In 1799, the Rosetta Stone was found by Napoleon’s troops when they invaded Egypt. The Rosetta Stone (196 B.C.) is inscribed with a royal decree (law) written in Egyptian in two different scripts, hieroglyphic and demotic, and in Greek.

Tomb painting depicting the ideal life that the deceased hoped to enjoy eternally.
It was in these river valleys that people first worked out rules for living together in communities. The earliest rules dealt with irrigation. In order for a farmer to get water from the river to his fields, there had to be a system of dams and canals. The cooperation of whole villages and often whole districts was required to build and defend these canals. Leaders were needed to supervise the building, and laws were needed to ensure that every farmer repaired his own ditches and used only his fair share of water. Thus, the need for water helped create the need for government.

So fertile was the soil of the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia that farmers could produce more than enough food for themselves and their family. They could sell the surplus. As a result trade and commerce developed and with it came the exchange of ideas and inventions between people of different regions. Since there was enough food available, some people could turn their attention to developing art and other skills. Potters learned to shape clay into beautiful vases; weavers learned to make fabrics; carpenters learned to build furniture; and architects and stonemasons learned to construct elaborate buildings.

Cities and towns grew. These were places where farmers could sell their crops, where craftspeople could live and practice their skills, and where rulers could establish their centers of government. In the cities where people lived close together ideas developed and spread.

Let us examine the various nations that developed in the Middle East and see what contributions they have made.

The Ancient Egyptians

The history of ancient Egypt dates back to 5000 B.C., or even earlier. At that time the Egyptians were already using copper tools. Great advances in agriculture had been made through the introduction of the plow and the use of irrigation systems. During the next few thousand years Egyptian civilization reached a very high level.

Although most Egyptians were farmers, many industries existed. Copper mining, stone quarrying, and cabinet making, tanning, metal working, glass blowing, and weaving were some of the most important occupations. Egyptian craftsmen produced wares that were exceptionally beautiful. Since these products were in great demand, seagoing ships carried them to distant lands.

Progress was made in the art of government. The villages were united to form one nation with all power in the hands of the pharaoh, or god-king, who maintained order throughout the kingdom. Religion was very important to the ancient Egyptians, whose main concern was the immortality of the soul. They believed that by mummifying, or preserving the corpse, the soul would have eternal life. Later they developed the idea that everlasting life was a reward for those who were good while alive.

One of the most important Egyptian contributions to civilization was the development of the art of writing. The Egyptians did not develop a real alphabet. Their system of writing was known as hieroglyphics. Picture-like signs represented objects and later ideas. Still later these signs were used to represent the sounds of words and then the sounds of syllables. Ink was made, and writing was done on rolls of papyrus which were stored in earthen jars. This made it possible to accumulate knowledge and pass it on to future generations.

It is believed that the first calendar in the world was developed in Egypt, perhaps as early as 4241 B.C. This calendar consisted of 12 months with 30 days each. At the end of the year five days were added on.
Architecture was highly advanced in ancient Egypt. Because of their concern with life after death, the pharaohs concentrated on building huge tombs to preserve their bodies and to hold all the objects they would need in the next life. These pyramids still stand today, 4,000 years after they were constructed. The pyramids, as well as the magnificent temples that were built, are proof that the Egyptians were skilled engineers who knew the principles of architecture and mathematics. Sculpture and painting were also developed and were used for decoration of the palaces and pyramids.
The Egyptians were well advanced in the science of mathematics. Exact measurements were needed to build pyramids. Since the Nile frequently overflowed its banks and erased field boundaries, precise land measurements were necessary. To meet these needs the Egyptians learned to add and subtract. They also could multiply and divide by two and three. They knew the basic principles of geometry and algebra.

**The Peoples of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent**

During the 3,000 years that the Egyptians were developing their civilization, equally important advances were being made by other people living in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and along the Mediterranean Sea. However, since there were no natural barriers to protect them, this area was the scene of constant warfare and the rise and fall of numerous nations.

**Sumerians**

By 3500 B.C., the Sumerians already had an advanced civilization in the fertile land lying between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Here, as in Egypt, the mild climate and good soil produced abundant harvests. The need for irrigation led to the growth of government. Flourishing cities arose where craftspeople produced textiles, metal products, and other goods. The Sumerians are given credit for being the first people to use wheeled vehicles. They also made important progress in mathematics. They developed a number system based on 60, which today is the basis for dividing a circle into 360° and an hour into 60 minutes. Geometric formulas were devised to compute the area of a triangle. It is believed that the Sumerians were the first people to develop a system of writing. Their writing is known as **cuneiform**. There were 350 signs representing complete words or syllables. Writing was done on soft clay tablets. Many other people of the Middle East borrowed this system of writing and used it until the introduction of the alphabet centuries later. The Sumerians were practical business people and were probably the first to use contracts in business. Sumerian literature included stories of the creation and the flood, which are similar to the later Hebrew stories found in the Bible.
Babylonians

The Sumerians were conquered by a group of people whose capital was Babylon, and who came to be known as Babylonians. The Babylonians are famous for the law code of Hammurabi, their greatest ruler. This law code provided that "If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If a builder builds a house for a man and does not make its construction firm, and the house which he has built collapses and causes the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death." Although the punishments were harsh, the code was an attempt to provide some form of justice.

Hittites

The Hittites reached the height of their power around 1500 B.C. in the area that is today Turkey and Syria. They were among the earliest people to use iron, and it was through them that the metal came to be used throughout the Middle East.

Lydians

The Lydians were the first people to use coined money in the 9th century B.C.

Phoenicians

The Phoenicians lived in cities along the Mediterranean in the land that is today Lebanon. They were the greatest traders, navigators, and colonizers of their day. They were skilled manufacturers, and their purple dye, textiles, metal goods, and glassware were famous throughout the Mediterranean world. Their most important contribution was the alphabet which they developed, consisting of 22 consonant signs arranged in definite order. Their first two symbols were called aleph and bet, and it is from these that the word alphabet comes.

Hebrews

The major contribution of the Hebrews was in religion, which was discussed earlier.

Chaldeans

In the 7th century B.C., Mesopotamia came under the control of the Chaldeans. These people were important because of the progress they made in astronomy. Through systematic observation of the heavens, the Chaldeans were able to identify many stars and planets and even predict eclipses.

Persians

By 500 B.C., all the lands in the Middle East has been conquered by the Persians, the people who now live in the area we know as Iran. In fact, the Persian empire was so large that it extended up to the frontiers of India in the east and included parts of Greece in the west. In this vast empire many different people mingled together and exchanged ideas and inventions. The Persians ran their empire very efficiently. Roads were built connecting distant lands. It may be said that the Persians developed the first pony express. Every 14 miles there was a post station where fresh horses could be obtained by the king’s messengers. The Persians treated the conquered peoples humanely, granting equal rights to all and respecting the gods of all. Their religion, Zoroastrianism, taught that there was a continuous struggle in the world between two great forces—righteousness and evil, and that righteousness would prevail (triumph).

Decline of the Middle East Kingdoms

As we have seen, the ancient Middle East made tremendous contributions to civilization. However, after several thousand years of advance, progress seemed to level off and come to a standstill. By the 5th century B.C., the center of civilization had shifted west along the Mediterranean Sea to Greece. For the next thousand years most of the advances in Western civilization came from the Greeks and the Romans. However, many of the ideas and discoveries of the ancient Middle East were borrowed by the Greeks and then developed still further.

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The Triumph of Islam—Muslim Civilization 622–1453

The Spread of Islam

Until the 7th century A.D., the people of Arabia had never played a large part in the development of the Middle East. Living in an area that was mainly desert, most of their time was spent looking after their flocks and wandering in search of water. In the 6th century, the Arabs had not yet reached the high level of civilization that the Hebrews, Egyptians, and other people of the Middle East had reached centuries earlier. However, in the 7th century, inspired by the teachings of Mohammad, the Arabs swept over Persia, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa in search of converts to the new religion and economic gains.

They conquered one settlement after another. In the west, Arab armies conquered Spain. They swept across south and central France until they were finally stopped at Tours, in the famous battle of 732 A.D. Although stopped in the west, the Arabs continued their successes in the east, extending their power into Central Asia and later into India and Southeast Asia. Within a century after Mohammed’s death, the Arab empire extended from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to India in the east.