

**The First Civilizations**

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**The Earliest Humans**

Anthropologists believe that the first humans appeared in Africa a few million years ago and that modern Homo Sapiens sapiens, or modern man, evolved by around 200,000 years B.C. (see Figure 1.1) This is known as the Paleolithic Era, or Old Stone Age. However, various religious traditions have alternative explanations for the origins of humanity.

Around 10,000 B.C., the earliest domestication of plants, such as barley and other cereal grains, occurred in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. (see Figure 1.2) These earliest farmers lived in permanent villages, some of which eventually grew into large towns.

By 8000 B.C., people lived in the town of Jericho surrounded by a defensive wall. (see Figure 1.3) Archeologists have uncovered another early town in what is now southern Turkey called Catal Hayuk. Animals, such as goats and sheep, were also domesticated during the Neolithic Era, or the New Stone Age.

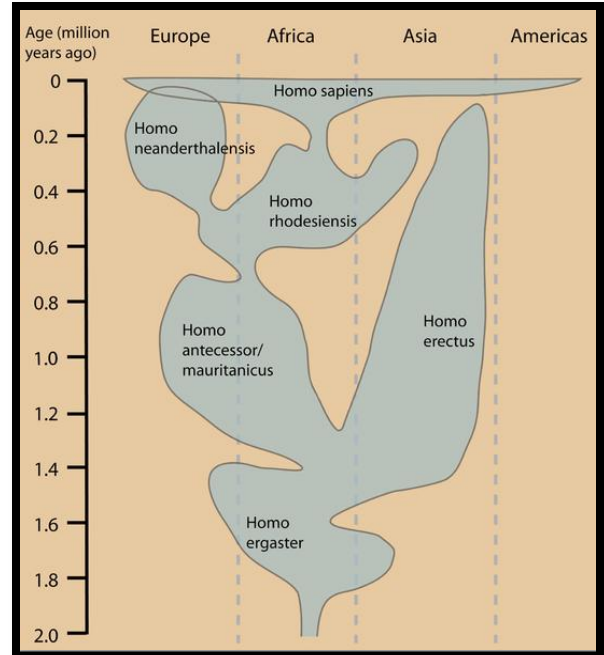


Figure 1.1 – Evolution of Hominids



Figure 1.2 – The Fertile Crescent



Figure 1.3 – Jericho

## The First Civilizations

By around 3000 B.C., people began to gather into larger communities. Large city such as Ur had emerged. (see Figure 1.4)

Around these cities, kingdoms known as city-states arose in a region of the Fertile Crescent known as Mesopotamia. Living in cities, or urban areas, was just one aspect of the process of evolution from pre-civilized to civilized societies that was taking place.

Historians have identified several things that were important to this transition, besides living in cities. These include:

- 1) the replacement of tools and weapons made of stone to those made of metal (a discovery that marks the transition from the New Stone Age to the Bronze Age) (see Figure 1.5);
- 2) the creation of a system of writing to allow record keeping;
- 3) the development of well-organized religious structures with a professional priestly caste;
- 4) political and military structures with a government bureaucracy that could manage the administrative demands of the growing population; and
- 5) a new level of artistic and intellectual creativity.

Besides the technological innovation of making bronze tools and weapons, the people of these city-states also developed a system of writing known as cuneiform, and thus the historical era of human development began. (see Figure 1.6)

Besides cuneiform writing, the Sumerians, Babylonians, and other Mesopotamians made many other contributions. They also developed elaborate irrigation systems for their crops. Along with improved methods of agriculture, these early societies also established new forms of government. One effort to establish a well-organized system of government can be seen in the code of laws issued by the Babylonian king, Hammurabi. It was the earliest systematic legal code yet uncovered. This “eye for an eye” set of laws was class based. Punishments varied depending upon what social class someone belonged to. (see Figure 1.7)



Figure 1.4 – Location of Ur



Figure 1.5 – Bronze Age Weapons

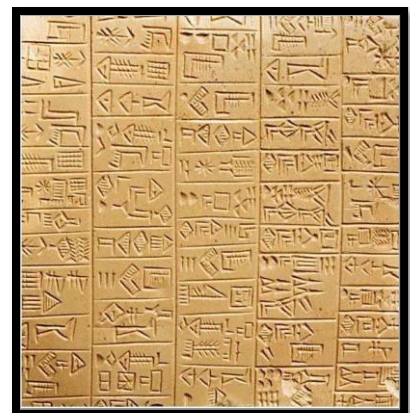


Figure 1.6 – Cuneiform Tablet



The Mesopotamian city-states were led by kings who were supported and maintained by a class system of nobles, military, and religious leaders. However, in the cities people were engaged in many different occupations necessary to a civilized society. Some people were craftsmen, some were shopkeepers, and others were involved in the growing trade network of the region. These traders were important to the spread of new ideas and innovations from one region to another. Slavery was also an institution that was widespread in the region; however, the majority of the people were farmers.



Figure 1.7 – Stela of Hammurabi's Code

Although the people of ancient Mesopotamia followed polytheistic religious beliefs, each city-state usually had one special god that they followed. The Epic of Gilgamesh is one interesting story about religious belief in the region of Mesopotamia. This story revolves around the mythological hero-king Gilgamesh's search for and failure to achieve immortality (see Figure 1.8). The mythology of ancient Mesopotamia influenced later civilizations. For instance, the story of the Hebrew prophet Moses relates how he was pulled from a reed basket floating down the Nile River. One thousand years before Moses, there was a very similar story about a great Mesopotamian king named Sargon who was also rescued from a reed basket flowing down a river. (see Figure 1.9) The Great Flood story of Noah was just one of many flood stories common throughout the ancient world. (see Figure 1.10)

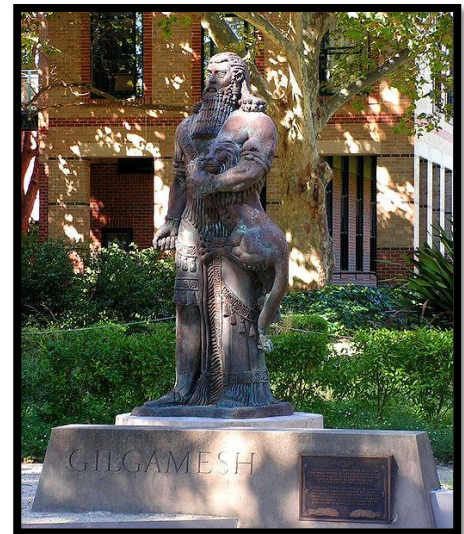


Figure 1.8 – Statue of Gilgamesh and Enkidu



Figure 1.10 – Noah's Ark



Figure 1.9 – Sargon

### Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egyptian civilization arose along the banks of the Nile River. The Egyptians organized a highly centralized political system unlike ancient Mesopotamia which was divided into many different warring city-states. (see Figure 1.11)

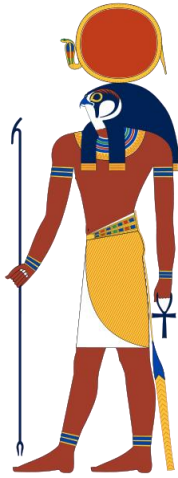


Figure 1.12 – RE

Mesopotamians and Egyptians both practiced polytheistic religions, or the worship of many Gods. The sun god, Re, also known by other names, was the most important Egyptian deity (see Figure 1.12). Osiris, his wife Isis, and their child Horus were just a few of the other significant deities. Osiris was the final arbiter, or judge of the dead (see Figure 1.13).

The Egyptians came to believe that their kings or pharaohs were gods.

This may explain the practice of mummification and the building of elaborate burial chambers for the pharaohs (see Figure 1.14). Egyptians held elaborate beliefs about life after death. They believed in ka, or life-force, which would leave the body at death. They also believed that ka was sustained by food and drink, so for ka to survive, it needed to consume food and drink after death as well.



Figure 1.11 – Egyptian Civilization

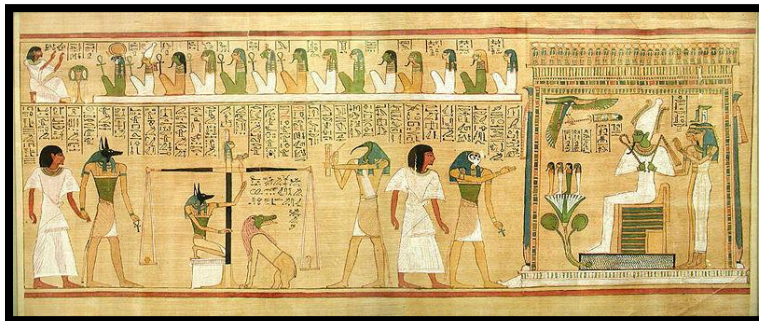


Figure 1.13 – The Book of the Dead, a guide to the afterlife



Figure 1.14 – Egyptian Pyramids



Egyptians also believed in Maat. This concept combined law, justice, morality, balance, order, and truth. Maat was also a goddess who regulated the stars, seasons, and the activities of both men and the gods (see Figure 1.15). The order of the universe at the time of creation was established by Maat. This concept also embraced all aspects of existence, including the cycle of the seasons, the movements of heavenly bodies, religious rituals, and interpersonal interactions that dealt with honesty and truthfulness. The Egyptians saw the actions of the gods behind all of the elements and forces of nature, and they believed that each element of nature was itself a divine force.



Figure 1.15 – Goddess Maat

Not only did the Egyptians worship female goddesses. A woman named Hatshepsut (see Figure 1.16) became the pharaoh, however, images of her show that she was clothed and bearded like a man. Women within Egyptian society did tend to enjoy a more co-equal existence with men than most other ancient societies. They enjoyed property and inheritance rights, even after marriage. Some women even operated businesses.

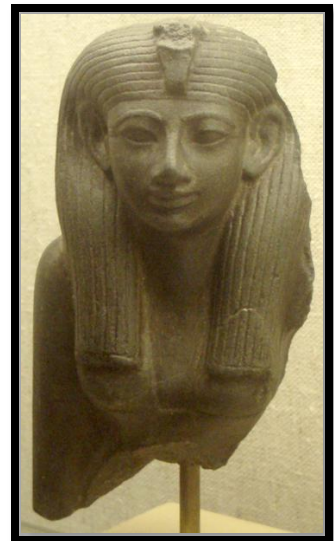


Figure 1.16 – Hatshepsut

Although the Egyptians were primarily polytheistic, they experienced a short period of monotheism. Just before the time of Hebrew leader Moses, the pharaoh Akhenaten attempted to change the official worship of other gods with the worship of only the sun god, Aten (see Figure 1.17). According to Biblical tradition, Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egyptian slavery shortly after the Egyptian's attempt at monotheism. Some have speculated that Moses' emphasis on monotheism could have been influenced by the monotheistic efforts of Akhenaten (see Figure 1.18).

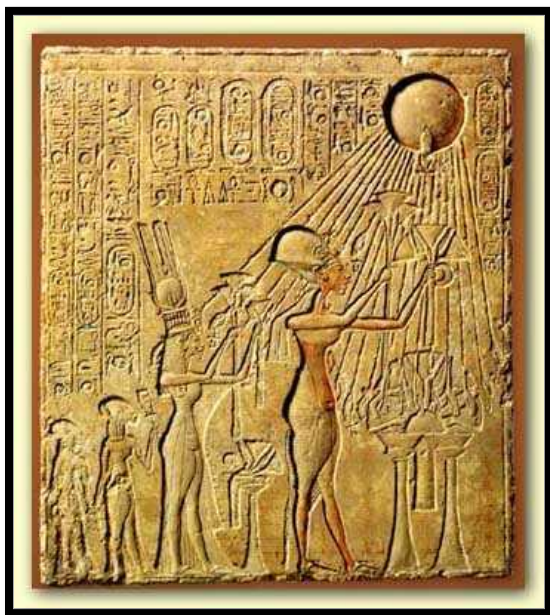


Figure 1.17 – Pharaoh Akhenaten and his family adoring the Aten



Figure 1.18 – Moses talking to the burning bush (God)

## Other Peoples

Hebrews were especially important in their contributions to the religious traditions of Western Civilization. According to Biblical tradition, the Hebrews, or followers of the patriarch Abraham, were the first people to develop a belief in one god, or monotheism, around 1750 B.C. After the time of Abraham, the Hebrews, or Jews, experienced centuries of struggle on their path toward a full acceptance of monotheism. Within Hebrew tradition, Moses was the greatest of many Jewish prophets. Not only did he lead the Jews out of captivity, he also spoke to the burning bush (God) on top of Mt. Sinai. Jewish tradition states that this is where he received not only the Ten Commandments, but all of the first five books of the Old Testament, or Torah.

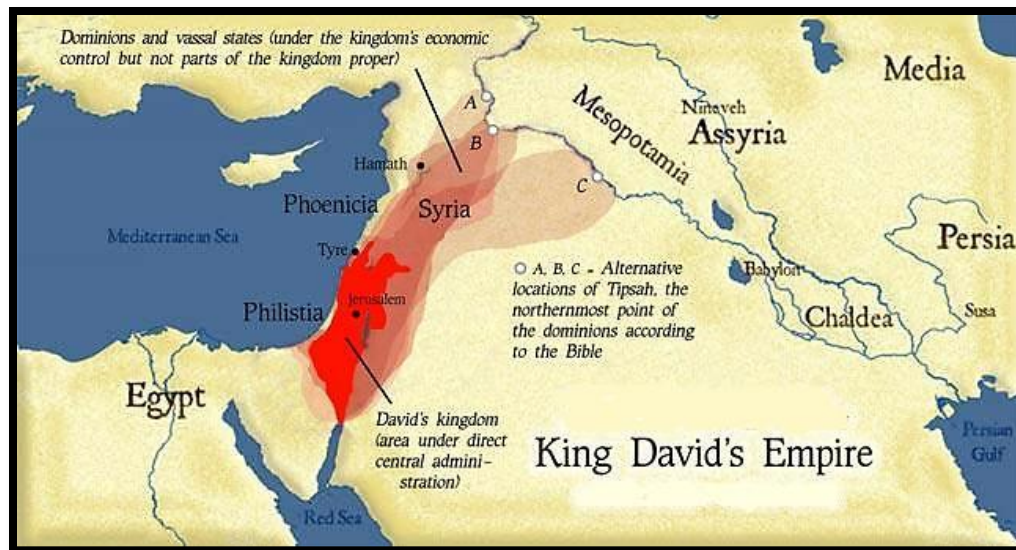


Figure 1.19 – Jewish Kingdom

After the time of Moses the Hebrews were able to conquer the region of Palestine, which includes today's modern state of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Under the leadership of Jewish kings such as Saul, Solomon, and David, the Hebrews developed a small but powerful kingdom centered around the city of Jerusalem, in a region of the Fertile Crescent known as the "Promised Land." (see Figure 1.19)

The Hebrews, Babylonians, and Assyrians (a people we will discuss later) were all linguistically related and belonged to the Semitic language family. Semitic speaking people dominated much of the ancient Middle East until around 1500 B.C. Then, a new people who belonged to the Indo-European language family arrived in the region. The Iron Age began with the arrival of the Hittites. (see Figure 1.20). They organized a powerful state on the Anatolian Peninsula and were aided in their efforts by the use of iron weapons. The Hittites competed with the Egyptians for dominance. They both attempted to control Palestine. The Hittites absorbed ideas from the Mesopotamian cultures and played an important role in transmitting Mesopotamian culture to the Mycenaean Greeks. (see Figure 1.21)

The early development of Western Civilization was built upon the foundations established by the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. Many others from the ancient Middle East also contributed to the development of Western Civilization. The Phoenicians, Assyrians, and Persians each played an influential role. But this is just the beginning. As we move forward from here, we will consider how other peoples built upon these early accomplishments. Perhaps no people added more to the development of Western Civilization than the Greeks or Romans, which we will examine in future Learning Units.

Figure 1.20 – Language Families



Major language Families		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afroasiatic languages                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Berber</li> <li>◻ Chadic</li> <li>◻ Cushitic</li> <li>◻ Semitic</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Altaic language families                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Mongolic languages</li> <li>◻ Tungusic languages</li> <li>◻ Turkic languages</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Amerindian language families                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Algic languages</li> <li>◻ Je-Tupi-Carib language families</li> <li>◻ Mayan languages</li> <li>◻ Quechua and Aymaran language families</li> <li>◻ Uto-Aztecan languages</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Austro-Asiatic languages</li> <li>◻ Austronesian languages</li> <li>◻ Dené-Yeniseian languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Dravidian languages</li> <li>◻ Eskimo-Aleut languages</li> <li>◻ Indigenous Australian language families</li> <li>• Indo-European languages                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Albanian</li> <li>◻ Armenian</li> <li>• Balto-Slavic                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Baltic</li> <li>◻ Slavic</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Celtic</li> <li>• Germanic                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ North Germanic</li> <li>◻ West Germanic</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Greek</li> <li>• Indo-Iranian                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Indo-Aryan</li> <li>◻ Iranian</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Romance</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Khoisan language families</li> <li>◻ Kradai languages</li> <li>◻ Language Isolate</li> <li>◻ Niger-Congo languages                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Bantu</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Nilo-Saharan languages</li> <li>◻ Paleosiberian language families</li> <li>◻ Papuan language families</li> <li>• Sino-Tibetan languages                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Sinitic (Chinese)</li> <li>◻ Tibeto-Burman</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ South Caucasian languages</li> <li>• Uralic languages                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finno-Ugric                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◻ Finno-Permic</li> <li>◻ Ugric</li> </ul> </li> <li>◻ Samoyedic</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



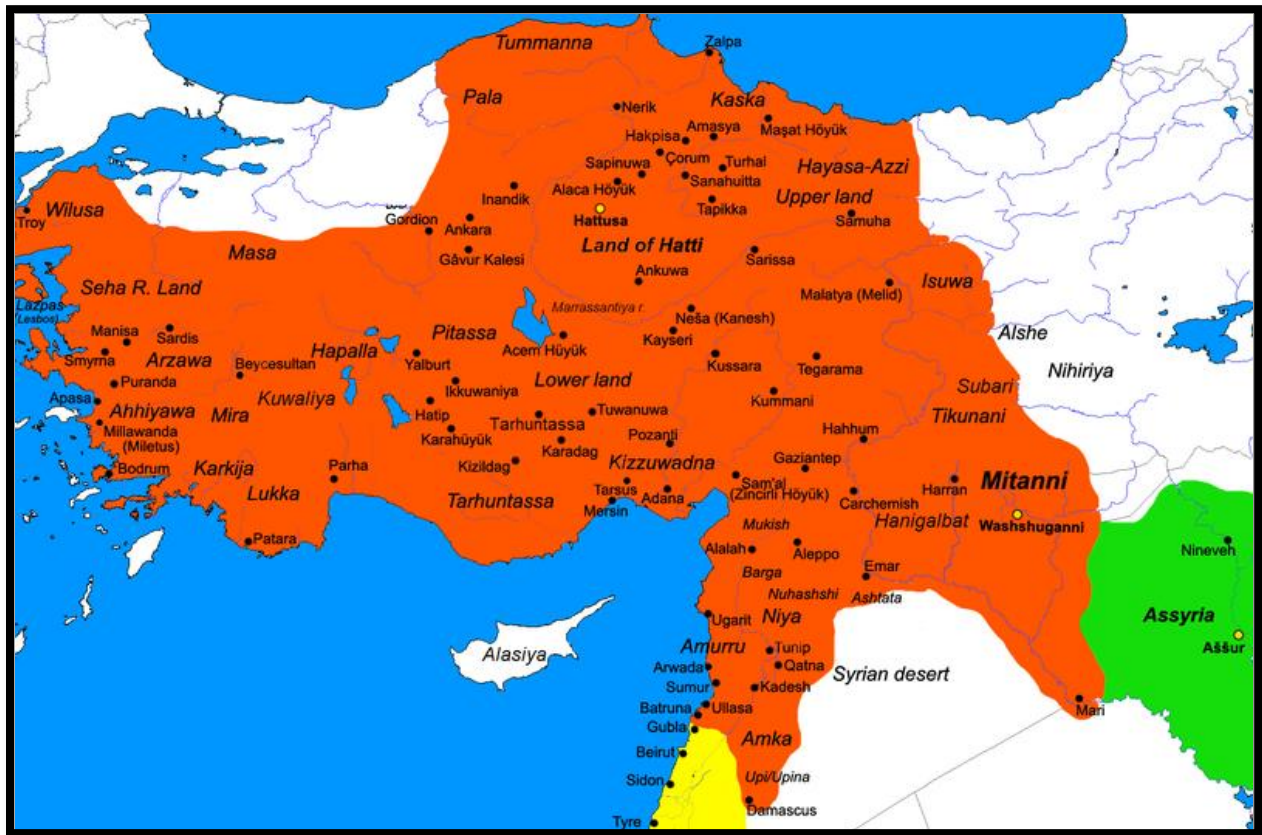


Figure 1.21 – Hittite Empire.

**Figure 1.1 – Evolution of Hominids**

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**Figure 1.2 – The Fertile Crescent**

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**Figure 1.3 – Jericho**

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**Figure 1.4 – Location of Ur**

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**Figure 1.5 – Bronze Age Weapons**

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**Figure 1.6 – Cuneiform Tablet**

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**Figure 1.7 – Stela of Hammurabi’s Code Code on Clay Tablets**

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**Figure 1.8 – Statue of Gilgamesh and Cub**

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**Figure 1.9 – Sargon**

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**Figure 1.10 – Noah’s Ark**

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**Figure 1.11 – Egyptian Civilization**

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**Figure 1.12 – Re**

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**Figure 1.13 – The Book of the Dead, a guide to the afterlife.**

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**Figure 1.14 – Egyptian Pyramids**

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**Figure 1.15 – Goddess Maat**

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**Figure 1.16 – Hatshepsut**

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**Figure 1.17 – Pharaoh Akhenaten and his family adoring the Aten**

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**Figure 1.18 – Moses talking to the burning bush (God)**

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**Figure 1.19 – Jewish Kingdom.**

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**Figure 1.21 – Hittite Empire**

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