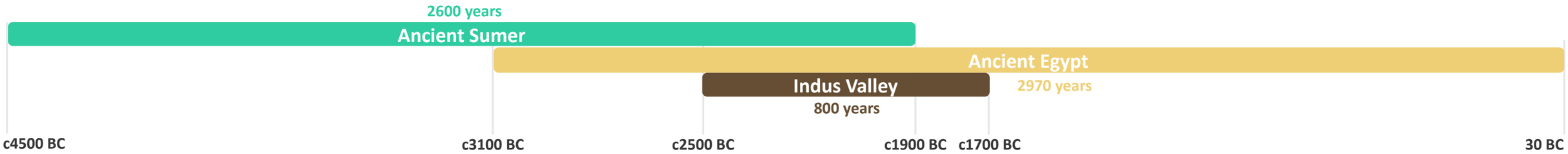
Ancient Civilisations

A civilisation is a developed society. Civilisations share common features, including cities, inventions, language, writing, hierarchy, leadership, infrastructure, arts and culture, trade and religion. Ancient civilisations first appeared over 6000 years ago in, or near, a semicircular area of land in the Middle East known as the Fertile Crescent. The climate, availability of water and variety of plants in the Fertile Crescent meant that nomadic hunter-gatherers could settle in one place and begin to farm for the first time.



Ancient Sumer

Ancient Sumer was the very first civilisation. It originated between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in modern Iraq. Being near a river was important for early civilisations, providing water for drinking and fertile soil for agriculture. The ancient Sumerian civilisation began c4500 BC and lasted for around 2600 years.

Cities

After nomadic people settled down as farmers instead of hunter-gatherers, small villages grew into cities. Public buildings and temples were built, surrounded by a protective wall. Cities, such as Uruk and Ur, had ports on the river for trade and canals for irrigation. The ancient Sumerians used mud bricks to build homes and huge ziggurats.

Rulers

A series of city states grew up in ancient Sumer. The city states were often at war with each other. A king or queen ruled each city and lived in a palace. King Lugalzaggisi united the city states of ancient Sumer under one ruler, but then King Sargon, of the neighbouring kingdom of Akkad, conquered ancient Sumer. He forced everybody to speak the same language and crushed rebellions. Sumer became part of the Akkadian empire.

Inventions

The ancient Sumerians invented many things to make work easier and life more comfortable. They developed a type of writing, called cuneiform, and a numbering system to communicate and keep records. The ancient Sumerians also invented the wheel, the plough, astonomy, irrigation and beer.

Food and farming

The ancient Sumerians grew their food in the fertile soil next to the rivers. Plenty of food meant that the population grew and there were crops to trade. The plough made farming easier and allowed people time to develop new skills.

Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptian civilisation began on the banks of the Nile, in the Fertile Crescent. Egypt was initially split into Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north. It became one kingdom c3150 BC. The civilisation lasted for around 2970 years.

Cities

The ancient Egyptians built cities on the fertile banks of the Nile, with easy access to water for crops and drinking. Most cities had a surrounding wall and two entrances. A main road ran through the centre of the city. Smaller, narrower streets connected to the main road. People lived in mudbrick houses, which were often two storeys high, with an open courtyard.

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Rulers

Pharaohs ruled over ancient Egypt with absolute power. The ancient Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was the earthly representative of the gods. The most well known pharaoh is Tutankhamun. His tomb was discovered in the Valley of the Kings by Howard Carter in 1922. The vast number of priceless artefacts found buried with the pharaoh provided a lot of information about life in ancient Egypt.

Inventions

The ancient Egyptians improved earlier innovations and invented many useful items to make life easier. They created clocks and calendars for telling the time. They made paper from the papyrus plants to record information. To help move water for their crops, they invented a *shaduf*, which used a lever mechanism to move a heavy bucket of water from a low to higher level.

Food and farming

The ancient Egyptians grew crops in the fertile soil next to the Nile. The most important crops were wheat and barley, which they used to make bread, porridge and beer. They also grew vegetables, fruits and flax to make into linen. Agriculture was essential to the ancient Egyptian economy. It provided food for the people, with enough left over to store for years of drought.

Indus Valley

The Indus Valley civilisation developed next to the Indus River in modern Pakistan and north-west India. The river provided the water needed for crops, drinking and transport. Historians know much less about the Indus Valley civilisation than those of ancient Sumer and ancient Egypt due to a lack of evidence. The civilisation began c2500 BC and lasted around 800 years.

Cities

The two largest cities that we know about are Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Excavations have shown that both cities were well planned. Each city had a citadel, marketplace, granary, workshops and a sophisticated sewerage and drainage system. The houses were built from mud bricks and often had toilets and baths inside. Large buildings have been excavated, such as the Great Bath in Mohenjo-daro.

Rulers

Historians do not know how the Indus Valley civilisation was ruled. It is possible that there were kings or priests, or perhaps each city had a ruling council. During the excavations, archaeologists did not uncover any palaces or royal tombs.

Inventions

The people of the Indus Valley made many new inventions. Their impressive sanitation system included flushing toilets and wastewater pipes. They were the first to use a standardised system of weights and measures. They also invented dice so that they could play games.

Food and farming

Farming was very important in the Indus Valley. The fertile floodplains beside the Indus River meant that they grew more than enough food to feed the population. Crops, such as wheat, barley, peas and lentils, were grown and used for bread and porridge.

Similarities and differences

The ancient Sumerians, ancient Egyptians and Indus Valley civilisation all developed next to rivers, which they used to provide water, transport and irrigation systems. They all made good use of the fertile land for growing crops. Each civilisation invented new things to advance their society. It is likely that these civilisations shared similarities because they coexisted for a period of time and were connected by trade. However, there were differences. Kings ruled individual city states in ancient Sumer, whereas pharaohs ruled all of ancient Egypt. Also, the Indus Valley civilisation planned their cities, whereas the cities of ancient Sumer and ancient Egypt grew and changed over time.

Glossary

civilisation	The developed culture and way of life of a society.
Fertile Crescent	The semicircular area of land where the first ancient civilisations began.
irrigation	The digging of channels to allow water to flow through a field to water crops.
nomadic	A lifestyle involving moving from place to place.
ziggurat	A large pyramid made from mud bricks, with a temple on top.

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