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CHAPTER ONE: FIRST EMPIRES AND CIVILIZATIONS

3500 BC to 800 BC

MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

SUMERIA

In about 5000 BC, farmers settled on the fertile land of southern Mesopotamia (now Iraq) known as Sumer, and from these humble beginnings the world's first great civilization formed. Living along the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates (Mesopotamia is Greek for the land 'between two rivers'), Sumerian farmers were able to grow an abundance of grain and other crops, the surplus of which enabled them to settle in one place. Sumerians also traded this surplus food for metals and tools with people as far away as present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, and they dug a network of ditches and canals as drainage channels on their fertile but flood-prone lands.

By 3000 BC, a number of city-states had developed in Sumer, the largest being Ur, with a population of 40,000. The first known system of writing originated in Sumer: at first pictographic, it gradually evolved into a series of simplified wedge-shaped signs formed using reed stalks on clay tablets (the script came to be called 'cuneiform', meaning

‘wedge-shaped’ in Latin). Sumerians also devised complex administrative and legal systems, developed wheeled vehicles and potters’ wheels, and built great ziggurats and buildings with columns and domes.

The first great empire of Sumer was established by Sargon, king of Akkad (an ancient kingdom situated north of Sumer), in about 2350 BC. All Sumerian cities were united under his control and the empire stretched from Syria to the Persian Gulf. This dynasty was destroyed in about 2200 BC but after 2150 BC the kings of Ur re-established Sumerian authority in Sumer and also conquered Akkad. Following an invasion by the Elamites (a civilization to the east of Sumer) and the sack of Ur in around 2000 BC, Sumer came under Amorite rule, out of which emerged the great city-state of Babylon (see page 14).

ANCIENT EGYPT: THE OLD KINGDOM

The first great civilization in Africa began with the settlement of the Nile valley in the north-east of the continent in around 5000 BC. It’s now thought these early settlers were from the Sahara, where, some 2,000 years earlier, Africa’s first farming societies had developed before climate change had turned the Sahara into desert. This same climate change had dried out the swamps of the Nile valley, making it more of an attractive settlement for farming people.

By the mid-fourth millenium BC, the valley of the Nile was densely populated, towns had grown and the region had been divided into two Egyptian kingdoms. Traditional Egyptian chronology tells us that in 3200 BC, the pharaoh (ruler)