

Historical River Valley Civilizations Source Sheet

	Egypt	Mesopotamia	Shang
Geography	Egypt was protected by natural barriers on all sides. The Nile provided the perfect waterway for trade. Also, the Nile flooded each year at about the same time, a fact that gave them a distinct sense of each year's passing (they created the calendar to predict this). It also naturally fertilized the land and provided for abundant agriculture. Many people attribute the Egyptians' optimism (eternal life) on the good fortune of its geography.	The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flooded randomly and violently without much warning, a condition that probably contributed to their pessimistic view of the gods and fatalistic view of life. Also, Mesopotamia had no natural barriers protecting them from enemy neighbors. They were subject to constant invasion. The rivers facilitated trade and allowed some of the cities to grow quite wealthy.	China is geographically isolated. Although the Shang traded with other civilizations, their limited contact with others produced an ethnocentric outlook. They called their land the Middle Kingdom, an assertion that implied that other people were on the periphery of the civilized world. Their land was fertile and supported a surplus of agriculture without complex irrigations systems.
Political	Egypt was united under one central government. Egyptians believed the king, or Pharaoh, was a god. This helped keep order because people were more inclined to obey the king if he was a god. Religious myths reinforced this belief. The government was strictly centralized and controlled the resources of the state.	Mesopotamian civilization was made up of many independent city-states that never were able to unit. This made them weak and vulnerable to invasion. However, sometimes the people had to unite to build irrigation canals for their agriculture. They developed written laws, the Code of Hammurabi, which was probably made to give unity to an expanding empire.	Most rule was local, consisting of a network of walled towns whose leaders were loyal to the king. These local leaders comprised the bureaucracy, a group of aristocratic chieftains who could be removed at the kings will.
Society and Economics	Women had more rights than in most early civilizations. There were certain jobs, however, that women were not allowed to do. The vast majority of people in Egypt worked in agriculture. The Nile allowed Egyptians to trade with other civilizations and were in turn influenced by them.	The Code Of Hammurabi reinforced patriarchy and social distinctions. A business class of people operated quite independent of government control. Like in Egypt, most people in Mesopotamia were farmers. Certain cities traded and grew rich. We know they traded with Egypt and India.	The family was the most important social institution. Men had most all of the authority. As villages became more productive, social classes became more distinct.
Religion	The Egyptians were polytheistic. The lineage of the gods extended to the pharaoh himself who had absolute power and was revered as a god.	The Mesopotamians were polytheistic. Each city-state had its own set of god that it worshipped along with a set of wider known gods. They built monuments called ziggurats to their gods. Their gods were often different manifestations of nature and were invoked to help in good harvests.	The honor and respect given to family elders was related to the worship of ancestors. Dead ancestors were summoned for advice through oracle bones and other means. Thus religion both drew from and reinforced patriarchy.