but also helped to restore the fertility of the soil. The farmers cultivated around 800 hectares with the help of irrigation. The earliest evidence of irrigation dates back to 3100 BCE. The Mesopotamian water lifting device known as the *shaduf* was used in Upper Egypt after 1500 BCE (Noaman & Quosy, 2017:18). This technology helped the cultivators to cultivate crops in the dry summer and helped in the expansion of agriculture. Planting of new seeds took place in October till March, after receding of the flood water. Irrigation was believed to be a sacred work and the major irrigational projects were state-sponsored. This helped in the expansion of agriculture beyond Nile valley. Irrigation work was supervised by local officials. The *nomes* (administrative units) developed as local irrigation units. Local labourers were employed to dredge channels, dug canals and ditches, build earthen dams, construct dike basins and to raise water with buckets (Hughes, 1992:17). Government officials tried to prevent the fluctuations of grain supplies in the country and regulate the supply of grains. In spite of state interventions, during the time of crop failures, the problems of flood and famine often hampered the agriculture of Egypt.

#### **Cultivation in Ancient Egypt**

The cultivation of wheat, barley, beans, gram and other winter crops required less efforts when compared with South Asia. For irrigation of the soil before planting, Egyptians had to pay attention to their local natural basins, making cuts in, or raising, their walls according to need, and guiding the flow of the flood from one place to another, so that the maximum area was inundated. Occasionally a natural basin needed to be subdivided with low mud walls, or the overflow channels deepened.

**Source: MHI-01, Block 2, Unit 6: 8.**



**Figure 8.4 : Egyptian Wall Painting from the period of New Kingdom depicting a farmer working with a *shaduf* from the tomb of Ipuy (located on the west bank of Nile)**

**Credit: Rogers Fund, 1930**

**Source:**[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Garden\\_Scene%2C\\_Tomb\\_of\\_Ipuy\\_MET\\_vs2973.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Garden_Scene%2C_Tomb_of_Ipuy_MET_vs2973.jpg)

Pre-Dynastic goods were found in Byblos on the coast of present day Lebanon. State played an important role in the trade and commerce of Egyptian Civilization. Trade above the village level was controlled by the state as early as the First Dynasty (Curtin, 1984: 71-74). The contemporary Egyptian records do not mention merchants as a separate entity before 2000 BCE, though it is widely believed that large scale trade was associated with the royal granaries and state officials. Egyptian trade with other parts of the eastern Mediterranean was normally under government control, but evidence of the presence of foreign merchants is also found.

Epigraphic evidence is found of the expeditions sent by the Egyptian rulers to the neighbouring areas to obtain commodities and goods either by acquisition or trade. Present day Lebanon and Egypt had a flourishing trading network. Lebanon supplied Egypt with its timber in exchange for the Egyptian crafts. Egyptian trade to the south was carried by the government expeditions from Nile to the Red Sea to present day Yemen. These official expeditions started from 2500 BCE and mainly dealt with luxury items like frankincense, ebony, myrrh and gold. There is evidence of the import of Syrian timber during the Pre-Dynastic Period. The Egyptian contact with the port town of Byblos of Levant is well documented. The Egyptians imported timber for coffins and to make boats and statues, as good quality wood was not available in Egypt. Regular expeditions were also sent to Ebla in North Syria and the turquoise mines in the Sinai desert (Kuhrt, 1995: 145). The presence of maritime trade and sea faring activities of the Egyptians are documented in their paintings of ships and boats. The Egyptian boats like the boats of the Mesopotamian and the Indus civilization had square sails and the plank boats were tied by reeds, though metals like bronze and copper would have also played some role.

A very interesting idea was forwarded by Richard L. Smith, who pointed out that the foreign trade under the royals in the early dynasties was based on the mechanism of gift exchange. In one evidence, the Pharaoh had sent the King of Babylon, gifts amounting to 26 pounds of gold, 6.5 pounds of silver, 18.5 pounds of bronze, textiles, more than 1000 stone vases filled with aromatic oils, 163 empty stone vases, finger rings, necklaces, mirrors, ivory boxes and other items. From the Kings of Babylon, the Egyptians received horses and chariots, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli and oil. Thus, the royal trade was essentially carried on through the medium of exchange of gifts (Smith, 2009: 48). Seidlmayer is of the view that Egypt became economically richer and culturally more complex. There was rise in prosperity and ordinary tombs became considerably larger and burials began to be provided with much better grave goods (Gee, 2015: 65).

---

## **8.8 RELIGION AND TEMPLES**

---

God was perceived as an individual, often associated with some attributes or positions and was defined and characterized by form and name. Like human beings, Gods were believed to have been created by a primordial God i.e. the initial or the first of all Gods and Goddesses. The Gods were not always immortal, and it was believed that the Moon God Thoth calculated the lifetime of Gods as well as of humankind.

The etymology of the names of the three most important Egyptian Gods – Re/Ra, Ptah and Osiris, are not yet certain. In the case of Re attempts have been made to interpret the name as ‘companion’, an illusion to the sun’s role as the companion of the moon. Ptah, on the other hand, is often connected to sculpture and Osiris as ‘seat of the eye’. Neith is the ‘Awful One’ and symbolizes the war Goddess, Isis obtained her name from ‘the throne’, Amun was the ‘Hidden One’ or the air God, who gained a lot of importance in Egyptian religion. The name Hathor is designated with the ‘house of Horus’ and



**Figure 8.5 : Depiction of Ancient Egyptian God Ra**

**Credit:** Jeff Dahl, 2007

**Source:** <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Re-Horakhty.svg>



**Figure 8.6 : Depiction of Ancient Egyptian God Osiris**

**Credit:** Jeff Dahl, 2007

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Standing\\_Osiris\\_edit1.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Standing_Osiris_edit1.svg)

Thoth as the messenger of the Gods and Atum or 'he who is the totality' is associated with intellect (Morenz, 1960: 23-24).

In Egypt, God was served by various philanthropic acts by the King such as building a temple, donating images or restoring or cleaning them. The land was often held by the temple and the state, and often there was an absence of division between the two. The Pharaohs often established new domains, often liquidating those of the predecessors. The lands of temples were often tilled on behalf of Pharaoh. For instance, the workmen of Deir el-Medina (an ancient Egyptian village) though employed by the King were paid by the temples (Jansen, 1975: 182). The control of the apportioning areas of the main temples was in the hands of the local state officials. Temples had granaries to ensure a steady supply of grain to the temples. The temple granaries supported a large number of priests who depended on the temples or tombs for subsistence (Teeter, 2011: 16-18, 36).

The priests had the responsibility of looking after the temples and images. The common people served God by way of honouring and glorifying Gods in festivals. The relationship between God and human beings was one of interdependence where gratitude and piety coexisted with hopeful expectations from God.

### **Priesthood**

According to the contemporary economic records, priesthood was a major institution in Egyptian society. During the Fifth Dynasty, the funerary cult of Neferirkare had between 250 to 300 priests associated with priesthood. Smaller temples like that of Anubis at Fayum and in Teudjoy, employed between 50 to 80 priests.

The rank of priest or *Ka* was an integral part of the Egyptian society and economy.

Initially the post of priests mostly belonged to the members of the royal family. However, as the administration became complex, a larger number of non-royal people were admitted to the ranks of priests. The rank was hereditary and often passed on within the family. There were various kinds of priesthood like that of *Khery Bebet* or Lector priest, *Sem* priests, *Hem Netcher* and the *Iwnmutef* Priests. The Lector priests were distinguished by their ability to read and their main duty was to recite specialized religious texts in both temple and mortuary rituals. In the Old Kingdom, the Lectors belonged to the royal household but by the Middle Kingdom, any person of knowledge could become a Lector priest. The Lector also played an important role in the administration. The God's father was associated with the daily offerings to God or the offering for the soul of the deceased. They were mostly related to the cult of Amun, Ptah and Min (associated with fertility and power). In New Kingdom, they were involved with the supply of food and other requirements to the temples. The title of *Sem* priests was prestigious and often attached to the sect of Anubis and Khnum. From the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty, *Sem* acted as the First Priest overseeing temple lands, priests and craftsmen. The *Hem Netcher* had great economic power, as he oversaw the materials used for the daily offering and often acted as the local governor. The lower ranks of *hem netcher* were responsible for duties within the sanctuary of the temple. The *Iwnmutef* priests were funerary priests who worked along with the *sem* and were associated with both private and royal mortuary cults. The King himself chose to be the First Priest. The priests were paid in kind from the offerings presented to the God or the royal and private statues in temples or tombs.

Most of the priests were also engaged with other professions like trade or as government officials. The combination of secular and sacred professions was present throughout the Egyptian civilization. For example, Harkhuf belonging to Sixth Dynasty was the overseer of foreigners, the seal-bearer of the King and a Lector priest. Similarly, a priest named Onurismose from Nineteenth Dynasty held the titles of God's Father and High Priest of Onuris as well as the royal scribe and scribe of the elite troops of the King. Nebnetcheru from XXII Dynasty was a priest of Amun in Karnak and also worked as the Chief of all the works on monuments.

The selection of the priest depended on the importance of a cult in a particular dynasty. Unlike the later historical period, ancient Egypt had no monastic organizations and the priests lived in the villages and had a familial life. Though they occupied a prominent position in society, the visual representations of the priests in the temple walls were less ornamental than the Kings. The priests started to be depicted in the temple walls from the Greco-Roman period and were mostly shown as part of a procession or enacting temple or funerary rites for the tomb owners.

---

## **8.9 SETTLEMENTS AND ARCHITECTURE**

---

The evidence for towns and settlements is less and rare. The cities like Hierakonpolis, Abydos, Elephantine and Edfu situated in south Egypt are important. The settlements were mostly small provincial towns. They were surrounded by a thick wall. Each town had a shrine which normally lay inside the walled area. However, the towns were not fortified by walls and the walls can only be seen in the frontier regions. The houses were closely built, and the population density was high. Important settlements were located in oases of the Libyan desert. These included Dakhla, Kharga, Bahriya and Farafra. These settlements were linked to the Nile valley. Excavations at Dakhla have revealed evidence of wall, pottery kilns, mud brick structures and cemetery sites. Control of the oases and the settlements were important for defense of the western frontier of Egypt. The interest of the Egyptian administration in the desert regions was in its manpower



and resources. The regions were rich in mineral resources of diorite, amethyst, copper and gold. Nubia was an important settlement and provided access to ebony, panther skins, ivory and fine oils. The settlement at Buhen was the source of copper deposits.

The Egyptians' belief in the service of the dead involved donations to secure a proper funeral and provision for, thereafter, had a considerable impact on their economic life, administration and law. The Second Dynasty architects had used extensive stonework in the construction of tombs at Abydos and Hierakonpolis. Lime stone was used in the construction of the first one, while in the latter, red stone was used. The great royal tombs in the form of pyramids are the most known form of Egyptian architecture. The first pyramid was the step-pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara. Netjerikhet Djoser is known for setting several architectural benchmarks, during his reign. He expanded the use of stone in construction works and the tombs started to be decorated more often with stone and wooden slabs (Manuelian & Schneider, 2015: 5-6).



**Figure 8.7 : The step-pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara**

**Credit:** Charlesjsharp, 2007

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2e/Saqqara\\_pyramid\\_ver\\_2.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2e/Saqqara_pyramid_ver_2.jpg)



**Figure 8.8 : Entry Hall of the pyramid Saqqara**

**Credit:** William Henry Goodyear, Joseph Hawkes, and John McKecknie, 2014

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8f/S1008\\_Entry\\_hall\\_Step\\_Pyramid\\_Complex%2CSaqqara.\\_image\\_9497.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8f/S1008_Entry_hall_Step_Pyramid_Complex%2CSaqqara._image_9497.jpg)

The funerary enclosures were laid out over an enormous terrain enclosed within the palace like walls and memorialized in stone were some of Egypt's most important royal rituals and ceremonies. The magnificent pyramids of Fourth Dynasty are still considered to be the wonders of the world. The pyramids of Cheops and Chefren and Mycerinus symbolize the epitome of this architectural form. During this period, the queens were also occasionally buried in smaller tombs. The layout of the pyramids often reflected the political structure of the old system. The layout of the Fourth Dynasty's pyramid was in a manner of houses facing a street and it has been argued that the largest and closest to the King's tomb reflects the importance of the tomb owner within the political hierarchy. A boat was enclosed with the pyramid so that the Kings could proceed onwards in their afterlife.

Sneferu (founding monarch of the Fourth Dynasty) was not willing to spend money on elaborate construction works. Thus, the government's patronage to construction works was regularized and standardized. To attain power over the provinces, he had established

pyramids all over the country. These pyramids were symbols of the royal presence specially in the important political and economic centres of Hierakonpolis, Naqada, Abydos, Zawiet el-Meitin, Seila and Abu Rawas. The people who were involved with the royal works like that of the chief builders of the pyramid and their families and servants and those who rendered direct personal services to the King were also those who were buried close to the royal burial. The development and elaboration of the royal tomb were accompanied by the development of standard beliefs in royal funerary temples, with King fighting over the traditional enemies of Egypt. The royal tombs did not depict individual, historical and military facts. However, the private tombs of the elites and the governors, provide vast information on agriculture, markets, cattle rearing, wine production and even domestic activities.

Thebes was the religious capital of Egypt. The spectacular royal burial ground was made up of rock-cut tombs and acted as a royal burial ground for 500 years. The tomb contains the mummies of ancient Pharaohs and queens. In 1922, the tomb of Tutankhamun was discovered from this region. The mortuary rituals involved the mummification of the dead bodies. According to sources, the embalming of the body of King Seti I of Nineteenth Dynasty took 70 days. The body was dried with the naturally occurring salt called *natron*. Vital organs like the lungs, intestines, liver and stomach were removed from the body and stored separately in containers called canopic jars, which in turn were placed inside richly decorated and gilded shrine protected by four Goddesses: Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Selkis. The body of the King was washed and filled with resin and bundles of linen and wrapped in linen bandages and protective amulets. The number and size of the pyramids reduced drastically region wise after the Fourth Dynasty. The reason is not evident, but the diversification of resources to other sectors could be an important reason. From the Fifth Dynasty, 'pyramid texts' were inscribed on the walls of the pyramids and provided important information of the contemporary Egyptian society and polity.

## **8.10 DECLINE OF EGYPT**

Historians and archaeologists are often of the view that the decline of Egypt happened over a course of several centuries. A series of harvest failures, disastrous floods, earthquakes, destruction of crops by marauders, disruption of trade routes and enemy attacks, all contributed to the downfall of Egypt (Kuhrt, 1995: 386).

The King Ramesses II's long rule of 67 years (1279-1213 BCE) saw peace and prosperity on the one hand, and drain of wealth and invasions on the other. He strengthened the foreign trade and initiated grand construction projects. These projects proved to be a burden on the royal exchequer. This was followed by the invasions of the sea-people, giving fatal blows to the country. The invasion was followed by a fragmented and weak centralized government. His reign was further followed by a series of weak rulers and a subsequent decline of the economy and trade. This gave rise to powerful factions of priests and local governors. The government of southern Egypt, for instance, came under the control of the Theban priests of Amun and the priests of the local dynasties. This led to the origin of the era of 'priestly dynasties' which was further strengthened by marriage alliances.

The weakness of central authority, however, hampered the economy of Egypt. Trade and commerce were often disrupted, revenue system suffered, and the economic framework disintegrated. At Thebes, the interruptions in the supply of resources to the employees of the state led to strikes and series of tomb robbing scandals (Pemberton, 2013: 186). Similar incidents took place at state properties, including the temples. The



breakdown of the economy and polity led to the decline of the societal framework. The number of crimes increased. Social unrest was on the rise. The frontiers were not guarded, and robbing and raids became frequent affairs. Libyans were often blamed for plundering the Egyptian settlements, specially the frontier ones. By the end of the Ramesses Dynasty, the inhabitants of the village of Deir el-Medina were forced to abandon their village and take refuge in the temple at Medinet Habu (located on the west side of the river Nile).

The internal unrest and instability were accompanied by continuous foreign invasions, which led to the final downfall of the Egyptian civilization. The invasion of the sea people was followed by attacks from its neighbouring areas of Libya from the West and Nubia from the South. The rulers of Egypt from 950-730 BCE were of Libyan lineage. Under the Libyans and with Nubian influence, Egypt was able to defend the prevailing politico-economic challenges. Mesopotamian model of assimilation was followed. The conquerors did not rob or loot the conquered areas. Instead, they ruled those areas efficiently and worked towards their prosperity. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt recovered to unify under an Egyptian Pharaoh. However, the fruits of success were limited. Egyptians were destroyed by the Assyrians in continuous raids during 671-663 BCE. The final blow was struck by Alexander of Macedonia in 332 BCE, leading to the destruction of the Egyptian civilization.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) Explain the influence of religion on the Egyptian statecraft and society.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Discuss the economic structure of Egypt.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) What led to the downfall of the Egyptian Civilization?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 8.11 SUMMARY

The unification of Egypt under Menes paved the rise of the great civilization. Religion was the basis of statecraft, administration, politics and society. The monarchy was embedded in the concept of divinity. The Pharaoh or the King was the epitome of power with a claim of sanction from divinity. The initial dynasties saw the royal households occupying almost all the executive offices. However, with the bureaucracy becoming more complex, the commoners were included in the government offices. The size and density of Egyptian settlements continued to increase with time, with the latter settlements showing signs of Libyan and Nubian influences. Religion continued to play an important role in the lives of Egyptians. The great civilization of Egypt declined under the leadership of weak rulers and continuous foreign invasions. The invasion of Alexander was the final nail in the coffin. The civilization declined but the legacy of the Egyptians still lives on.

## 8.12 KEY WORDS

<i>Dbn/Deben</i>	: copper coins.
<b>Emmer wheat</b>	: a variety of wheat with bearded ears and spikelet each containing two grains. The wheat was a daily staple for the ancient Egyptians.
<i>Maat</i>	: Egyptian concept of justice and order.
<i>Nomarch</i>	: local governors.
<i>Nomes</i>	: administrative units.
<i>Papyrus</i>	: a material prepared in Ancient Egypt from the stem of a water plant and was used as paper for writing.
<b>Pharaoh</b>	: Egyptian title for a King.
<i>Pr hd/Prwy hd</i>	: treasury.
<i>Snwt/Snwtj</i>	: granaries.

## 8.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 8.3
- 2) See Sub-section 8.5.1
- 3) See Sub-section 8.5.2
- 4) See Sub-section 8.5.3

### Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) See Section 8.6, and Section 8.8
- 2) See Section 8.7
- 3) See Section 8.10 on the Decline of Egypt

---

## 8.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Curtin, P. D. 1984. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Frankfort, Henri. 1978. *Kingship and God: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the integration of Society and Nature*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Gnirs, Andrea M. 2003. 'Coping with the Army: The Military and the State in the New Kingdom', in *Ancient Egyptian Administration*, J. C. Garcia (Ed.). Leiden: Brill.

Gee, J. 2015. 'Did the Old Kingdom Collapse? A New View of the First Intermediate Period', in *Towards a New History for the Egyptian Old Kingdom Perspectives on Pyramid Age*, T. S. Peter Der Manuelian (ed.): Leiden: Brill.

Hughes, J. D. 1992. 'Sustainable Agriculture in Ancient Egypt'. *Agricultural History, Springer*. 66 (2), pp.17-18.

Jansen, J. J. 1975. Prolegomena to the Study of Egypt's Economic History during the New Kingdom. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*.

Kennett, D. 2008. *Pharaoh Life and Afterlife of a God*. New York: Walker & Company.

Kuhrt, Amelia. 1995. *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000-300 BCE* (Vol. 1). New York: Routledge.

Manuelian, P. D., and T. Schneider. 2015. *Towards a New History for the Egyptian Old Kingdom, Perspectives on Pyramid Age*. Leiden: Brill.

Morenz, S. 1960. *Egyptian Religion*. (A. E. Keep, trans.) New York: Cornell University Press.

Noaman, M. and D.E. Quosy. 2017. 'Hydrology of Nile and Ancient Agriculture'. In S. A. Masayoshi Satoh (ed.), *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt: Past, Present and Future*. Switzerland: Springer.

Pemberton, Delia. 2013. *The Civilization of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Rosen Publishing.

Smith, R. L. 2009. *Premodern Trade in World History*. London: Routledge.

Teeter, Emily. 2011. *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Warden, L. A. 2014. *Pottery and Economy in the Old Kingdom*. Leiden: Brill.

Wilkinson, T. A. 1999. *Early Dynastic Egypt*. New York: Routledge.

Wolinski, Arelene. 1987. 'Egyptian Masks: The Priest and His Role', *Archaeology*, 40 (1): 22.

PDF:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/124743.pdf?refreqid=search%3A4c533b5ef850847ddaf8a4b0c861c0dd>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40000484.pdf?refreqid=search%3A32f93b763a1c10b282ab086351828847>

---

## 8.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

---

### **Ancient Egypt History and Mysteries**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6DdNtfBRIU>

### **Engineering of Ancient Egypt - How Pyramids Are Built**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9zN5JuubN0>

### **The Mighty Egyptian Civilization: Ruled By Ramesses II**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lo7jaH2yGk>

### **The Lost Gods of the Egyptians**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWzKAFveXyo>



---

## UNIT 9 SHANG CIVILIZATION IN CHINA\*

---

### Structure

- 9.1 Objectives
- 9.2 Introduction
- 9.3 Major Sites of Bronze Age Civilization in China
- 9.4 Main Features of Bronze Age Civilization in China
  - 9.4.1 Bronze Age Objects and Bronze Technology
  - 9.4.2 Walled Settlements
  - 9.4.3 Burials
  - 9.4.4 Social Strata and Lineages
  - 9.4.5 Nature of Kingship
  - 9.4.6 Divination and Sacrifice
  - 9.4.7 Writing
- 9.5 Who were the Shang?
  - 9.5.1 Archaeological Evidence and the Written Records
  - 9.5.2 The Mystery of the Xia
- 9.6 The Bronze Age World in China: Multiple Centres and Networks of Exchange
- 9.7 Legacy of the Shang
- 9.8 Summary
- 9.9 Key Words
- 9.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 9.11 Suggested Readings
- 9.12 Instructional Video Recommendations

---

### 9.1 OBJECTIVES

---

In Unit 7 you would have learned about the basic features of Bronze Age civilization and in Unit 8 about one major example of such a civilization, that of Egypt. In this Unit, we will discuss about Bronze Age civilization in China. After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain about the Shang civilization and state, together with its immediate predecessors and other contemporaneous cultures in what is now China;
- List the major sites of Bronze Age civilization that have been unearthed in China;
- Identify the distinctive features of Bronze Age civilization as they developed in China;
- Outline recent archaeological evidence that has changed our understanding of the origin and growth of Chinese civilization; and
- Summarize the lasting contribution of the Shang to Chinese civilization.

## 9.2 INTRODUCTION

The Shang Civilization, from the middle to the end of the second millennium BCE, was the first to bear all the hallmarks of a major civilization in China. This included bronze metallurgy, urban settlements with monumental buildings, a clearly stratified society consisting of kings, elite and commoners, a political-religious state, and for the first time in China, writing. It was the first civilization for which the textual record is matched by the archaeological evidence. Several features that have come to be identified with Chinese culture over the centuries had their origins in the Shang period. This includes the unique **logographic script**, the practice of ancestor worship, large-scale mobilization of labour for monumental projects, the beginnings of bureaucracy, and the sixty-day cycle of the traditional calendar.



**Map 9.1 : Extent of Shang Kingdom**

**Credit:** Lamassu Design, 2009

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Shang\\_dynasty.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Shang_dynasty.svg)

The spectacular results of archaeology in China in the last one hundred years, and particularly in the last fifty years, have transformed our understanding of the Bronze Age civilization in China in general and of Shang civilization in particular. The excavations of walled settlements and thousands of burial sites all over China have confirmed that several distinct Bronze Age cultures co-existed simultaneously over wide areas of China and interacted amongst themselves. They have uncovered the largest collection of bronzes from that era anywhere in the world. They go on to show that the bronze casting technology employed by the people of those cultures was indeed unique for their time. It is indeed one of the most exciting stories of modern archaeology.

### 9.3 MAJOR SITES OF BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATION IN CHINA

The earliest bronze object found in China was uncovered at a site in northwest China, dating back to the early third millennium BCE. However, the earliest significant finds of bronze objects and of bronze casting were found in the **Erlitou** site in the Henan province of north China. It was first explored from 1959-1978, and then again after 1999. The Erlitou culture is estimated to have lasted from about 1900-1500 BCE. At the site, settlements with walls made of pounded earth, houses and burial sites have been found. Bronze objects, mainly weapons and vessels of various kinds, as well as the earliest evidence of bronze casting, have been found here. The earliest collections of bronze objects used for ritual purposes have also been discovered at this site. The Erlitou culture can be considered the dawn of the Bronze Age in China.



**Map 9.2 : Area of the Erlitou culture (1900-1500 BCE) in northern China**

**Credit:** Kanguole, 2015

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Erlitou\\_map.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Erlitou_map.svg)





### Map 9.3 : Map of the Erlitou site

Adapted from Gideon Shelach & Yitzhak Jaffe. 2014. 'The Earliest States in China A Long-term Trajectory Approach'. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22 (4). **(Figure 3)**

About 85 kms. to the east of the Erlitou site was found the remains of the later **Erligang** culture (1600-1300 BCE). In the Erligang culture we find evidence of a much more extensive and sophisticated bronze casting industry. Apart from a huge collection of bronze objects, the remains of foundries are also available. Erligang was probably the site of a large urban settlement. This is testified by the walls which run around its perimeter for about 7 kms, and which were as thick as 20 metres at the base and 8 metres high. The evidence of these walls, palaces and bronze casting workshops point to a society and political structure that was already able to mobilize and direct labour on a large scale.

However, the most famous archaeological site of the Bronze Age in China is near **Anyang**, which is also a part of the Henan province of north China. Excavation here began in 1928, as part of the effort to uncover the source of the earliest examples of Chinese writing found on ‘**oracle bones**’ (See **Sub-section 9.4.6** for more on the oracle bones). The excavations near Anyang revealed the site of an ancient capital city of the kings of the Shang dynasty (approx. 1600-1046 BCE), confirming the existence of this dynasty which had earlier been known only from later historical accounts. It covers an area of about 30 sq. km and contains the remains of monumental palace-temple compounds, huge burial sites and bronze casting workshops. These bear a close resemblance to the earlier Erligang culture. But the main difference in the Anyang site is that it houses evidence of the earliest Chinese writing, mainly on thousands of oracle bones and also on bronze ritual objects. This writing enables us to identify conclusively that this site was ruled by the Shang kings.

Apart from these major sites which are all in north China in the region of the Yellow river and its tributaries, excavations of the last few decades have revealed, and continue to reveal, the existence of many other sites of great importance. Their antiquity rivals

that of Erlitou, Erligang and Anyang. These other sites are located in different parts of north and north-west China, as well as in central China as far south as the Yangzi river region.

---

## 9.4 MAIN FEATURES OF BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATION IN CHINA

---

The archaeological excavations have provided us with a large number of artefacts and reveal the layout of settlements. These help us in reconstructing the social, economic, political and cultural structures and systems of Bronze Age civilization in China. Here we will discuss some major features of this civilization.

### 9.4.1 Bronze Age Objects and Bronze Technology

The largest collection of bronze objects anywhere in the world are to be found in China. Scholars find it difficult to put an end date to the Bronze Age civilization in China because bronze objects continued to be produced and utilized for ritual and other purposes in significant quantities even after the use of iron technology commenced there.

The bronze objects produced in China in this period were mainly vessels and weapons. After the introduction of the horse drawn chariot into China around 1200 BCE, bronze fittings for the chariots were also made. The great majority of bronze vessels found were associated with wine: either wine warming or pouring vessels, or goblets for drinking. Another very typical bronze vessel found was the *ding* or tripod cooking vessel. That these were often used for ritual or ceremonial purposes can be seen from the size of some of the vessels found. The largest of these weighed over one ton!

Another distinctive feature of the bronze vessels from China is that they had intricate designs all over the surface. These give the bronzes a strong aesthetic appeal beyond their utilitarian functions. Recent excavations in central China have led to the discovery of bronze objects very distinct from those in the north, representing an altogether different culture. These include ceremonial bells in the lower Yangzi river region. The most remarkable bronze objects, however, were discovered at Sanxingdui in southwestern China. These include bronze masks, and human and animal figures, including the world's earliest life-size standing human figure made of bronze.

Despite variety in the style of bronze objects found, they all employed a common technique of production: **bronze casting** using ceramic moulds. In this method, first a model of the object was made in clay. After this was fired, another layer of clay was laid over the original model and this layer was then cut into sections and removed. A thin layer was shaved off between the two clay models to leave a small gap between them when the outer layer was reassembled. The molten metal (some variant of copper-tin-lead mix) was then poured into the gap. After it cooled, the outer layer was removed section by section, revealing the bronze object, which was then polished. An interesting feature was that the design was not etched onto the surface of the bronze after it was cooled. Rather, it was made on the interior of the mould itself, so that it was cast along with the object.



**Figure 9.1 : Bronze head with gold foil mask from Sanxingdui site**

**Credit:** Momo, 2011

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Gold\\_Mask\\_%28ÄŹÑ'b—in%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Gold_Mask_%28ÄŹÑ'b—in%29.jpg)



**Figure 9.2 : A Shang dynasty Bronze vessel to preserve drinks**

**Credit:** Ismoon, 2011

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/La\\_Tigresse%2C\\_bronze\\_vessel\\_to\\_preserve\\_drink.\\_Hunan%2C\\_11th\\_BC.\\_Cernuschi\\_museum.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/La_Tigresse%2C_bronze_vessel_to_preserve_drink._Hunan%2C_11th_BC._Cernuschi_museum.jpg)

Bronze casting as practiced in China was a more sophisticated and complex process than that of hammering the metal into shape practiced elsewhere, such as in Ancient Greece. According to an archaeologist and art historian, Robert Bagley, this showed both the abundance of metal ores and of labour available (Bagley, 1999:141). It also permitted a more efficient division of labour and the production of bronze on a large scale. Since copper ore was mined in central China, it had to be transported a great distance to north China using the many waterways in the region. This fact, plus the fact that all the bronze producing cultures of China shared a common technology of bronze casting, is evidence of the considerable interaction among them even at this very early stage.

### **9.4.2 Walled Settlements**

Recent archaeological discoveries have unearthed more than fifty walled settlements spread across vast regions of China, dating back to the late Neolithic period. At the time of the Erlitou culture, such walled settlements were still confined mainly to the north and northeast regions. The largest covered area is about 100,000 sq. metres, and probably contained about 600 houses. By the time of the later Erligang culture, these settlements contained palaces, temples, large burial grounds, warehouses, granaries and some workshops as well.

A special feature of these settlements is that the walls and the foundations of main buildings were made of pounded earth. First, a bamboo framework would be erected, within which mud would be deposited in layers. One layer of mud would be pounded down hard and then left to dry before another layer was deposited. The same process was repeated until the desired height of the wall or foundation was reached. This process resulted in walls and structures that were extremely hard and durable. Interestingly, it was the same pounded earth process that was used centuries later to build the Great Wall of China.

The existence of large walled settlements, especially from the Erligang period onwards, points to the capacity of the social and political organization in that age to mobilize the huge amount of labour needed to build them. It also shows necessity of the communities or incipient states of those times to defend themselves from enemies.

### **9.4.3 Burials**

Our primary evidence on Bronze Age civilization in China comes from thousands of burial sites. The Chinese of that period not only buried their dead, but they placed in the graves and tombs either real or symbolic objects that they believed would be needed by the departed after death. The wealthier or prominent a person who died, the more goods were found in their graves. From this tradition we get a good picture of the material culture of the people of those times, their social organization, their political structure, and even their belief systems.

Across the river from the palace zone at the archaeological site at Anyang are the remains of a royal cemetery. Eight tombs of Shang kings and one incomplete one, have been found. These were deep **shaft burial pits**, with complex structures, which would have required tremendous resources and skills to engineer, perhaps not very different from those of the Egyptian Pharaohs (title given to the political and religious leader of the Egyptian people, as you must have read in **Unit 8**). However, practically all of the tombs have been looted by grave robbers over the centuries, leaving little of importance. However, from Anyang one royal tomb has been found intact. This is the tomb of Lady Hao, the consort of the Shang king Wu Ding (1250-1192 BCE). This tomb, though

smaller than those of the Shang kings, is one of the most stunning finds of modern Chinese archaeology. Apart from hundreds of bronze objects, her tomb contains a large number of goods made of jade, bone, ivory, pottery and stone, besides thousands of cowry shells. Some of these appear to be goods used or collected by Lady Hao in her lifetime, while others were symbolic items to accompany her in her afterlife. In the burial pit have also been found the skeletons of 16 humans and 6 dogs. Inscriptions on some of the bronze artefacts have enabled experts to positively identify the tomb as belonging to Lady Fu Hao. Incidentally, Lady Hao was no ordinary woman or royal consort. There is ample evidence that she was a military general who commanded troops in battles.



**Figure 9.3 : Tomb of Lady Fu Hao, Yinxu, Henan, China**

**Credit:** Chris Gyford, 2007

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Tomb\\_Fu\\_Hao\\_YinXu.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Tomb_Fu_Hao_YinXu.jpg)

Apart from the royal tombs, at least 3000 other burial sites have been found from the Shang period, although only some of them have been excavated. The differences in the quantity and type of burial goods found testify to the existence of different social strata. From the burials, we can understand that the people of those times had great veneration for their ancestors. They believed that the dead needed the same things to sustain them in their afterlife as they needed during their lifetimes. For the kings and other members of the elite, this also meant that they had to be accompanied in death by other humans who were sacrificed and buried along with them. These could be consorts and close retainers, they could also be slaves or prisoners, as many skeletons found in the graves were found to have been decapitated or otherwise mutilated. The Shang burial sites also contain objects with writing on them. Overall, these graves have been a major source of information about Bronze Age civilization in China.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) List major bronze age sites in China indicating the period they flourished in.

.....



- 2) What techniques were used for making bronze objects in Shang civilization?

- 3) State the specific features of burials in Shang period.

#### 9.4.4 Social Strata and Lineages

As we can see from the discussion above on burial sites, Shang society was highly stratified. The differences found between the palaces and other kinds of residences also show the existence of sharp class distinctions. There was an elite, consisting of the royal family and lesser nobility. Some of the elite were residents in the Shang capital, while others seem to have been dispersed among smaller settlements. There were distinct occupational groups, such as bronze casters, potters, butchers, shepherds, and so on. There were also an indistinct group of commoners referred to in some inscriptions as ‘the multitude’. There has been much scholarly discussion, without any consensus about the status of these common people – whether they were slaves, or some kind of serfs, or just peasants, is not clear from the records so far. Clearly, they would have provided much of the labour required for monumental walls, buildings and graves of the Shang kings, along with perhaps captured prisoners from other places.



**Figure 9.4 : Chinese Character to denote ‘the Multitude’**

**Source:** <http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.8-Society-2010.pdf>

‘The multitude’ in the oracle bones were signified by the symbol or Chinese character represented above (**Figure 9.4**). The character has been read by scholars as suggestive of an image of the peasant under the gaze of an overseer, or simply outdoors in the fields. In Modern Chinese, the term *li min* is one of the most commonly used terms to indicate ‘the multitude’ and ‘the common people’.

**Source:** <http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.8-Society-2010.pdf> (Indiana University, class text reading material online) & *When the World was Black: The Untold History of the World’s First Civilizations, Part Two: Ancient Civilizations (Volume Two of the Science of Self)*(Atlanta: Supreme Design Publishing, 2013).

From the available written and archaeological evidence, we know that great importance was attached to the common descent groups, or lineages. Lineage was accorded importance not only among the elites, but it seems to have held importance for artisans and various occupational groups as well. Clan solidarity was cemented by the practice of ancestor worship or veneration. The clan ancestors continued in a very real sense to influence and exercise control over the actions of later generations, even long after their death. Shang society could in some sense be considered to be a confederation of lineage groups.

#### 9.4.5 Nature of Kingship

The Shang kings were patrimonial rulers. What this means is that the state was considered to be in some sense a large family, or a group of linked lineages, of which the king was the head of the dominant or royal lineage. Succession to the throne was hereditary, though not necessarily from the king to the eldest son. The king commanded absolute obedience over his subjects, with powers of life and death over them.

The Shang kings directly ruled over a core zone which was not very large, covering a part of the north China region. Around this core zone was an area consisted of smaller states or principalities which were ruled by other members of the royal lineage or allies of the Shang king. The Shang kings moved frequently within this area. Beyond this, there was yet another zone controlled by hostile peoples, with whom the Shang periodically waged wars. The large number of decapitated sacrificial victims found in the Shang tombs were most likely prisoners captured during such battles. The Shang king did not maintain a standing army, but relied on his relatives, smaller nobility and allies to provide him with manpower to fight his wars as needed.

Inscriptions dating back to this period show that the Shang kings were concerned about many aspects of governance including war, the success of harvests, building cities and so on. However, the most unique feature of kingship during the Shang period was that the king was both a political and religious head. The Shang state could be considered a theocracy of some kind. As the head of the royal lineage, only the Shang king could communicate directly with the ancestors of the royal line and with the gods, including the supreme deity called **Di**. We will see in the next Section how this was done through a process known as divination. By the later Shang period, the kings did not use the services of other diviners, but themselves communicated with the spirits. The fact that the Shang king was the only channel of communication between the world of gods and spirits and that of human society must have greatly enhanced his authority over his people.

#### 9.4.6 Divination and Sacrifice

The Shang believed in a wide array of gods and spirits. The foremost among these was known as **Di**, or Shang **Di**. They also had a number of nature gods, including gods of rain, thunder, wind, the sun, moon, etc. The Shang also worshipped the spirits of their ancestors. The more remote the ancestors, the more powerful they were believed to be. A major activity of the kings was presiding over elaborate rituals to please the spirits of their ancestors and other gods. Excavations have uncovered the remains of huge palace-temple compounds where the kings must have conducted these rituals.

The kings not only worshipped the spirits and gods, but also communicated with them on a regular basis on a variety of matters, including relations with other states, the condition of the harvest, childbearing of the royal consorts, illness, natural calamities, and so on. This was done through a process known as divination using '**oracle bones**'.



First, the questions or concerns of the kings were inscribed in brief phrases on bones. These were always the flat shoulder bones (scapula) of oxen or the shells on the underside of turtles (plastron). A diviner (later usually the Shang king himself) heated the bone or shell until it cracked. The resulting cracks were then interpreted, usually in the form of an answer to the question asked or a prediction. This answer was then also written on the bone, as well as the actual outcome of the matter which was being considered.



**Figure 9.5 : An Oracle Bone from the period of Shang Dynasty**

**Credit:** Herr Klugbeisser, 2004

**Source:** <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Orakelknochen.JPG>

The oracle bones containing writing were first identified as relics of an ancient civilization in 1899. Since that time, more than 200,000 fragments of oracle bones have been found. These have opened up to archaeologists and historians a vivid picture of the world of the Shang, about which till then no primary evidence had been found. The names of the kings and other notables have been identified through the oracle bones, and by and large these match the later historical records. Although the oracle bone inscriptions relate exclusively to the activities and concerns of the kings, they nevertheless shed much light on various aspects of the political, social and religious life of those times.

Apart from divination, a major ritual activity was to make sacrifices for pleasing the gods and the spirits of the ancestors. Since it was believed that these spirits had a direct bearing on the wellbeing of the living, it was believed to be necessary to make elaborate offerings to please them. This could take the form of both animal and human sacrifice. The burial sites described earlier in this Unit provide ample evidence of the importance of notions of obligation and sacrifice in the religious beliefs of the Shang people.

### 9.4.7 Writing

A great importance of the oracle bones is that they are the earliest evidence of writing in China that we have. With the discovery of writing from this period, the Shang can be said to be the period in China when all the major attributes of civilization emerged.



**Figure 9.6 : Oracle Bone Script on an Ox Scapula from the reign of King Wu Ding of the Late Shang dynasty**

**Credit:** BabelStone, 2011

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/Shang\\_dynasty\\_inscribed\\_scapula.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/Shang_dynasty_inscribed_scapula.jpg)

The written symbols found on the oracle bones as well as on some bronze objects of the same period are clearly the forerunner of the later Chinese script. Chinese writing is logographic. A single written character represents an idea or an image and has meaning in itself. For instance, the Chinese word for ‘child’ is a single character written

as 子, the word for ‘man’ is written as 人, and so on. This is unlike scripts based on phonetic symbols, like English or Hindi, where the written symbols represent sounds but do not represent meaning in themselves. The Shang writing that has been found is clearly logographic. Although a little different in style from modern Chinese writing, they can be read and understood by scholars of Chinese.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) What is distinct about the position of the King in China during the period of your study?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Who were ‘the multitudes’?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Why was sacrifice considered important in Shang China?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Give two main characteristics of the script used for writing in China.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## **9.5 WHO WERE THE SHANG?**

---

Our understanding of the nature of Bronze Age Civilization in China initially depended entirely on written records from a later date. However, more recent archaeological evidence has contributed greatly to our understanding of this foundational age.

### 9.5.1 Archaeological Evidence and the Written Records

The earliest references to the existence of the Shang dynasty in China came in texts dating from the end of the first millennium BCE, several hundred to a thousand years after the end of Shang rule. The information provided about the Shang in those texts was very sketchy. There was no other material evidence to back up the claim to its existence. All that began to change just about a hundred years ago, first with the discovery of the oracle bones with their inscriptions, and later with the painstaking excavations at a number of sites, particularly at Anyang.

The names of the kings mentioned on the oracle bones matched with those in the historical record. The tomb of Lady Hao is the first one that belonged to a person mentioned in the historical narrative. The origins of Chinese civilization began to become much clearer, emerging from the cloudy mists of mythology. Since archaeological excavations and new discoveries in China are proceeding at a rapid pace, we can expect the picture to become even clearer in the foreseeable future.

Clearly, the correspondence between the written historical narrative and the available archaeological evidence lends much more credibility to the current understanding of the Shang. At the same time, some scholars have pointed out how the existence of a historical narrative can also in some ways limit the development of our understanding of the Shang world. In their desire to fit the facts found on the ground (archaeology) to what is there in the written tradition, historians and archaeologists sometimes can distort the picture that is emerging about the Shang and its immediate predecessors or miss out on important aspects of the story.

### 9.5.2 The Mystery of the Xia

The dichotomy between the representation in historical narrative vis-à-vis archaeological evidence can be seen in the debate over the Xia dynasty. According to Chinese historical tradition, the first dynasty in China was not the Shang, but the Xia. The last ruler of the Xia, as the traditional narrative goes, was defeated by the first ruler of the Shang dynasty. This has meant that many archaeologists in China have sought to equate the Erlitou culture discussed at the beginning of this Unit with the Xia. However, as the historian Robert Thorp has pointed out, ‘in spite of the pleasing fit between the expectations of traditional history and the time-space coordinates of the Erlitou Culture, there remains a notable lack of corroborating evidence that a Xia state, or people, or culture even existed’ (Thorp, 2005: 61). It remains to be seen whether further archaeological excavations will confirm the existence of the Xia as the earliest dynasty of Bronze Age civilization in China.

---

## 9.6 THE BRONZE AGE WORLD IN CHINA: MULTIPLE CENTRES AND NETWORKS OF EXCHANGE

---

The earlier understanding of the beginnings of Chinese civilization was that its original nucleus was in the region of the Wei river valley in north China, and that it then spread outwards from this single source, first towards the east following the course of the Yellow river, and then more gradually, in a southerly direction.

The archaeological discoveries of the past few decades have upturned this understanding. The use of carbon dating since the 1970s in particular points to the simultaneous existence of a number of late Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures developing from local roots in different regions of China, especially different parts of north, northwest and central

China. For example, the sites found in the Hunan province in south-central China in the Yangzi river region, are particularly famed for the bronze *nao* (ritual bells). Some of these cultures are of the same antiquity and of a comparable level of sophistication as the better known cultures centred in north China. The co-existence of a number of distinct Bronze Age cultures spread out over different parts of China is one of the most exciting finds of modern Chinese archaeology, pointing to perhaps multiple sources of Chinese civilization.

At the same time, there is clear evidence of networks of exchange and mutual influence between these different regional cultures. For example, the copper ores needed for bronze casting were mined in central China. From there they had to be transported hundreds of kilometers north to supply the huge workshops and foundries found near Anyang and other sites. It has also been pointed out that, despite the different forms and designs of the bronze objects found in the different regions, the bronze casting technology employed by them was virtually the same. Not just technology, but rituals and belief systems, as well as artisans, may have circulated among different regions. There is reason to believe that the use of horse and the horse chariot came to Bronze Age China from outside, through the northwest, as late as 1200 BCE. Skeletons of elephants and whales, as well as thousands of cowry shells, none of which came from within the region, have also been found in the burial sites at Anyang. These further testify to the extensive networks of exchange that must have already existed at that time.

On the basis of the new archaeological discoveries, the great archaeologist of ancient China, K.C. Chang, proposed the idea of an ‘interaction sphere’ in which the different cultures in what is now China grew together, interacting and influencing each other. Other scholars have suggested that the cultures in some regions, such as that in Sanxingdui in south-west China, followed such a distinct path of development that it is hard to include it in what is generally characterized as ‘Chinese civilization’. While these matters are still debated among historians, it is clear that the Bronze Age world of China was much wider and more diverse than it was believed to be until recently.

---

## **9.7 LEGACY OF THE SHANG**

---

Several of the elements of Bronze Age civilization discussed above have continued into later times and have formed an intrinsic part of what is commonly recognized as ‘Chinese civilization’. These include:

- *The logographic script.* The present-day Chinese script is one of the most unique of the major systems of writing in the world. The characters representing pictures or ideas, and the absence of an alphabet-based system, make the Chinese written language today instantly recognizable. These were clearly derived from the writing system of the Shang.
- *The importance of lineage.* Chinese society through the ages has placed great emphasis on the solidarity of the common descent group. The individual has had close identity with the clan or lineage to which he or she belonged, and the extended family group or clan has traditionally exercised a high degree of influence and even control over the individual.
- *Ancestor worship.* Chinese families to this day place great emphasis on remembering their departed ancestors. Even now, among many Chinese societies, families follow the regular ritual of sweeping the graves of their ancestors and offering them food, paper money and other items.

- *Large scale mobilization of labour.* From the famous Great Wall of China to the huge dykes and dams on the Yellow and Yangzi rivers to the building of monumental palaces and city walls, Chinese have been known throughout their history for building massive public projects involving the use of enormous reserves of labour. The remains of city walls, royal tombs, huge bronze foundries and palace-temple structures from the Bronze Age indicate that this practice was already in evidence in those times.
- *The notion of the ruler as the intermediary between Heaven and mankind.* This concept too, which later took the form of the Chinese emperors claiming to have the 'Mandate of Heaven' to rule, has its origins in the role of the Shang king as the only one who was in direct communication with the gods and spirits.

These and other aspects of the legacy of the Shang justify our understanding of it as the formative period of Chinese civilization.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) Do recent archaeological findings in China confirm the written records about this period?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Write 50 words on the networks of exchange between different bronze age sites in China.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) List four important legacies of the Shang culture.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 9.8 SUMMARY

Recent archaeological discoveries in China have opened up to us a clear picture of the development of Bronze Age civilization from the earlier Erlitou and Erligang cultures to the civilization of the Shang centred at Anyang. They have also revealed the simultaneous existence of other distinctive Bronze Age cultures spread over wide areas of China. There was clearly some mutual interaction and influence among them, and with the



world outside as well. The Bronze Age civilization in China was characterized by the high degree of sophistication of their bronze casting technology and the beauty of their bronze objects. The people of those times were capable of building massive public projects. They placed great emphasis on kinship and on their obligations to their ancestors. By the late second millennium BCE, the remains of the Shang settlements show the existence of a powerful state headed by a ruler who combined both political and religious leadership. They had already developed a sophisticated system of writing and they have left written records which give us insights into their beliefs and their everyday concerns. In this sense, Chinese History can truly be considered to begin with the Shang.

---

## **9.9 KEY WORDS**

---

<b>Di</b>	: classical Chinese term for Supreme or the Highest Deity.
<b>Logogram</b>	: a written character that represents a word or phrase.
<b>Logographic script</b>	: a writing system that is based on logograms.
<b>Oracle bones</b>	: a group of inscribed animal bones and shells discovered in China and originally used in divination by the Ancient Chinese, especially during the Shang dynasty.
<b>Shaft burial pits</b>	: a deep rectangular burial structure with vertical sides that housed the coffin along with other material goods of the dead.

---

## **9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES**

---

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-1**

- 1) Erlitou, Erligang, Anyang. For details, see Section 9.3
- 2) Bronze casting. For details, see Sub-section 9.4.1
- 3) Shaft burial pits, material goods, life after death, social stratification. For details, see Sub-section 9.4.3

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) Patrimonial ruler, hereditary succession, continuous mobility, theocratic government. For details, see Sub-section 9.4.5
- 2) See Sub-section 9.4.4
- 3) Appease the God and the spirits of ancestors, public wellbeing. For details, see Sub-section 9.4.6
- 4) Logographic, Phonetic. For details, see Sub-section 9.4.7

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-3**

- 1) Yes, but not all the claims of the written records have been verified by the archaeological findings so far. Substantiate your answer with description of oracle bones and the mystery of Xia. For details, see Sub-section 9.5.1 and 9.5.2

- 2) Significance of carbon dating, exchange of copper ores, evidence of horse, animal skulls and skeletons, interaction sphere. For details, see Section 9.6
- 3) For details, see Section 9.7

---

## 9.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Bagley, Robert. 1999. 'Shang Archaeology'. In Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds.) *Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chang, Kwang-Chih. 1980. *Shang Civilization*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Chang, Kwang-Chih. 1986. *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Keightley, David. 1990. 'Early Civilisation in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese'. In Paul S. Ropp (ed.). *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keightley, David. 1999. 'The Shang: China's First Historical Dynasty'. In Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds.), *Cambridge History of Ancient China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thorp, Robert L. 2005. *China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

PDF:

<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.1-Shang-2010.pdf>

<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.3-Bones-2010.pdf>

[http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.4-Shang\\_Religion-2010.pdf](http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.4-Shang_Religion-2010.pdf)

<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.5-Kings-2010.pdf>

<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.6-Bronze-2010.pdf>

<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/3.8-Society-2010.pdf>

---

## 9.12 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

---

**How Ancient Chinese Bronzes were created**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaYUEV-vGLM>

**Oracle Bone, Shang Dynasty**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9gfIqOo\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9gfIqOo_I)

