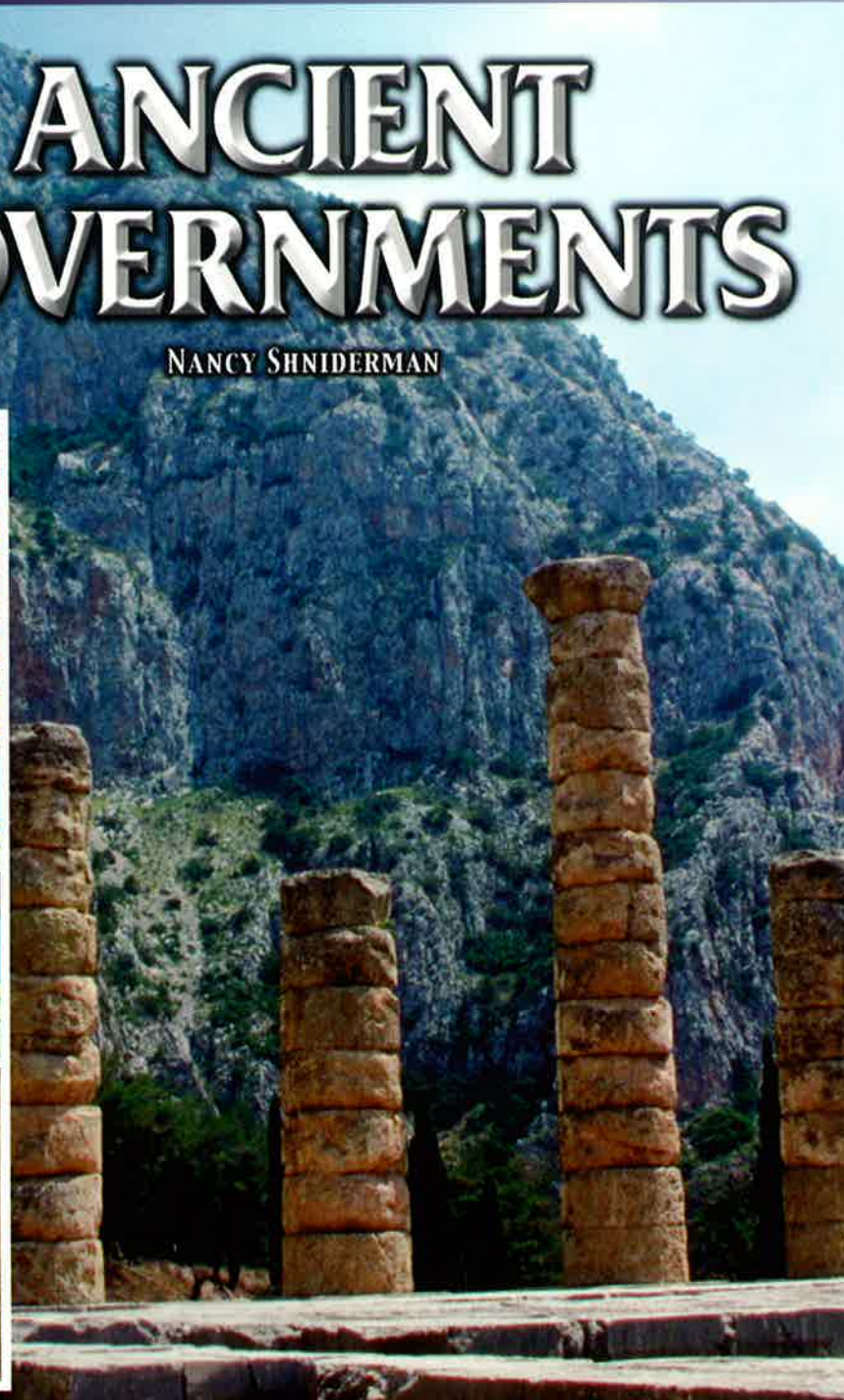


# ANCIENT GOVERNMENTS

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For teachers' inspection ONLY



Mayan ruins in Copan, Honduras

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# The Fertile Crescent

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Many historians believe that civilization began in the Fertile Crescent. This area had rich soil and was shaped like a half-moon, or crescent. The Fertile Crescent began along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It stretched to the Persian Gulf. This region of southwest Asia is present-day Iraq.

## THE SUMERIANS

The eastern section of the Fertile Crescent was Mesopotamia. *Mesopotamia* is a Greek word meaning “between the rivers.” The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers border the region. These two rivers empty into the Persian Gulf.

Sumerians were one of the first people known to live in the Fertile Crescent. The Sumer civilization began around 3500 B.C. It lasted until around 2000 B.C.

Sumer was a city-state in the southern part of Mesopotamia. A city-state consisted of a **sovereign** city and the surrounding area. It was like a small nation. The city-states of Ur, Eridu, and Uruk were Sumerian settlements.



Map of the ancient Near East showing the Fertile Crescent area, the birthplace of civilization

Each state was ruled by a priest-king. The king was a divine monarch who was treated as a god.

The kings established organized legal and political systems. Sumerian laws were considered to be inspired by the gods. Breaking a law was a crime against both the state and the gods.

Sumerian rulers performed religious ceremonies and judged disputes. They also led the military and directed trade. They ruled with the help of other priests. These priests surveyed land and assigned fields. They also distributed crops after a harvest.

The Sumerians had a **caste system**. The upper class included kings, priests, and nobles. Government officials and the wealthy also were considered upper class. The middle class included farmers, merchants, tradespeople, and soldiers. The lower class was made up of slaves.

## Sumerian Law

One of the most important accomplishments of the Sumerians was the development of a legal system. Their law was one of the first to be recorded.

Sumerian law was designed to solve disputes. Justice fell somewhere between individual **revenge** and state-administered revenge. Victims had to take the accused to court. The court then listened to both sides, made a decision, and set the punishment for the crime. Often the victim or the victim's family had to carry out the sentence.

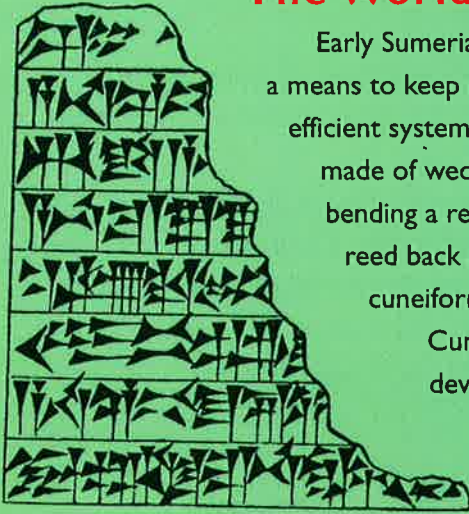
The laws were made to fit within the class system. Harming a priest or noble was a serious crime. Harming a slave or poor person was not as serious. But punishments for nobles were usually harsher than for someone from a lower class who committed the same crime.

Later, the Babylonians and the Assyrians based their laws on those of the Sumerians. The Sumerian legal system also influenced laws set down by the Hebrews.

Around 2000 B.C., a nearby tribe from Akkad conquered Sumer. Akkad united all of Mesopotamia under its rule.



## The World's First Writing System



Early Sumerian states governed large areas. They needed a means to keep records. Over time, they developed an efficient system of writing. They used a form of shorthand made of wedged lines. They created this new writing by bending a reed against wet clay. Then they moved the reed back and forth one time. This form of writing was cuneiform, or wedge-shaped.

Cuneiform was the first written language, developed in about 3300 B.C. It had about 500 wedge-shaped characters. It lasted longer than any other form of writing except Chinese.

### Sumerian Accomplishments

Calendars divided into 12 months were invented by the Sumerians. They based their calendars on the cycle of the moon. This led them to study astronomy.

The Sumerians also invented the wheel around 3400 B.C. The wheel was first used to make pottery. Later, it was used for transportation.

## THE BABYLONIANS

The Babylonians lived along the Euphrates River. Their kings were considered gods, or divine monarchs. They built elaborate temples to their gods and goddesses. Many of their kings ruled as **despots**.

In around 2000 B.C., the Babylonians conquered Akkad. All of Sumer and Akkad were joined with the Babylonian kingdom.

### Hammurabi and the Code of Laws

Hammurabi was a Babylonian king who ruled for 42 years (1792–1750 B.C.). He created the Code of Laws.

These laws were based on Sumerian law. Hammurabi's laws protected the weak from being **tormented** by the strong. But the laws were harsh. They demanded that the punishment fit the crime. An example of Hammurabi's laws was "an eye for an eye." Often

different social classes received different treatments under the laws.

The Code of Laws consisted of 282 laws. The code addressed issues such as business and family relations, labor disputes, private property, and personal injury. These are a few examples of the laws.

- **Law 3:** If anyone brings an accusation of any crime before the elders and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death.
- **Law 24:** If fire breaks out in a house, and someone who comes to put it out . . . takes the property of the master of the house, he shall be thrown into that self-same fire.
- **Law 121:** If anyone stores corn in another man's house, he shall pay him storage at the rate of one gur for every five ka of corn per year.
- **Law 195:** If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be **hewn** off.
- **Law 221:** If a physician heals the broken bone . . . of a man, the patient shall pay the physician five shekels in money.

After Hammurabi's death in 1750 B.C., Babylon was invaded. But the kingdom later reorganized. The Assyrians finally conquered Babylon in 689 B.C.

Hammurabi before the sun god (from the stele on which the Code of Laws was written)



## Hammurabi's Code of Laws

In the winter of 1901–1902, a French archaeological team was working in what is today Shush, Iran. They found the eight-foot-high **stele** on which Hammurabi's laws had been written in cuneiform. It had been broken into three pieces.

The pieces were returned to Paris, France, where they were restored. The stele is now on display in the Louvre, a famous Paris museum.

# THE PERSIANS

Around 2000 B.C., the Persians migrated to the Fertile Crescent from central Asia. They settled in a region east of the Fertile Crescent in present-day Iran. The Persians were warriors who rode horseback.

The Persian government was a monarchy ruled by kings. The Persians were religious people who worshiped many gods and goddesses. They prayed three times a day.

Cyrus the Great expanded the Persian Empire. He conquered Asia Minor and the Fertile Crescent. He was the first king of ancient times to feel it was his *duty* to conquer the world.

Eventually, the Persian Empire stretched all the way to India. Because the empire became so large, it was divided into 20 provinces. At its height, the Persian Empire included 40 million people.

From 549 B.C. to 331 B.C., the empire was divided into provinces, or satrapies. Each was governed by an official called a *satrap*. But the king of all Persia was still the final and absolute authority.

The satraps were responsible for collecting taxes and transferring them to the king's royal treasury. They also provided men for the royal army.

The king set up a secret service to serve as his eyes and ears. Members informed the king of affairs throughout the empire.

Around 330 B.C., the Persian Empire was conquered by the Greeks, and eventually, the Romans conquered the area.



Hand-colored woodcut of the bas-relief of Cyrus the Great found in Pasargade, the capital of Persia