CHAPTER 3: The Mediterranean and Middle East, 2000-500 B.C.E.

I. The Cosmopolitan Middle East, 1700-1100 B.C.E.

A. Western Asia

1. In the southern portion of western Asia, the Kassites ruled Babylonia during this period. Babylonia did not pursue territorial conquest. In the north, the Assyrians had their origins in the northern Tigris area. They were involved in trade in tin and silver.

2. The Hittites had their capital in Anatolia; used horse-drawn chariots; and had access to important copper, silver, and iron deposits.

3. During the second millennium B.C.E., Mesopotamian political and cultural concepts spread across much of western Asia.

B. New Kingdom Egypt

1. The New Kingdom period was preceded by the decline of the Middle Kingdom and by the subsequent period of rule by the non-Egyptian Hyksos. A native Egyptian dynasty overthrew the Hyksos to begin the New Kingdom period. This period was characterized by aggressive expansion into Syria-Palestine and into Nubia.

2. Innovations during the New Kingdom period include Queen Hatshepsut’s attempt to open direct trade with Punt and Akhenaten’s construction of a new capital at Amarna. Akhenaten also made Aten the supreme deity of Egypt and carried out a controversial reform program.
When the Ramessides seized power, they renewed the policy of conquest and expansion neglected by Akhenaten. Their greatest king, Ramesses II (r. 1290-1224 B.C.E.) ruled for sixty-six years.

C. Commerce and Communication
1. The Syria-Palestine area was an important crossroads for the trade in metals. For this reason, the Egyptians and the Hittites fought battles and negotiated territorial agreements concerning control over Syria-Palestine.
2. Access to metals was vital to all bronze-age states, but metals, including copper and tin for bronze, often had to be obtained from faraway places. The demand for metals spurred the development of trade in copper from Anatolia and Cyprus, tin from Afghanistan and Cornwall, silver from Anatolia, and gold from Nubia.
3. New modes of transportation introduced during this period included horses, chariots, and camels

II. The Aegean World, 2000-1100 B.C.E.
A. Minoan Crete
1. Minoan civilization is known through legendary accounts of King Minos, the labyrinth beneath his palace, and the Minotaur. Archaeological evidence for Minoan civilization includes excavated palace sites at Cnossus, Phaistos, and Mallia, and widely distributed remains of Cretan pottery and other artifacts. The evidence suggests that Minoan civilization was influenced by the civilizations of Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia.
2. Minoan civilization was destroyed, probably by Mycenaean Greeks, about 1450 B.C.E.

B. Mycenaean Greece

1. The Mycenaean Greek people are thought to be descended from a combination of an indigenous population and Indo-European invaders. The civilization developed suddenly around 1600 B.C.E.

2. Although it was first known only through the accounts of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the existence of Mycenaean civilization was proved by the archeological expedition of Heinrich Schliemann in 1876 at Mycenae in southern Greece. Schliemann and other archeologists discovered shaft graves, gold and silver jewelry, a palace complex, and other artifacts.

3. Later Greek legend explains the development of Mycenaean civilization as being the result of immigration from Phoenicia or the liberation of the Greeks from Minoan tyranny. There is no archeological evidence to back up these legendary accounts. The evidence does indicate, however, that Mycenaean civilization was influenced by Minoan civilization and that the Mycenaeans rose to power on profits from trade and piracy.

4. Mycenaean sites share certain common characteristics, including hilltop citadels with thick fortification walls that enclosed palaces and administrative buildings. Also typical of Mycenaean civilization were luxury-filled tombs for departed rulers, large houses for the aristocracy, and the use of Linear B writing. Linear B was an early form of Greek that used symbols to represent syllables.
5. The Mycenaean state controlled the economy, organizing grain agriculture and wool production. However, we know little about the Mycenaean political system, religion, society, or particular historical events. The uniformity that is characteristic of the Mycenaean territory may have been due to some sort of political unity, or it may have been the result of extensive contact and trade.

6. Evidence for long-distance contact and trade includes wall painting of ships in Egypt and Thera and excavated remains of the ships themselves. Other evidence includes the widespread dispersal of Cretan and Mycenaean pottery and other goods around the Aegean world and in the Middle East. The evidence indicates that Cretan traders came first, and were later joined and then replaced by Mycenaeans.

7. In this trade, Crete and Greece exported wine and olive oil, weapons, craft goods, slaves, and mercenaries. They imported amber, ivory, grain, and metals (gold, copper, and tin). The fine line between trade and piracy can be seen in the strained relations between the Mycenaeans and the Hittites and in the siege of Troy.

C. The Fall of Late Bronze Age Civilizations

1. Old centers of civilization in the Middle East were destroyed.

2. Unknown invaders destroyed the Hittite kingdom. Syria likewise fell to invasions.

3. The Egyptians battled invasions from the sea in the north and lost control of Nubia in the south.
4. Mycenaean civilization fell due to a combination of internal decline and external aggression. Annihilation of the trading routes of the eastern Mediterranean undermined the position of the Mycenaean elite and probably led to internal unrest and collapse.

5. The collapse of Mycenaean civilization demonstrates the degree to which the civilizations of the Late Bronze Age were interdependent; their prosperity and their very existence relied on the trade networks that linked them and gave them access to natural resources, particularly metals. When this cosmopolitan world collapsed, the Mediterranean and the Middle East entered a “Dark Age” - a period of poverty, isolation, and loss of knowledge.

III. The Assyrian Empire, 911-612 B.C.E.

A. Background and Location

1. The Assyrian homeland was in northern Mesopotamia. It had more rain and a more temperate climate than Sumer and Akkad, but it was also more exposed to raiders.

2. Assyrian power revived in the ninth century B.C.E. and the Assyrians built an empire, expanding along trade routes westward toward the Mediterranean, north to modern Armenia, east to modern Iran, and south to Babylonia.

B. God and King

1. Assyrian kings were regarded as the center of the universe, chosen by the gods as their surrogates on earth. Kings had secular and religious duties.
2. The secular duties of kings included receiving information, hearing and deciding on complaints, and carrying out diplomacy and military leadership. The religious duties of kings included supervision of the state religion, performance of public and private rituals, and consulting and gaining the approval of the gods.

3. Assyrian kings were celebrated in propaganda that was designed to produce feelings of awe and fear in the hearts of their subjects. Such propaganda included the public display of royal inscriptions relating to conquests and punishments and artistic renderings of the kings as large, muscular, and fierce men.

C. Conquest and Control

1. At their peak, the Assyrian armies had half a million troops divided into functionally specialized units. The Assyrian troops used a variety of military technologies, including iron weapons, cavalry, couriers, signal fires, and spy networks.

2. Assyrian techniques of conquest included terror tactics and mass deportation of civilization populations. Mass deportation served a dual purpose: to destroy the morale of the enemy and to transfer needed laborers to the core area of the empire.

3. The Assyrians found it difficult to control their vast and diverse territory. Their level of control varied, being more effective at the core and less effective in the peripheral parts of the empire.
4. Within the empire, the duties of Assyrian officials were to collect tribute and taxes, maintain law and order, raise and provision troops, and construct and maintain public works. The central government included high-ranking officials and professionals.

5. The central government exploited the wealth and resources of the empire for the benefit of the center, but it also invested in provincial infrastructure and so was not entirely parasitic.

D. Assyrian Society and Culture

1. The Assyrian government did not distinguish between native Assyrians and immigrants. All were considered to have equal right and responsibilities. The Assyrian economy was based on agriculture but also included artisans and merchants.

2. In the realm of knowledge and learning, the Assyrians both preserved the knowledge inherited from older Mesopotamian societies and made original contributions to mathematics and astronomy. The Assyrian Empire maintained libraries that were attached to temples in the cities, such as the Library of Ashurbanipal in Ninevah.

IV. Israel, 2000-500 B.C.E.

A. Background and Location

1. The Israelite people were nomadic herders and caravan drivers who developed a complex sedentary agricultural civilization. As they did so, their cult of a desert god evolved to temples in the cities, such as the Library of Ashurbanipal in Ninevah.
2. Israel's location makes it a crossroads for trade. However, the area has few natural resources.

B. Origins, Exodus, and Settlement

1. Sources for the early history of the Israelite people include the Hebrew Bible, which is based in part on oral traditions compiled in the fifth century B.C.E., and archeological excavations.

2. Biblical accounts of the origins of the Israelite people include the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These stories may be a compressed account of the experiences of many generations of nomads. The story of Cain and Abel and the stories of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah reflect the tensions between the nomadic Israelite people and settled agricultural people.

3. The Biblical account of the Egyptian captivity is not confirmed by Egyptian sources but may be linked to the rise and fall of the Hyksos rulers of Egypt. The period of Israelite slavery according to the Bible corresponds to the period of large-scale construction projects under Sethos I and Remesses II, while the Biblical account of the exodus may reflect the memories of a migration from Egypt and nomadic life in the Sinai.

4. The cult of Yahweh with its exclusive devotion to one god developed during the period of nomadism in the Sinai.

5. The Biblical account of Israelite settlement in the land of Canaan says that Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan and destroyed Jericho and other Canaanite cities. The archeological evidence of what probably happened is that
the nomadic Israelite tribes settled in the hills of Canaan, where they were joined by other groups and by refugees from a troubled Canaanite society.

C. Rise of the Monarchy

1. Wars with the Philistines brought about the need for a strong central government. Saul, the first king, established the Israelite monarchy. David, the second king, completed the transition to monarchy.

2. The Israelite monarchy reached the height of its power in the reign of King Solomon, who forged alliances and sponsored trade. Solomon also expanded the bureaucracy and the army, and built the first temple in Jerusalem. The temple priesthood sacrificed to Yahweh, received a portion of the agricultural tax, and became very wealthy.

3. The wealth and prestige of the temple priesthood was indicative of the increasing gap between the rural and urban, and the wealthy and the poor in Israeli society.

4. Israelite people lived in extended families and practiced arranged marriage. Monogamy was the norm. Men were allowed to have extramarital relations; women were not.

5. In early Israel, women enjoyed relative equality with their husbands in social life, but at the same time, they suffered certain legal disadvantages: women could not inherit property, nor could they initiate divorce. The main occupations of women were bearing and raising children, maintaining the household, and engaging in agriculture or herding. As society became more urbanized, some women began to work outside the home in a variety of occupations.
6. There are some records of women exercising political influence. Examples include the story of Deborah and references to “wise women.” However, the status of women declined during the period of monarchy.

D. Fragmentation and Dispersal

1. After Solomon, Israel divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north (capital: Samaria), and Judah in the south (capital: Jerusalem). The two kingdoms were sometimes at peace with each other and sometimes fought.

2. There were some significant religious developments during the period of fragmentation. The concept of monotheism was sharpened, but at the same time, some Israelites were attracted to the worship of Canaanite gods.

3. Political developments during the period of fragmentation include the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom (Israel) in 721 B.C.E. and the fall of the southern kingdom (Judah) to the Babylonian monarch Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar deported a large number of Jewish elites and craftspeople to Babylon. This was the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora.

4. During the Diaspora, the Jewish people developed institutions to preserve Jewish religion and culture. These developments continued even after some of the Babylonian Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem. Developments of the Diaspora included a stronger commitment to monotheism, strict dietary rules, and veneration of the Sabbath.

V. Phoenicia and the Mediterranean, 1200-500 B.C.E.

A. The Phoenician City-States
1. The Phoenicians were the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel who were pushed into the strip of land between the mountains and the sea in modern Lebanon by about 1100 B.C.E. There, the Phoenicians established a number of small city-states that were deeply involved in commerce. They also invented the first alphabetical writing system.

2. The major Phoenician city-states were Byblos, Berytus, Sidon, and Tyre.

B. Expansion into the Mediterranean

1. Phoenician expansion into the Mediterranean was carried out by Tyre, beginning in the ninth century B.C.E. Colonies were established first on Cyprus, then on the North African coast, the south and southeastern Spanish coast, Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta.

2. Phoenician expansion into the Mediterranean was the work of a combination of state and private enterprise. Expansion was a response to the Assyrian invasions of Syria and Palestine, the shortage of agricultural land in Tyre, and opportunities for trade and access to resources.

C. Carthage’s Commercial Empire

1. The city of Carthage was established on a narrow promontory near modern Tunis around 814 B.C.E. The walled city was governed by two judges selected from upper-class families and by a senate that was dominated by the leading merchant families.

2. The navy was the most important arm of Carthaginian power. Citizens served as rowers and navigators of the fast, maneuverable warships.
3. Carthaginian foreign policy and military activity were in the service of trade and were deployed in enforcing a commercial monopoly in the Mediterranean and developing new trading opportunities. Carthaginian merchants were active around the Mediterranean and traded with sub-Saharan Africa, along the Atlantic coasts of Spain and France, and with Cornwall.

D. War and Religion

1. The Carthaginians made not attempt to build a territorial empire; their empire was an empire of trade routes and ports. The Carthaginian military was subordinate to the civilian government and consisted of mercenary soldiers commanded by Carthaginian officers.

2. Carthaginian religion involved the worship of capricious gods that needed to be appeased by sacrifice, including the sacrifice of Carthaginian children. The Greeks and Romans thought that the Carthaginians were a hard, gloomy people who treated their subjects harshly.

VI. Failure and Transformation, 750-550 B.C.E.

A. Consequences of the Assyrian Conquest

1. The Assyrian conquest brought about the destruction of Israel, deportation of the Jewish population of Israel, and pressure on the kingdom of Judah.

2. The Assyrian conquest put pressure on the Phoenicians; Assyrians threats and Assyrian demands for tribute helped to spur the Phoenicians to establish colonies in the western Mediterranean.

3. The Assyrian conquest also resulted in the invasion and occupation of Egypt and in Assyrian control over Babylonia and western Iran.
4. As their empire grew, the resources of the Assyrians became overextended and they had difficulty ruling over a large, ethnically complex territory with subjects and neighbors who had come to hate Assyria.

5. The major sources of resistance to the Assyrian Empire were the Neo-Babylonian dynasty of Babylon and the kingdom of the Medes in Iran. The Assyrian Empire was destroyed when the Medes captured the Assyrian homeland in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Anatolia, the Neo-Babylonians took over much of the other territory of the Assyrian Empire.

VII. Conclusion

A. The Late Bronze Age in the Middle East was a “cosmopolitan” era of shared lifestyles and technologies exhibiting patterns of culture that had originated in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Similarly, the Minoans and Mycenaean Greeks borrowed heavily from the technologies and cultural practices of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

B. Around 1200 B.C.E. the societies of the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean slipped into a “Dark Age” of isolation and decline. After 1000 B.C.E. a resurgence occurred, such as the Assyrian creation of an empire of unprecedented size and diversity.

C. The Israelites’ settlement in Canaan led them into conflict with the Philistines and forced them to adopt a more complex political structure.

D. After the upheavals of the Late Bronze Age, the Phoenician city-states along the coast of Lebanon flourished. Carthage became the most important city outside the Phoenician homeland, maintaining power through naval superiority.
E. The far-reaching expansion of the Assyrian Empire was the most important factor in the transformation of the ancient Middle East.