River Valley Civilizations:
Mesopotamia (3500 B.C.E.-1600 B.C.E.)
You Mean the Wheel Was Invented in the Middle East?

Geography of the Fertile Crescent

Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means “land between two rivers.” The Tigris is the river which sits on “top” and Euphrates which is “under.” Mesopotamia is located in a region called the Fertile Crescent because of the land’s curved shape consisting of rich soil. This region is located between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea in Southwest Asia. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flooded Mesopotamia at least once a year leaving behind a fertile mud called silt. Farmers planted crops in the rich soil and used these rivers for irrigation. Early civilizations developed in river valleys because the rivers helped with trade, gave these early city-states protection, and provided fertile soil.

The Sumerians (3000 B.C.E.)

Sumer is believed to be one of the first civilizations located in Mesopotamia. The Sumerians built many cities that shared the same culture yet they had their own government with their own rulers. This began the development of a city-state. At the center of every Sumerian city was a walled temple called a ziggurat. Religion played an important role in Sumer and the Sumerians believed in many gods. The belief in more than one god is called polytheism. Early Sumerian governments were controlled by temple priests but after 2500 B.C.E. city-states came under the rule of dynasties. A dynasty is where rulers pass their power on to their sons who eventually passed it on to their own sons. Kings and priests in Sumer made up the highest level in society with wealthy merchants next. At the lowest level of society were the slaves who were either foreigners who had been captured or Sumerians sold into slavery to pay debts.

The fertile soil of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers made food production prosperous for the Sumerians. Because of the surplus of food, they were able to trade with other long-distance civilizations. Since money was not yet invented, the Sumerians used the barter system to exchange goods. This exchange led to cultural diffusion where products and ideas were shared with nearby cultures. To keep records of their exchanges, early Sumerians used pictograms which were symbols of objects. Around 3000 B.C.E., Sumerian scribes invented a system of writing called cuneiform. Cuneiform was written on a clay tablet baked in the sun.

Along with cuneiform, historians also believe the Sumerians invented the wheel, the sail, and the plow. They were also the first to use bronze. Bronze was used in making weapons and even more advanced tools.
Hammurabi and the Babylonian Empire (1792 B.C.E.-1750 B.C.E.)
Around 2000 B.C.E., the Sumerians were invaded by warriors who made their new capital in the city of Babylon. This empire became known as the Babylonian Empire and reached its peak during the rule of the Hammurabi. To help unify his large empire, Hammurabi created a single code of laws called the Code of Hammurabi. This was one of the earliest written law codes in world history. The Code of Hammurabi gave punishments ranging from fines to death. This code was engraved in stone and placed throughout his empire.

The Phoenicians (1100 B.C.E.)
The Phoenicians were great shipbuilders and sailors who settled in city-states around the Mediterranean Sea near what is today the country of Lebanon. Phoenicia was located between well-traveled trade routes in Egypt and Asia and the location made trade easy. The merchants of Phoenicia traded many goods with other civilizations and needed a way to help people keep records and make writing simpler. The Phoenicians created a system of writing that used symbols to represent sounds. This writing system became known as the Phoenician alphabet. Since the Phoenicians traded with many other civilizations, the Phoenician alphabet was used by many, including the Greeks and the Romans. Today, most western alphabets (including the English alphabet) are based on the Phoenician alphabet.

Quick Review
1. In which of the following settings did the earliest civilizations arise?
   A. Foothills  
   B. River valleys  
   C. Steppe lands  
   D. Mountain ranges  

2. What are three advantages ancient Sumerians had living in cities?
   - Powerful traders along the Mediterranean  
   - Spreaders of culture  
   - Created the first alphabet

3. Which civilization best completes the title of the chart above?
   A. Phoenicia  
   B. Egypt  
   C. Nubia  
   D. Mesopotamia

4. Label the following:
   Tigris River  
   Euphrates River  
   Mesopotamia

Connection to Today
The Code of Hammurabi allowed the large Babylonian Empire to become more unified and made order easier because everyone followed the same single code of laws. The law of the United States, the Constitution, provides order and gives people a sense of unity. What are some other codes of law that exist today?

Resources
FCPS Databases (Marshall Cavendish Digital)
- Mesopotamia (http://www.marshallcavendishdigital.com/article/displayresult/17/4505/46435/searchsolr)
Learn 360
- Early Mesopotamia (http://goo.gl/G9c4y)