
UNIT 7 BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATIONS: MAIN FEATURES*

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7.1 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will study a period that archaeologists and historians call the Bronze Age, a period that saw major developments in human history, in terms of settlement, technology, as well as social and economic complexity. Through this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain what is meant by the term ‘Bronze Age’;
- Relate the Bronze Age to the concept of civilization; and
- Identify the implications of the important social formation represented by the Bronze Age in the area of urbanization, writing and long-distance contacts.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

The Bronze Age comprises ‘an inordinately short period’, in the words of V. Gordon Childe, in terms of human history, yet was immensely important for the development of society. Much of what we can recognize around us now, such as the cities we live in, or the crafts we practice, or technologies of transportation, or the fact that we use writing as a means of recording, originated roughly 5000 years ago. It was also a period that saw the culmination of technologies that had been introduced before the Bronze Age. Agriculture or animal breeding, for example, were the results of a roughly two thousand-years long experimentation of humans with domesticating plant and animal species. However, it was the increased levels of productivity in certain areas that were to eventually lead to more complex social structures.

* Prof. Jaya Menon, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

We need to take cognizance of two terms: 'Bronze Age' and 'Civilization' in order to begin. Ostensibly, the term 'Bronze Age' implies an Age when humans used bronze to make their major tools. The implication here is of a sequence of materials' use when humans first used stone, followed by copper-bronze, and eventually made the shift to iron. While it may be true that bronze came to be used for making major tools, the real significance of the term 'Bronze Age' lies in its correlation with a particular social formation, marked by urbanism and state societies, in other words, of civilization.

The term 'Civilization' here is not used in the sense of being refined or sophisticated. This, according to Shereen Ratnagar, 'refers to a stage of social development, from one-room huts to the architecture of complex buildings, from oral traditions to literacy, from rural households to city life, and from reliance on stone to metals and stone' (Ratnagar, 2001:13). 'Civilization' also refers to geographical scale, to a number of groups using the same (1) writing system; (2) art codes; (3) metallurgy and (4) sets of craft techniques. Archaeologically, these similarities will manifest as regularities over a large geographical area. This combination of material regularities comprises what the archaeologists call 'cultures'. Cultures, in an archaeological sense, are similar categories of artefacts in assemblages found from a restricted geographical area and period of time. An example of a Bronze Age 'culture' in South Asia would be the Harappan civilization.

Bruce Trigger (2003), who undertook a comparative analysis of early civilizations, noted that 19th century discussions of civilization focused on writing as a key attribute, as it enabled recording and complex commercial transactions. However, subsequently, Gordon Childe (1950) preferred to spell out a list of ten attributes for early civilizations or urban societies. These comprised: (1) large dense population; (2) non-agricultural population supported through surpluses; (3) primary producers paying surpluses to a deity or a ruler; (4) monumental architecture; (5) a ruling class; (6) systems of recording; (7) the development of exact sciences; (8) monumental art; (9) long distance trade and; (10) resident specialist craft workers controlled by an elite. While, Gordon Childe's list can be recognized as a first step in understanding the concept of civilization, such kind of traits' list tend to produce contestations rather than agreements on categorizations of societies.

Trigger (2003: 44) notes: 'A more useful characterization of early civilizations must instead be framed in terms of the general sorts of social, economic, and political institutions and the associated types of knowledge and beliefs that were required for societies of that degree of complexity to function... Technology, settlement patterns, art, and architecture can be understood only in terms of the roles they played in materially supporting such institutions, facilitating social interaction, and promoting the ideological objectives of various segments of society.'

7.3 SOURCES FOR THE BRONZE AGE

We get to know about the Bronze Age both from the available written records and the material remains of those societies. The Bronze Age is a period marked by the use of writing for various purposes. Thus, Mesopotamian writing is called '**cuneiform**', while '**hieroglyphs**' were the form that Egyptian writing took. While writing constituted a major material evidence, other forms of material or archaeological evidence comprise monuments, art, and a myriad range of objects of everyday use (such as pottery, ornaments, tools). One constraint regarding material remains revolves around their nature: whether a material is organic or inorganic. In most situations, organic materials (such as cloth, reeds, wood) do not survive, unlike inorganic materials like stone, metal, and

clay. However, in the extremely dry conditions of Egypt, organic materials such as wood, reeds and cloth, do survive, and hence inform us regarding the pervasive use of these materials in the everyday lives of people.



Figure 7.1 : Egyptian Hieroglyphs from the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I (Pharaoh of the New Kingdom of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt) located in Valley of the Kings in Egypt.

Credit: Jon Bodsworth, 2007

Source:https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Hieroglyphs_from_the_tomb_of_Seti_I.jpg



Figure 7.2 : Letter on a clay tablet sent by a high-priest named Luenna to the king of Lagash c. 2400 BCE which shows the earliest writing in cuneiform script from Mesopotamia.

The tablet is currently displayed at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Credit: Jastrow, 2005

Source:https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Letter_Luenna_Louvre_AO4238.jpg

The histories of the civilizations of both Mesopotamia and Egypt have been based largely on the texts that survive, since writing has been deciphered in these regions. At the same time, the wealth of the Egyptian pyramids as well as the temples, palaces, and royal graves at certain Mesopotamian cities have for long consumed the bulk of archaeological attention. Both writing and wealth recovered from burials have informed us regarding the lives of the elite sections of society. It is only more recently that other sections of society are beginning to be understood through archaeological work on houses, and objects of everyday nature.

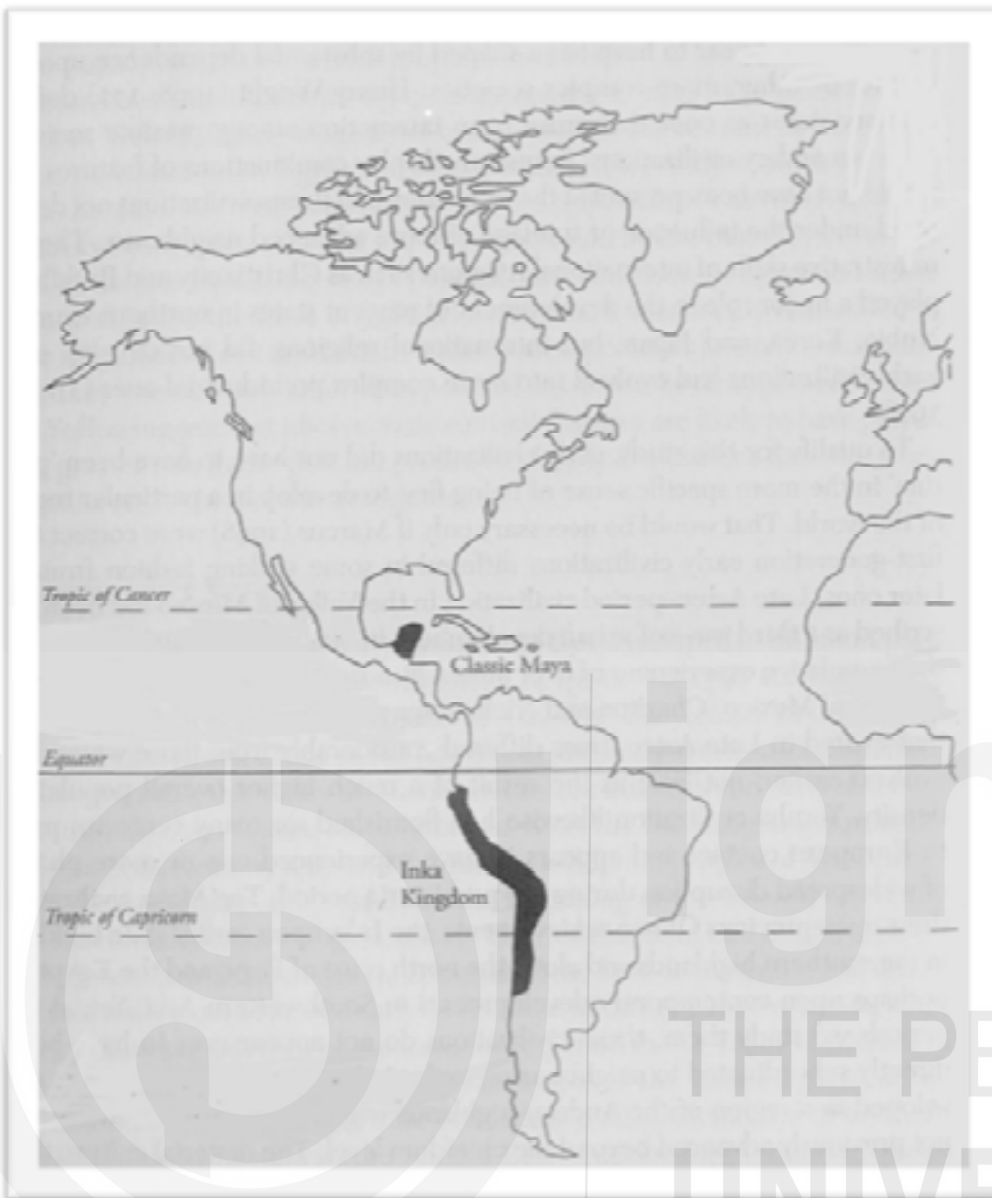
7.4 SPACE AND TIME IN THE BRONZE AGE

The major Bronze Age civilizations are those found in the river valleys of the Euphrates (Mesopotamia), the Nile (Egyptian), the Indus (Harappan) and the Yellow River (Shang) (see **Map 7.1** for their location on Map). Unit 8 will deal with the Egyptian civilization, while the Shang civilization will form the focus of Unit 9. However, Bronze Age and civilization are two separate aspects. Not every part of the world went through a Bronze Age, yet if we were to look at other civilizations, there are several that come to mind, such as the Classic Maya (250-800 CE), the late Aztecs (early 16th century CE) and the Inkas (early 16th century CE) (though these were later in time than the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Harappan, and Shang) (see **Map 7.2** for their location on map). Civilizations are sometimes categorized as 'primary' and 'secondary'. Primary civilizations are those with distinct features seen for the first time (such as urbanism, writing, and socio-economic hierarchies among the people) that developed in parts of the Old World. Areas to which civilization is considered to have spread are called as secondary civilizations. Implied in the concept of secondary civilization is the idea of diffusion, or spread. However, in many regions earlier understood as areas of secondary civilizations, scholars are beginning to trace indigenous developments that negate the idea of diffusion.



Map 7.1 : Locations of Early Bronze Age Civilizations

Adapted from Bruce Trigger, 2003: 31



Map 7.2 : Location of Classic Maya and Inka Kingdoms

Adapted from Bruce Trigger, 2003: 30

The location of early civilizations in river valleys is not coincidental. Civilizations and early state structures relied on high productivity that could be achieved only in the fertile soil of the alluvial plains. These valleys were deficient in most other required raw materials, like good quality timber, metals, and stone.

The earliest civilizations in the Old World (Mesopotamia and Egypt) can be roughly dated to the fourth and third millennia BCE. In South Asia, the Harappan Bronze Age is dated to the second half of the third millennium BCE. The Shang civilization in China is still later and is dated to the second half of the second millennium BCE.

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) Explain the meaning of the term 'Bronze Age'. Outline its relation with the term 'Civilization'.

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2) List the major sources for understanding the Bronze Age.

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3) Match the river in Column A with its associated civilization in Column B

A		B	
River		Civilization	
a) Euphrates		i) Mesopotamia	
b) Indus		ii) Shang China	
c) Yellow River		iii) Egyptian	
d) Nile		iv) Harappan	

7.5 METAL IN THE BRONZE AGE

The first use of copper as a new material goes back prior to the Bronze Age, to a period generally termed as ‘chalcolithic’, or a period when both copper and stone were used as the major materials for tools. Copper (or even bronze) was not necessarily more efficient than stone as the primary material for tools. The advantages of stone were its durability, strength, as well as the ease of obtaining it, and manufacturing tools from it. However, the primary advantage of copper and bronze was the ability to fashion more complex shapes from the material, through the technique of casting. This meant that the metal could be liquefied and poured, such that the liquid metal would take the shape of the receptacle into which it was poured. The primary material out of which the major tools were made in the Bronze Age was copper, and usually, its alloy, bronze. Bronze is an admixture of two metals, most usually copper and tin, but also copper and lead, as well as copper and arsenic. The addition of tin made the alloy harder than pure copper, which proved to be an advantage for tool production. The technique of alloying meant that metallurgical skills had developed to such an extent that two metals could be combined to produce a new material. Gordon Childe notes that metallurgical techniques required intimate knowledge of the radical transformation of the physical properties of the substance by heating. Due to the nature of these skills, he conceived of the ‘smith’ (metal worker) as being possibly one of the earliest specialists.

The dependence on tin-bronze in the Bronze Age had far-reaching implications. Copper is rare and tin even more so. Requirements of these two metals would have meant bringing them into the alluvial valleys which were the centres of the civilizations. It was more likely that crafters such as smiths would have travelled to the source of ores, smelted these and carried the metals back in a purified form for working. The craft would, thus, have necessarily entailed a certain amount of mobility.

Through the Bronze Age, metal as a raw material for tools did not totally supplant or replace stone. In South Asia, the Harappans continued to fashion blades out of a good quality **chert** available from the outcrops at Rohri along the Indus in Sind. Archaeologically, we also find stores of broken and folded copper tools and objects, possibly kept for recycling.

The advantage of copper and bronze being recycled was possible due to the nature of these materials that lent itself to be melted and cast into new forms. The stores of copper tools and objects also indicate the importance of metal to that society, as well as the probable rarity of the material; hence the need to preserve it for reuse.

7.6 URBANISM

One of the primary characteristics of the Bronze Age world was its association with urbanism. Gordon Childe saw the development of urbanism in terms of a revolution, which he termed the 'Urban Revolution'. We have seen earlier that he identified urbanism in terms of certain archaeological attributes. Even if one may not completely agree with a trait list of attributes for urbanism, it is clear that the locale of the Bronze Age was the city. Several cities, such as Ur and Uruk in Mesopotamia and Mohenjodaro and Harappa in South Asia, epitomize the Bronze Age city. We can identify some of Childe's traits in them: monumental architecture, writing, art, systems of measuring, agricultural surplus enabling growth of non-agricultural occupations and specialists, social inequities, and long-distance trade.

Urbanism depends on a secure agricultural base. We must note that the northern mountainous regions of the Fertile Crescent (the area stretching in an arc from the Levant to Iran) were those that witnessed the beginnings of farming and animal breeding, much earlier from between 10,000 and 8000 years ago. These were, however, not the areas where cities developed. People had to move into the vast alluvial plains of south Mesopotamia for urban development to take place. This was a gradual movement, first from the mountainous regions into the northern alluvium in the region of modern Baghdad. Further large-scale movement of population from the northern part of the alluvium to the southern alluvium began in the Early-Middle Uruk period (4000–3400 BCE) but a marked shift was apparent only in the Late Uruk period (3400–3200 BCE).

Robert Adams (1972), who has written on urban development in Mesopotamia, considers the growth of cities in the southern alluvium as a possible result of a combination of factors: of large numbers of villagers moving southwards as well as the settling down or sedenterization of people that had been nomadic earlier. Hence, this led to the burgeoning of populations in cities such as Uruk in the southern alluvium. This growth of population can be seen in the increase in the physical size of just one city: from a figure of 70 hectares in the Early Uruk period, Uruk grew to 100 hectares in the Late Uruk period, and finally to a massive 400 hectares in the Early Dynastic period (3000-2350 BCE). A similar movement of population can be seen in South Asia, from the hills of the Baluchistan region to the valley of Indus. Early Harappan settlements in the hilly flanks were necessarily much smaller, as were early forays and settlements in the valley, until people occupied the valley regions in the Mature Harappan period. Mohenjodaro eventually was to grow to more than 100 hectares in size (For details, see **Unit 7 in BHIC-101: History of India-I**). In both cases, large-scale increase in agricultural productivity could not take place in the smaller hill valleys but in the extensive plains of the great rivers.

Agricultural productivity was closely linked with the silt deposited by perennial rivers that annually and regularly flooded their banks. Agricultural productivity was also

dependent on the technology of ploughing. Mesopotamian agriculture was marked by the technological innovation of the seeder-plough, that enabled even planting, less wastage of seed, and resulted at the best of times in a very high seed:yield ratio of 1:76. It is very likely that the high agricultural productivity of Mesopotamian agriculture resulted in the hyper-urbanism that we see, for instance, in the case of Uruk reaching a size of 400 hectares in the beginning of the third millennium BCE.

Why was agricultural productivity so important for early Bronze Age societies? Much like at present, high agricultural productivity provided a sound economic base for the support of people performing other specialized, but non-agricultural tasks. A Bronze Age society that functioned in the absence of coined money could only do so because its productivity enabled non-agriculturists to subsist on it without participating in its production. Cities are primarily known for their secondary occupations, being locations of specialists such as scribes, merchants, crafters, and ritual practitioners. These occupations could flourish in cities due to the surplus coming from the primary producers also located within, and on the peripheries of the urban centres.

7.7 SURPLUS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF LABOUR

Two of Childe's criteria for early cities, surplus and a ruling group, are significant. Surplus is not just the extra over and above the minimum required for subsistence, but implicit in surplus is a political authority that enables the accumulation of surplus. We can see the large public institutions in Mesopotamia (such as the temple, palace, and estates belonging to public officials or elite groups) being mechanisms through which surplus was produced and accumulated. Susan Pollock (1999: 118) describes these estates as an integral part of an oikos-based economy. Temples, palaces and estates are termed as '**oikoi**' (from the Greek word for 'households') or rather 'great households'. These were large socio-economic units with a dependent force, usually of non-kin, personnel in managerial positions, along with flocks of animals, pastures, fields, orchards, storage facilities, and artisans' workshops. The oikos represented a shift away from an economy dependent on tribute from the community to one where the oikos had its own varied and large workforce.

Thus, the necessities (food, oil, cloth) produced by the oikos were used to sustain non-agricultural productive activities of the personnel located within the institutions, as well as those who came to work for these institutions. This cycle, of the redistribution of surplus by the state to non-agricultural specialists, was integral to the Bronze Age economy. It is through these distributions of surplus that we can visualize Bronze Age monumental architecture, such as the temples and palaces in Mesopotamia, the pyramids in Egypt, and the specialized architecture on the citadel mound at Mohenjodaro, being built. Not only that, Mesopotamian temple records inform us that scribes, potters, and other crafters, herders, and merchants worked for and were located within the temple. Workforces were highly specialized and terms of service varied from part-time and contractual, to permanent labour obligations.

Barry Kemp (1991) explains, in the context of Egypt, that temple staff was divided into groups that probably worked at different times, with each subdivision serving for one month out of ten. The rest of the time they worked at agriculture and other tasks in their villages, but gave their labour to the temple for the prestige involved and were also compensated in kind, in the form of food and drink. '...(T)he practical consequence was a massive sharing out of jobs by the state. The number of employees required was multiplied by many times, hugely increasing the numbers of people receiving partial

support from the state. Because the system was only part-time, the system itself was not clogged by the presence of unnecessary personnel' (Kemp, 1991: 113). What we are seeing here is a massive appropriation of labour by the institutions of rituals and state. Thus, the Bronze Age economy, with its high level of specialization could only function in the absence of money through such a system of labour appropriation.

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) What were the advantages of the use of copper and bronze over stone?

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- 2) What is Urbanism? Describe three important features of urban cultures.

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- 3) What was the function of 'great households' in the Bronze Age economy?

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- 4) In the absence of money, how did the Bronze Age economy function?

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7.8 WRITING

The appropriation of labour and the maintenance of large institutions and estates made practices of recording necessary. Even though early societies would have had simple systems of counting, methods of recalling categories and recording when, where, and what kind of transactions took place would have necessitated more complex notational

systems. Writing developed in the Bronze Age, for keeping records of varying kinds by the large estates: of the outputs of fields; of numbers of animal herds; of raw materials being allocated for crafting; of the outputs of crafters; of raw materials being brought in by merchants, and so forth.

From an early use for recording purposes, the scope of writing seems to have enlarged to include myths, hymns, foundation stories, royal inscriptions, and eventually legal codes. It is unlikely that literacy was widespread, with a small section of society having the ability to read and write. We can assume that with this ability also came great power.

Writing took different forms in different Bronze Age societies. For example, in Mesopotamia, writing developed in a cuneiform script (see the box below for details). For the historian and the archaeologist, early forms of writing had to be deciphered as they were no longer in use. Objects made of stone and clay with writing on them present important historical information through what is written down. From these early written evidences, we get to know about earlier societies, their transactions, their social relationships, their rulers and gods, their customs and rituals, and the language(s) they spoke.

Cuneiform Script

- The earliest writing was found from levels of around 3200 BCE from the Eanna Temple precinct in the city of Uruk.
- Writing was primarily found on clay tablets that varied in size.
- Clay was useful as it was abundant in the alluvial environment and could be prepared easily into tablets (See **Figure 7.2**).
- The form that writing took is called ‘cuneiform’ or wedge-shaped writing, from the form of the letters.
- The wedge shape of the letters arose from the writing stylus (or pen) that was pressed into the wet clay to produce the signs.
- Cuneiform was used to write various languages such as Sumerian and Akkadian.
- The earliest uses of writing were for administrative purposes of recording transactions taking place within the large public institutions such as the temple and the palace.
- Writing was also used for preparing what are called ‘lexical lists’, lists of words of the same categories, for example, *The Standard List of Professions* records about 120 terms of various professions.
- From the mid-third millennium BCE, writing began to be also used for recording transfers of rights over land, houses, and slaves, as well as for royal inscriptions and literary texts.

(Source: J.N. Postgate, 1992)

7.9 LONG-DISTANCE CONTACTS

The alluvial river valleys of Bronze Age civilizations were deficient in metals, wood, and most varieties of stone. The dependence on copper and tin and their rarity within the alluvial valleys meant that these metals had to be procured, often from considerable distances. The Bronze Age world was, thus, an expansive one. Frontiers were often in the form of physical features such as rivers or hill ranges, but were usually demarcated, maintained, and contested by states in different territories. Thus, required materials were brought in through various mechanisms. States organized expeditions to procure raw materials, such as the Egyptians in the Sinai for stones and metal. Mesopotamian temples requiring good quality timber for construction and ship-building, and semi-precious stones for decoration depended on rulers for organizing the inflow of these

materials. Some of this information is obtained through myths or stories. Thus, one story is about Enmerkar, the ruler of Uruk and his negotiations with the ruler of a land, called Aratta beyond the seven ranges of mountains, to get lapis lazuli, carnelian and other precious materials for decorating the temple of Inanna. Messengers go back and forth, and in time, a consignment of precious goods is exchanged for a donkey caravan of grain. An excerpt of the story reads as:

The lord then opened his main storehouse...the barley for the granary he measured out in full, adding (even) for the locust-tooth. After having loaded the pack donkeys – the reserve donkeys, having placed them at their sides – the king, the lord of broad wisdom, the Lord of Uruk, the Lord of Kulaba, dispatched them directly to Aratta. The people like ants out of their crevices, in their entirety were moving onto Aratta...After the emissary reached Aratta, the people of Aratta stepped up to wonder at the pack donkeys. In the courtyard of Aratta the emissary measured out in full the barley for the granary, adding (even) for the locust-tooth. As if from the rains of heaven and shining sun Aratta was filled with abundance. As when the gods reclined together on their couches, Aratta sated its hunger (cf. Postgate,1992).

Similarly, a myth about the semi-mythical king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, tells us about him going far north to the ‘Cedar Forest’ in present-day Lebanon, to obtain cedar trees for a temple. The heroic nature of the task – usually completed in six weeks – taking him only three days is typical of myths, but illustrates the procurement of raw materials through an expedition-like venture.

Epic of Gilgamesh

- Stephanie Dalley (1989) writes: ‘The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the longest and greatest literary composition written in cuneiform Akkadian. It narrates a heroic quest for fame and immortality, pursued by a man who has an enormous capacity for friendship, for endurance and adventure, for joy and sorrow, a man of strength and weakness...’
- The earliest written version is dated to about 2150 BCE, but, like many other stories, probably circulated in oral form in earlier periods.
- It is considered as an epic because it features the heroic exploits of a semi-historical and partly mythical figure with gods and goddesses on the margins playing various roles.
- Gilgamesh inherited divinity as two-thirds of his nature from his mother Ninsun, the goddess Lady Wild Cow.
- Gilgamesh is considered as a historical figure as his father has been named in the Sumerian King list as Lugalbanda, King of Uruk.
- The historicity of Gilgamesh, also may be read from the fact that Gilgamesh is claimed as the ancestor of rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur, suggests that versions of the epic circulated in different cities. The great king of Ur, Shulgi, ruling from 2150 – 2103 BCE took a keen interest in the stories of Gilgamesh. He claimed Ninsun as his mother, and that would have made Gilgamesh his brother.
- There were clearly many small stories that were woven together into an epic. One of these is Gilgamesh and Huwawa (or Humbaba), a monster who was guarding the Cedar Mountain, that the Sumerian and Akkadian versions place to the east in the Zagros Mountains and to the west in Lebanon respectively. These again indicate the many versions of the stories that must have been prevalent.
- The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has many facets to it: the motif of friendship (Gilgamesh and Enkidu), the search for materials (the expedition to the Cedar Mountain, an important source of the excellent timber), and the quest for immortality (Gilgamesh’s distress over Enkidu’s death).



Figure 7.3 : Neo-Assyrian clay tablet (number 11) of the Epic of Gilgamesh with one of its story called the ‘Story of the Flood’.

The tablet is also known as the ‘Flood Tablet’.

The tablet is currently preserved at the British Museum, London.

Credit: BabelStone, 2010

Source:https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7a/British_Museum_Flood_Tablet.jpg

Mesopotamian cuneiform records inform us of contacts with far-flung areas, such as Dilmun (identified with the Island of Bahrain), Magan (identified with Oman), and Meluhha (associated by most scholars with the Harappan region). These records tell us about the kinds of materials that were coming into Mesopotamia, such as copper, semi-precious stones, diorite, as also manufactured items. In the Bronze Age, many of these materials that travelled across borders seem to have been in the nature of luxuries or for consumption by the large institutions within the cities.

Such long-distance contacts suggest the movement of more than just goods. It is quite possible that with people also travelled ideas, technologies, myths, languages, and customs.

7.10 BRONZE AGE SOCIETY

Louis Wirth (1938) defines the city in social terms, as a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement occupied by socially heterogeneous individuals. We must remember

that people often in-migrate and come to live within a city. Looking at Adams' theory of urbanization in Mesopotamia, we can recognize heterogeneity in the cities. Cities in the southern alluvium were places to which people migrated and we see that a large-scale movement of villagers and people who were formerly nomadic were beginning to settle in the cities. People gravitated to these early cities for various reasons, as we have discussed in the previous section. This would have led to a situation where not everyone knew each other, and people and communities were different. What city dwellers were probably confronted with was anonymity, relationships between strangers, who came face to face with each other in the confines of the city.

Trigger (2003: 44) points out that 'the basic principle governing social relations was not kinship but a hierarchy of social divisions that cut horizontally across societies and were unequal in power, wealth, and social prestige.' Whether these hierarchies represented classes is not so clear. However, there does appear to be a strong correlation between wealth, power, and prestige in these societies. We know there were individuals and families that had political power, as also those occupying ritual roles, with both categories exhibiting high status and wealth. It is also likely that those who worked for the large institutions, such as the temple and the palace, on a permanent basis would have immense power and prestige, as well as access to wealth.

The question arises regarding the source of wealth: was wealth seen in terms of land and its ownership? While land may have been under the control of communities probably linked through kinship, it does also seem that higher-ranking individuals may have begun to obtain access to larger plots of land. In contrast, several individuals may not have had any access to land but they participated in the economy through their labour. The latter were often dependent members of an oikos. Yet other completely dependent and low status individuals may have been prisoners of war, particularly women and children.

Despite the social hierarchies, what marks Bronze Age societies are the enduring vestiges of kinship. We have seen above that kin-based communities survived in the context of landholding. Early Mesopotamian societies followed the practice of collective ownership which was probably practical as individual ownership would have led to increasing fragmentation of cultivable land. Joint control of land also meant that the best lands (for example, those closest to the rivers or irrigation channels) would be rotated and not always be farmed by the same families. In Egypt, communities of people came to offer labour, for short periods, on large construction projects for the state, such as building the pyramids. It is quite likely that the state made arrangements for their stay, and food and drink was provided through daily allotments of rations.

Bronze Age societies were also strongly influenced by religion. Bruce Trigger (2003: 409) points out that 'the Egyptians had no word for "religion". Religion was inseparable from daily life... All aspects of state activity, everyday life, and material culture in ancient Egypt were coloured by religious beliefs and symbolism.' The importance of religion can be seen in the emphasis on prophecies, beliefs in numerous deities and, the central locations of temples dedicated to a city's presiding deity. Temples were also the heart of a city and the lives of city dwellers largely revolved around the temples. There seems to have been a belief in multiple deities, with each city having its patron deity who could be a god or a goddess, but also temples devoted to other deities. Much significance was attached to temples and materials for the building and construction of places of worship were often procured from great distances.

Large temples in Mesopotamia were institutions in their own right, as we have seen above. It is quite possible that power was concentrated in the hands of temples and their personnel, with deities perceived as the owners of all lands and fields and offerings

including grain, curds, fish and other food items being made to them. Temples, thus, would have served as reservoirs of food for the community. By the mid-third millennium, the authority of the temples was however tempered by the rise of kingship in the Mesopotamian city states. As it is said, 'Kingship came down from Heaven.' Power that had earlier been in the hands of individuals and families who had sacred as well as secular authority was now bifurcated. Endemic warfare between city states, and the rise of gifted war-leaders are some of the factors that led to the emergence of secular power centres.

We can also find the king playing a ritual commemorative role on certain occasions, such as initiating the building of a temple, or at the beginning and end of the cropping seasons, at times of sowing and harvesting. These are vestiges of an earlier time in antiquity, when the same person performed both secular and ritual roles, with a gradual divergence, over time, of these roles into separate personnel. The king was, in all likelihood, seen as the personification of God on earth.

Apart from the religious inclination, one of the important social rituals is that of death. This can be investigated through archaeology, as in the Bronze Age people followed the practice of burying the dead. Burial practices are useful not only in understanding aspects of ritual but also show how social hierarchies played out. The pyramids in Egypt, for instance, reflect ritual spaces where the upper sections of society were buried as contrasted with the simple pits in which commoners wrapped in shrouds were buried (For details, see Unit 8 of this Course). The construction of the pyramids and the wealth they contained are also illustrative of immense means at the disposal of the upper sections of society, wealth that could be disposed of with the dead. The royal cemetery at Ur in Mesopotamia too, reflects a similar massive incarceration of wealth with the dead.

Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) Discuss the factors that necessitated the development of writing.

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- 2) Name the script of ancient Mesopotamia. Describe how it was written.

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- 3) Was the Bronze Age economy self-sufficient? How did it meet its metal requirements?

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- 4) Discuss the role of temples in Ancient Mesopotamia.
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7.11 SUMMARY

The Bronze Age world was, thus, a complex one, with diverse populations in many cases located within urban centres. This was a world that interestingly also illustrated the significance of kin ties among its people, even while these populations came face to face with each other in anonymous situations in urban spaces. The dependence on copper and tin, as well as other required raw materials necessitated wide-ranging interactions across different regions and diverse communities. The Bronze Age world was an expansive one, far more than its predecessors or its successors. As a social formation, the Bronze Age is thus important for its emphasis on urbanism, far-flung contacts, social heterogeneity, archaic political structures, specialized economies, and civilizational nature.

7.12 KEY WORDS

- Chert** : a fine grained sedimentary rock composed of materials such as microcrystalline or cryptocrystalline silica.
- Cuneiform** : writing in the form of wedge-shaped signs formed by tools made from the cut ends of reeds. Cuneiform script was one of the earliest systems of writing, invented by the Sumerians.
- Hieroglyphs** : a character of the ancient Egyptian writing system. It was a stylized picture of an object representing a word, syllable, or sound.
- Oikoi** : an ancient Greek word encompassing three related but distinct concepts: the family, the family property, and the house.
- Polytheistic** : belief in more than one God.

7.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 7.2

- 2) See Section 7.3
- 3) a (i); b (iv); c(ii); d(iii)

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) The ability to fashion more complex shapes, beneficial in tool production, possible emergence of specialised smiths, mobility. For details, see Section 7.5
- 2) Section 7.6
- 3) Section 7.7
- 4) Discuss appropriation of labour. See Section 7.7

Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) For keeping records of varying kinds by the large estates. List the various elements noted in the initial records. See Section 7.8
- 2) See the Box in Section 7.8
- 3) No, the Bronze Age economy was not self-sufficient. In the answer, discuss long-distance trade. See Section 7.9
- 4) Section 7.10

7.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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7.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

**Bronze Age
Civilizations:
Main Features**

Bronze Age Miniseries Part 1-3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt1aWllpChs> (Part 1)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLhJc3gS-BQ> (Part 2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvH2q0q4iDs> (Part 3)

Bronze Age Collapse: National Geographic Documentary, 2010

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6_VGLy2gKM



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