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History Of Ancient Near East

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Introduction: The Cradle of Civilization

The **History Of Ancient Near East**is, in many ways, the story of how human civilization itself began. Often referred to as the "Cradle of Civilization," this vast region stretching from the eastern Mediterranean coast to the Iranian plateau witnessed the birth of the first cities, the invention of writing, the codification of laws, and the rise of vast empires. For anyone seeking to understand the foundations of the modern world, the history of the Ancient Near East is not merely an academic curiosity; it is the essential prologue to our shared human story. This article will guide you through the key periods, cultures, and transformations that defined this pivotal region over several millennia.

The Dawn of Urban Life: The Neolithic and Chalcolithic Eras

Before the grand empires of Assyria and Babylon, the first seeds of complex society were planted during the Neolithic period. Long before the first written records, the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East made the revolutionary shift from nomadic hunter-gatherer bands to settled agricultural communities. Sites like **Çatalhöyük** in modern-day Turkey and **Jericho**in the Levant represent some of the world's earliest known towns. These were densely packed settlements where people began to domesticate plants like wheat and barley and animals such as goats and sheep.

This agricultural surplus was the engine of change. It allowed for population growth, specialization of labor, and the emergence of social hierarchies. The subsequent Chalcolithic period (Copper Age) saw the development of metallurgy, long-distance trade networks, and more elaborate religious structures. It was a slow, necessary dawn, setting the stage for the explosive innovation of the Bronze Age. The **History Of Ancient Near East**thus begins not with kings and battles, but with the quiet, revolutionary act of farming.

The Ubaid Period: The Precursor to Sumer

In southern Mesopotamia, the Ubaid period (c. 6500–3800 BCE) laid the foundation for the first true civilization. The Ubaid people built large temple complexes on platforms, indicating a centralized religious authority. They developed sophisticated irrigation systems to control the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This period marks the first clear evidence of social stratification and the movement towards the urban centers that would define the Sumerian world. It was in this crucible of southern Iraq that the first cities of the world would soon rise.

The Sumerians: Inventing the City and the Written Word

Around 4000 BCE, the Sumerians appeared in southern Mesopotamia, and with them, the **History Of Ancient Near East** enters its most creative phase. The Sumerians did not simply live in towns; they invented the city-state. Cities like **Uruk**, **Ur**, **Lagash**, and **Nippur**were independent political entities, each with its own patron deity, ruler, and walls. This period saw an explosion of innovation.

Perhaps the Sumerians' greatest gift to world history was the invention of writing. Around 3200 BCE, they developed cuneiform script, initially to record economic transactions. This system of wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay tablets evolved to record literature, law, and history. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a masterpiece of world literature, was written in cuneiform. They also developed advanced mathematics (base-60, which gives us 60-minute hours), the wheel, the plow, and complex legal codes that preceded the famous Code of Hammurabi. The Sumerian city-state, with its temple (the ziggurat) and its palace, became the model for urban life in the region for centuries.

The Akkadian Empire: The World's First Empire

While the Sumerian city-states were often in conflict, a transformative event occurred around 2334 BCE. Sargon of Akkad, a Semitic ruler from the north, conquered the Sumerian cities and created the world's first true empire. The **Akkadian Empire** was a new kind of political entity: a centralized state that controlled a wide territory, connected by roads and a common administration.

Sargon's empire stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. He installed his daughter, Enheduanna, as the high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur. Enheduanna is the first named author in world history, composing hymns to the goddess Inanna. The Akkadian period represents the first major shift in the **History Of Ancient Near East** from a collection of independent city-states to a unified imperial system. Though the empire collapsed after about 200 years due to internal rebellion and invasion by the Gutian people, the idea of empire had been born and would never be forgotten.

The Third Dynasty of Ur and the Return to Sumerian Order

Following the Akkadian collapse and a period of Gutian rule, the Sumerian city of Ur rose to prominence again under the **Third Dynasty of Ur** (c. 2112–2004 BCE). This period is often called the "Sumerian Renaissance." The kings of Ur, such as Ur-Nammu and his son Shulgi, re-established Sumerian culture and language as the official language of administration, even as Akkadian remained widely spoken.

Ur-Nammu is famous for issuing one of the earliest known law codes, which predates Hammurabi's by three centuries. The period was characterized by massive building projects, including the great Ziggurat of Ur, and a highly centralized, bureaucratic state that controlled every aspect of the economy. The Third Dynasty of Ur is our best window into the organization of a Sumerian state, with tens of thousands of administrative tablets surviving to this day.

The Old Babylonian Period and the Code of Hammurabi

The fall of Ur left a power vacuum, and the **History Of Ancient Near East** entered a period of competing kingdoms. The most famous of these is the **Old Babylonian Kingdom**, under King Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE). Though he began as a minor king, Hammurabi was a brilliant military strategist and diplomat who gradually conquered all of Mesopotamia.

Hammurabi is best remembered for his law code, the **Code of Hammurabi**, a massive stele inscribed with 282 laws. While not the first law code, it is the most complete and famous. It covers everything from property rights and slavery to marriage and medical malpractice, operating on the principle of "an eye for an eye." The Code reveals a society with clear social classes (free men, commoners, and slaves) and a complex legal system. The Old Babylonian period also saw Akkadian become the diplomatic language of the entire Near East, a status it would hold for centuries.

The Age of Empires: Hittites, Kassites, and Mittani

The centuries following Hammurabi saw the rise of new powers that reshaped the **History Of Ancient Near East**. The **Hittites**, an Indo-European people based in Anatolia (modern Turkey), became a major power

around 1600 BCE. They were among the first peoples to master iron smelting on a large scale, and their armies were formidable. The Hittite Old Kingdom under rulers like Hattusili I and Mursili I even managed to raid Babylon in 1595 BCE, ending the Hammurabi dynasty.

In the north of Mesopotamia, the **Kingdom of Mittani** emerged, a powerful state that controlled the upper Tigris and Euphrates region. In the south, the **Kassites** took over Babylon and established a long-lived dynasty that ruled for nearly 400 years. This period is often called the "Age of Internationalism." The great powers—Egypt, Hatti (the Hittite kingdom), Mittani, Babylonia, and Assyria—engaged in diplomacy, trade, and royal marriages. The **Amarna Letters**, a cache of diplomatic correspondence found in Egypt, provide a vivid picture of this international system, where kings addressed each other as "brothers" and exchanged gifts, brides, and insults.

The Rise of Assyria: Masters of Warfare and Administration

The **History Of Ancient Near East**is incomplete without the story of the Assyrians. Originating in the city of Ashur on the Tigris River, Assyria began as a small city-state. Through a combination of military innovation, ruthless tactics, and efficient administration, it grew into the most powerful empire the world had yet seen.

The **Neo-Assyrian Empire**(c. 911–609 BCE) is the period of its greatest expansion. Kings like Ashurnasirpal II, Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal created an empire that stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. The Assyrians were masters of siege warfare, using battering rams, siege towers, and tunnels to capture fortified cities. They were also known for their policy of mass deportation, forcibly relocating conquered populations to break their will to resist.

Yet the Assyrians were not just warriors. They were also great builders and patrons of culture. Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh contained over 30,000 clay tablets, including the standard version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Their palaces were decorated with magnificent reliefs depicting royal hunts and military campaigns. The Assyrian state was a highly centralized bureaucracy, using a network of roads and postal stations to control its vast territory. The empire's fall in 609 BCE was swift and total, but its legacy of imperial organization profoundly influenced those who came after.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire: A Final Flowering of Mesopotamian Culture

With the fall of Assyria, Babylon rose again. The **Neo-Babylonian Empire**(c. 626–539 BCE), under the Chaldean dynasty, was a period of economic prosperity and cultural revival. King Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605–562 BCE) is the most famous ruler of this period. He rebuilt Babylon into the largest and most magnificent city of its time.

Nebuchadnezzar constructed the **Ishtar Gate**, covered in blue glazed bricks with images of dragons and bulls. He built massive walls around the city, and he is popularly associated with the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon**, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. This period also saw the final redaction of many Babylonian religious and literary texts. The Neo-Babylonian Empire is famous in the Hebrew Bible for the Babylonian Captivity of the Jewish people, whom Nebuchadnezzar deported to Babylon after conquering Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

The Achaemenid Persian Empire: Unity Under a New System

The **History Of Ancient Near East** reaches a culmination with the **Achaemenid Persian Empire**(c. 550–330 BCE). In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and created the largest empire the world had ever known, stretching from India to the Balkans and Egypt. The Persians brought a new model of imperial rule that differed significantly from the Assyrian model of terror.

The Persians practiced a policy of tolerance. Cyrus allowed the deported peoples, including the Jews, to return

to their homelands and rebuild their temples. The empire was divided into provinces called **satrapies**, each governed by a satrap who owed loyalty to the Great King. A system of royal roads, most famously the **Royal Road** from Susa to Sardis, allowed for rapid communication and troop movement. The Persians adopted the Aramaic language and script as the common language of administration across the empire.

The Persian Empire was the first truly global empire, connecting the diverse cultures of the Near East, Egypt, and Anatolia into a single political and economic system. It was this world that Alexander the Great conquered in the late 4th century BCE, marking the end of the Ancient Near Eastern period and the beginning of the Hellenistic age. The Achaemenid Empire was the final and most mature expression of the imperial traditions that had evolved over three thousand years in the region.

Legacy of the Ancient Near East

The **History Of Ancient Near East** is not a distant, irrelevant past. Its innovations are the bedrock of our own civilization. The invention of writing, the development of law codes, the emergence of urban life, the creation of the first empires, the observation of the stars, the invention

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