

# EARLY CIVILIZATIONS

Text written by Erdal Yavuz

## Progress towards “civilization”

“Civilization” as a term comes from Latin *civilis* (of or proper to a citizen) as a derivation of *civis* (townsman). The Turkish term *medeniyet* has also a similar correlation as it is derived from the Arabic word *medina* which means “town”.

The emergence of civilization in human history by the development of agriculture and sedentary way of life, dated back to about 6,000 years BC.

The characteristics of these early civilizations are: food production in permanent habitations, processing metals and other natural sources, a division of labor in terms of occupational specialization and the development of writing.

More significant than all the establishment of a complex form of organization, the state and the development of hierarchical administrative bureaucracies are the central characteristics of all civilizations.

Societies with the above distinctions appeared in several different parts of the prehistoric world more or less independent from each other and at different time periods like Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and India.

Civilizations in history had the following common particularities:

1. Intensive agricultural techniques, such as crop development and irrigation permitted a surplus of food beyond the subsistence. This allowed the sustaining of a group of population in other fields, such as administration, industry, war, science or religion etc.

2. Those not in agriculture constituted the population of the cities. By time a government and its bureaucracy in charge of coordinating the tasks of production and protecting the whole community began to concentrate in the cities.

3. This institutionalized control of production by a “ruling” class became more complex in time and other formal social institutions such as organized religion, education, permanent army and markets and money as forms of economic exchange developed. More or less a similar organization appeared in all early civilizations which continued to exist until today : “The State”.

4. A significant aspect of civilization is considered to be the invention of “writing”. The distinguishing of pre-history and history is generally based on the appearance of written documents.

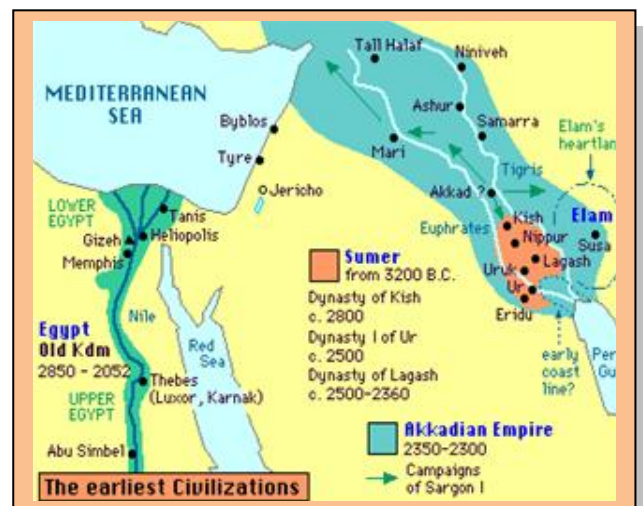
The invention of the first writing systems is in late 4th millennium BC in Sumer and 1000 years later developed into cuneiform.

The first phase in the development of cities began around four thousand B.C. Settlements developed in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq, the Nile valley of Egypt, the Indus Valley region of modern-day Pakistan and North India, and in the Huang He (Yellow River) and Yangtze River valleys of China.

The Harappan civilization of the Indus River valley developed in the middle of the third millennium B.C.E. approximately at the same time as the river civilizations of the Middle East.

The first Chinese civilization developed along the Yellow River in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E.

In this text, due to practical reasons of forced by the course hours and curriculum, only Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations will be studied.



## River valleys

The early cities were located on fertile flood plains next to large rivers and had access to pasture land for raising animals. They also benefited from a warm climate and a permanent supply of water.

Over time, small and simple settlements grew into larger and more complex centers with a variety of activities, from agriculture to trade to manufacturing. Labor became more specialized and this made production more efficient.

The following sources are mainly used in this text  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook.html>  
<http://history-world.org/>  
<http://www.ancientsites.com/>  
<http://www.bartleby.com/67/>  
<http://www.historyguide.org/>

By time a greater collective organization particularly the management of irrigation systems and controlling the redistribution process took shape.

The regularity of agricultural production necessary for the survival, depends on the regularity of water supply. A regular supply could be achieved by the control of the water in irrigation systems and canal networks. Such a task made necessary the common and organized efforts of the communities. This aspect inevitably led to a more centralized organization of the communities.

#### An example of canal maintenance report:

My Lord,

Your servant sends the following message:

Yesterday a young man of Iddin-Dagan came to me; I heard his report and went myself to the weir.... I was at the weir and all is well. The upper switching point made of stone, the one my lord had made, is (still) under water, the water flowing one cubit high over the stone [but the....] is intact. The water has demolished at the middle wall, the lower embankment downstream from the causeway but less than one reed length of it has collapsed. I cut through the stone weir and the water fell at the middle weir so that work has already started on repairing the embankment of the weirs. There is no reason whatsoever for worrying; all is fine. The stone wall and the switching point of stone which my lord made are fine. My lord should not worry.

**Letter from "Mari" (circa 2000 BC)**

**from: Leo Qppenheim, Letters From Mesopotamia, The University of Chicago Press, 1967**

This shift to centralization of coordinative functions and appearance of distinct institutions of administration, namely the formation of the "state" is the most important change in the history of human development.

The earliest known "civilization" Sumer, is believed to have begun around 4000-3500 BC. In Mesopotamia (meaning land between the rivers in Greek) where Tigris (Dicle) and Euphrates (Firat) flow in a valley and finally meet before arriving to the Persian Gulf.

Communities had also developed in the northern regions but since rainfall in that area was so unpredictable, after 5000 B.C. communities began to spread towards the rich alluvial plains of the south.

The economy of these early communities was primarily agricultural and approximately 100-200 people lived in villages.

The rivers rise and fall with the seasons were sometimes unpredictable and caused floods which could destroy crops, livestock and villages. Inevitably floods and heavy rains were one of the common themes in Mesopotamian literature.

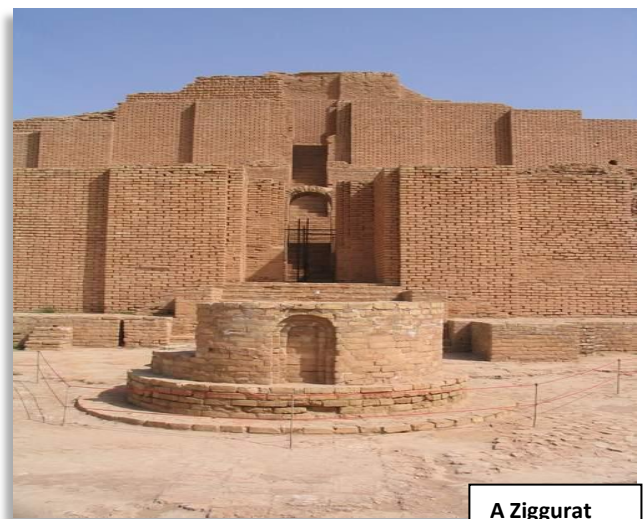
The alluvial plain in southern Mesopotamia was more fertile than the north but there was much less rainfall, and to remedy this, irrigation canals had to be constructed.

The construction of canals demanded cooperation between different social groups in construction, regulation, and maintenance. Due to such a necessity, a common decision organ constituted by the representatives of the communities.

Later on, the "representation" eliminated and replaced by a hereditary administrative elite with a ruler at the top.

During the early stages these rulers were priests. Besides controlling the religious life of the community, they were also managing the economy, land ownership as well as organizing the defense and external relations of the "state".

At the center of the city a temple building called *ziggurat* served also as the headquarter of the administration.



A Ziggurat

Later on, the power began to be represented by a more secular king. However, the priests continued to represent the upper class in the society. Below the ruling class were the scribes and the officials in charge of supervising every aspect of the city's economic and social life.

In brief the society was divided between an elite group of a ruling class, an intermediary group of merchants, artisans, and craftsmen and the free peasants who composed the majority of the population.

War captives turned into slaves also existed in households as well as in various areas of services and production.

### A brief history to 2000 BC

This first historical age, called the Old Sumerian (or Early Dynastic) period starting around 2800 B.C was characterized by frequent warfare as each city sought to protect or enlarge its land and water rights.

Each city-state was a theocracy, for the chief local god was believed to be the real sovereign. The god's earthly representative was called "ensi", the high priest and city governor, who fulfilled both religious and secular functions.

The main land was divided in two parts. A part of the land belonging to the temple called 'common' was worked by all members of the community, while the remaining land was divided among the citizens. For the right to use the land cultivators paid from one third to one sixth of the crop as rent or tax to the administration. Priests and other administrators, however, held rent-free lands and were not subject to taxation. (Does this remind us the Ottoman administration system?)

In addition to the temple (or state) lands, also a part of a territory was owned by traditional tribal groups. After 2600 B.C., these common lands started to become the private property of great landowners called *lugal* meaning "great men". (Does this remind us the decline of the Ottoman "timar" system and rise of *ayan* and *derebeyi's*).

In later periods "*lugal*" will be the political title given to the "king".

Warfare between cities eventually led to the further empowering of "*lugal*"s. Their authority replaced that of early priestly rulers. Sumeria became a more unified state, with a common culture and a centralized government. This led to the establishment of a professional bureaucracy and an army. By 2375 BC, most of Sumer was united under one king, Lugal Zaggisi of Umma.

One of the best known *lugal* is Urukagina, who declared himself *lugal* of Lagash near the end of the Old Sumerian period and ended the rule of priests and "powerful men". Urukagina's reform edict condemns people acting "for their own benefit" and after describing the reforms conclude by the following remarks: "... freed the inhabitants of Lagash from usury, burdensome controls, hunger, theft, murder, and seizure (of their property and persons). ... established freedom. The widow and the orphan were no longer at the mercy of the powerful man."

In about 2340 BC King Sargon of Akkad conquered Sumer and went on to build an empire that stretched westward to the Mediterranean Sea. The empire, though short-lived, promoted further art and literature.

### A picture of the daily life

If someone could narrate his impressions of a Sumerian city state of 2500 BC, the picture would be somewhat like that:

Farmers working in their fields with ox-drawn plows and some of the workers use bronze sickles. The cities surrounded by fields where agricultural goods produced. These lands were thought to be "owned" by a local god.

An official organized groups of farmers to work on the land and provide crops for the community. In all directions, irrigation canals led to grain and vegetable fields.

Dominating the flat countryside is the image of a **ziggurat** placed at the center of the city. Citizens lived in small, one-story houses constructed along narrow alleyways.

The river is dotted by boats carrying produce to and from the city. The incoming boats bring such goods as stone, copper, and timber from the north and Anatolia.

Merchants arrange the trade of grain and manufactures for the metals, stone, lumber, and other essentials not available in Sumer.

#### Daily life is not without problems.

#### Here is something familiar to you!

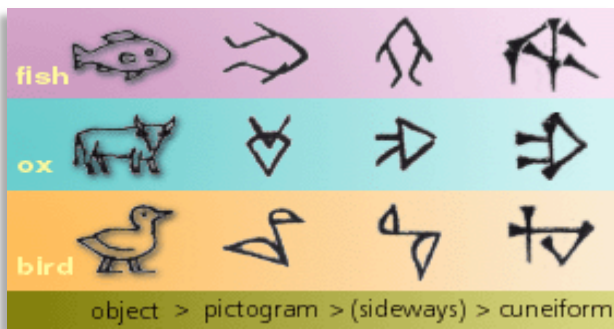
A letter of a boy to his mother, from Old Babylonia, (circa-2025 - 1763 BC)

*From year to year, the clothes of the (young) gentlemen here become better, but you let my clothes get worse from year to year. Indeed, you persisted (?) in making my clothes poorer and more scanty. At a time when in our house wool is used up like bread, you have made me poor clothes. The son of Adad-iddinam, whose father is only an assistant of my father, (has) two new sets of clothes [break] while you fuss even about a single set of clothes for me. In spite of the fact that you bore me and his mother only adopted him, his mother loves him, while you, you do not love me!*

From: Leo Qppenheimer, Letters From Mesopotamia, The University of Chicago Press, 1967

Inside the city, a large number of specialists pursue their appointed tasks as agents of the community and not as private entrepreneurs. Some casting bronze tools and weapons, others fashioning their wares on the potter's wheel.

Scribes would be at work writing clay tablets carrying the orders of the administration addressed to the district administrators. Some would be registering the inventory of the goods received that day as donations to the temple.



How "cuneiform" developed!

Also in these clay tablets will take place the announcements of price and wages, production figures, lists of taxes, contracts and other subjects of organizational life in the community. Some scribes would be occupied in writing basic texts to be used for the purpose of teaching future scribes reading and writing at schools built just for his purpose.



### Sumerian myths

The Sumerians believed that their ancestors had created the land by separating it from the water. According to their creation myth, the world was once watery chaos.

The mother of chaos was Tiamat, an immense dragon. When the gods appeared to bring order out of chaos, Tiamat created an army of dragons.

Enlil, the god responsible for the order and harmony in the universe called the winds to his aid. Tiamat came forward, her mouth wide open. Enlil pushed the winds inside her and she swelled up so that she could not move. Then Enlil split her body open. He laid half of the body flat to form the Earth, with the other half arched over it to form the sky. The gods then created mankind from Tiamat's his blood mixed with clay.

The most popular among the myths is the Gilgamesh epic, considered as one of the outstanding works of ancient literature.

The superhero Gilgamesh originally appeared in Sumerian mythology as a legendary king of Uruk. In one episode he journeys to the bottom of the sea to obtain the plant of eternal life. As he stopped to bathe at a spring on the way home, a hungry snake snatched the plant. When Gilgamesh saw the creature cast off its old skin to become young again, it seemed to him a sign that old age was the fate of humans.

### Mother Nature

A narrative of the fertility god, Dumuzi, and Inanna, the queen of heaven and earth, became in Babylonian accounts the story of Tammuz and Ishtar. Various versions of the myth agree that Dumuzi and Inanna, after a passionate courtship, consummated marriage. Through their marriage the vital forces of nature increased.

The very imagery of Inanna as a well-watered field is an agricultural metaphor, as is the image of Inanna's breast in "Your breast is your field":

**O Lady, your breast is your field,  
Inanna, your breast is your field.  
Your wide, wide field which pours out  
plants Your wide, wide field which pours  
out grain Water flowing from on high for  
the lord, bread from on high  
...I will drink it from you.**

From "Mesopotamian Worldview Expressions"  
at:  
<http://www.albany.edu/faculty/lr618/we3.html>

## Sumerian contributions

The instability of natural phenomenon was side by side with the regular patterns of seasons. These conditions made necessary the observation of the celestial objects, learn their regularities.

Early cultures identified celestial objects with gods and spirits. They related these objects (and their movements) to phenomena such as rain, drought, seasons, and tides. Calendars developed to mark the movements and phases of the Sun and Moon and other bodies of the space. This knowledge was of importance to agricultural societies because a good harvest depended on planting at the correct time.

The calendar developed by Sumerians was adjusted to the phases of the moon. This lunar calendar was adopted later by the Semites, Egyptians, and Greeks.

An example demonstrating how improvement could be enforced by actual needs is the following: The Mesopotamian plain had no stone, no metals, and no timber except its soft palm trees, these materials had to be transported from Syria and Anatolia. Water transport down the Tigris and Euphrates solved the problem. The oldest sailing boat known is represented by a model found in a Sumerian grave of about 3500 B.C. Soon after wheeled vehicles also appear in the form of ass-drawn chariots for warfare as well as the transport of goods overland.

Another important invention was the potter's wheel, "the first really mechanical device." used in Sumer around 3500 B.C. Earlier, people had shaped pots by molding or coiling clay by hand, but now a proportioned product could be produced in a much shorter time.

### Math in Sumer

The Sumerians based their number system on 10, but they multiplied 10 by 6 to get the next unit. They multiplied 60 by 10, then multiplied 600 by 6, and so on. (The number 60 has the advantage of being divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20, and 30.)

The Sumerians also divided the circle into 360 degrees. We can still see traces of a base 60 system in the current use of hours, minutes, and seconds to measure time and degrees (360 in a circle) to measure angles.

## And the first "written" law

We owe the first written law code to a Mesopotamian king Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.) As the king of Babylonia, he founded an empire that was eventually destroyed by raids from Asia Minor. To Hammurabi also attributed the building of the legendary "Tower of Babel". His code of laws is carved on a column, in 3,600 lines of cuneiform; it was found (1902) at Susa and is now at Louvre Museum in Paris.

The code, which addresses such issues as business and family relations, labor, private property, and personal injuries and other regulations of everyday life. A well known aspect is the nature of the punishments, which is reflected in the popular culture as "an eye for an eye". Much of the code is drawn from earlier Sumerian and Semitic laws and reflects the social conditions of the Mesopotamian culture and daily life.



"Hammurabi Law" carved on the stone at the Louvre Museum

## End of Sumer and after

Immediately to the north of Sumer, where the two rivers came most closely together, the plain was less subject to flooding but made fertile by rainfall and irrigation. This area, known first as Akkad.

A Semitic people called the Amorites conquered the area about 2000 B.C. and founded a great new capital city of Babylon. The area hereafter came to be known as Babylonia.

Except for invasions of Hittites, Babylonia continued to dominate Mesopotamia for a thousand years.

The third region, called Assyria, stretched from the north of Babylonia to the Taurus range. The Assyrians, were able to conquer the whole of Mesopotamia in the eighth and seventh centuries and setup a commercial network including Anatolia.

Thus the history of Mesopotamia can be pictured as a shift of the center of power northwards, from Sumer to Babylonia and then to Assyria.

The Babylonian Empire was able to establish a unified trade and cultural zone incorporating much of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. About 1600 B.C.E., Hittite invaders from Asia Minor crushed the Babylonians and established their own empire. The Hittites, in turn, were displaced by a series of smaller kingdoms that disputed the control of Mesopotamia between 1200 and 900 B.C.E. During this period smaller regional cultures, such as the Hebrew and Phoenician, flourished. After 900 B.C.E., a new series of empires the Assyrian and Persian controlled the region.

### Later development of the "Alphabet"

Letter Name	Proto-Sinaitic	Early Phoenician	Greek	Phonetic Value	Letter Meaning
'aleph			A	[ʾ]	ox
beth			B	[b]	house
gimmel			Γ	[g]	throwstick
daleth			Δ	[d]	door
he			E	[h]	
waw			Ϝ ϝ Y	[w]	hook/peg
zayin	=	I	Z	[z]	
heth	III	⊖	H	[h]	fence
teth		⊗	Θ	[t]	
yodh			I	[y]	arm/hand
kaph			K	[k]	palm of hand
lamedh			Λ	[l]	goad/crook
mem			M	[m]	water
nun			N	[n]	snake
samekh		⊕	Ξ	[s]	
'ayin	⊖	⊖	⊖	[ʾ]	eye
pe		⊖	Π	[p]	
tsade			Μ <sup>2</sup>	[s]	
qoph	8	φ	φ <sup>3</sup>	[q]	
reš			P	[r]	head
šin	3	W	Σ	[š]	
taw	+	X	T	[t]	mark (?)

## Another early civilization: Ancient Egypt

The Nile River, longest river in the world, forms a line of life through the sterility of the giant Sahara desert in North Africa. Nile begins at near Khartoum in today's Sudan and ends at the rives of the Mediterranean sea. Along this narrow strip, one of the greatest and most enduring human civilizations established itself.

Around 5000 BC, people began to live in villages up and down the Nile Valley, and one thousand years later Nile culture began to flourish.

From 3900 to 3100 B.C., the villages along the Nile valley grew. The unification of Egypt, took a few generations and finally the first dynasty of Egypt founded. This led to a centralization of authority and capacity through which massive administrative and building projects could be realized.

Large-scale irrigation projects begun as well as large-scale distribution of food and regulation of trade. At the same time, the Egyptians invented writing. The need for record-keeping for the control of lands and production motivated this development. This early form of writing was by pictures which developed into hieroglyphics. Below is a simple chart of early hieroglyphic alphabet.



The most important consequence of unification was the establishment of a state system. By time the institutional structure went beyond the individual king (pharaoh) or his administrators.

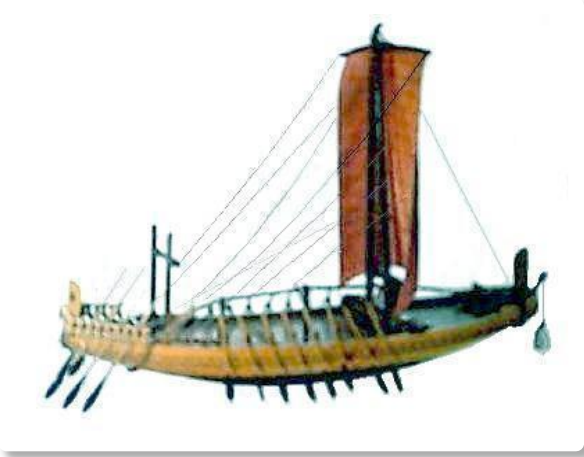
The pharaoh began to be considered an incarnated god. As a god, he brought life, fertility, order, stability, and rationality to the Egyptian state just as the gods could do and the pyramids represented also this divine force.

This institution of the divine king lasted for almost 3000 years and gave to the Egyptian state a stability unseen by any other early civilization.

During the period called The Old Kingdom, (2650-2134 BC) agricultural production had been revolutionized by the building of massive irrigation projects and the population increased exponentially.

This period, is considered to be the richest and most creative period in Egyptian history.

The trade within the county as well as with other regions developed and transport on Nile was made by boats



Above is an Egyptian boat of 2500 BC.

Almost all the pyramids were built at this time; the growth in population and wealth allowed the kings to assign vast amounts of labor and materials to these monuments.

The first pyramids were almost entirely symbolic in nature to exhibit the power of the central administration.

An intermediate period (2134-2040 BC) came when, due to certain climatic conditions the level of Nile reduced causing a production crisis so hunger and death.

All the administrative organization that held the country together during the Old Kingdom fell apart and the country divided into dozens of chiefdoms.

For one hundred years after the decline of the Old Kingdom order and the institution of the Egyptian king was re-established and this period is named as the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BC.)



Trade with foreign countries began again, irrigation projects were repaired, and the writing of texts started.

As the kings of Egypt slowly regained the authority of the monarchy, Egypt again grew in wealth and population.

The large-scale immigration of foreigners into the Nile Valley during the Middle Kingdom also caused end of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt. In time, as their numbers increased, they threatened the power of the Egyptian monarchy itself and Egypt fell into disorder.

This period, called the Second Intermediate Period, saw Egypt ruled by foreign kings for almost a hundred years. The Egyptians, called these kings Heka-Khast, or "Rulers of the Foreign Lands." The Greeks later altered this word to "Hyksos".

1550 BC. an Egyptian general who finally drove out the Hyksos, founded a new dynasty, and started a new era that is named as the New Kingdom, which will last 500 years.

It is towards the end of this period that a young Amenhotep IV rejected the pantheon of Egyptian gods and brought the belief to one and only one god deserved to be worshipped: "Aten" the sun-god.

Renaming himself Akhenaten, with his wife famous Nefertiti, he is considered as the founder of the first monotheistic religion we know of in human history.

Also during this time the Hittite empire began to gain ground towards the Egyptian frontier.

The warfare between Egypt and the Hittites resulted by a treaty signed between Ramses II (pharaoh of Egypt) and the Hittite King Hattusili after the Battle of Kadesh, in what is now modern day Syria, around 1272 B.C. This is the earliest treaty ever signed in history.

The peace treaty was recorded in two versions, one in Egyptian hieroglyphs and the other in Akkadian using Cuneiform script. An interesting note : although the majority of the text is identical, the Hittite version claims that the Egyptians came to them asking for peace whereas the Egyptian version of the same text say it was the other way round.



Above is the famous peace treaty displayed at the Anatolian Civilizations Museum in Ankara.

Around 1000 BC. Egypt fall into another period of political chaos when no-one was really in charge of Egypt. This period is called "The Third Intermediate Period".

In 728 BC, after three hundred years of chaos, Egypt was invaded by the Nubians from the south. Since then Egypt lived under the domination of different powers like Assyrians and Persians. In 332 BC they welcomed the Greek conqueror of Persia, Alexander the Great, into their country as their great liberator.

At its height, Alexander's short lived empire included all of Egypt, Greece, Thrace, Turkey, the Near East, Mesopotamia, and Asia all the way to India.

After the death of Alexander the short lived empire divided among his most powerful generals, and Egypt came under the control of one of his generals and his dynasty will be called the Ptolemaic period.

Even though they adopted Egyptian customs to a certain degree, during the reign of Ptolemaic kings Greek became the state language, and cities were renamed.

The final queen of the Ptolemaic line, is the famous Cleopatra. She fell into a dispute with her half-brother over the succession and invited Julius Caesar and the Romans to intervene. However, when she sided with Mark Antony against Augustus Caesar and lost in the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C., Egypt became a Roman province.

In Egypt anti-Roman sentiment soon crystallized around a new religion, Christianity, introduced in the middle of the first century AD. These Egyptian Christians, called "Copts," saw this religion as a tool to use in anti-Roman struggle but Egypt never recovered as an independent state .

Egypt, at times it the greatest power in the world. At other times, the under the domination of foreign powers. Particularly after 300 AD, its greatness shrank permanently, and now only the stones of their monuments stand as a testimony of three thousand years of a civilization.



Elizabeth Taylor (Cleopatra) and Richard Burton (Mark Antony) in "Cleopatra"(1963) a film of Joseph L. Mankiewicz.