**SAMPLE COMPARE/CONTRAST ESSAY – EARLY CIVILIZATIONS**

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING MESOPOTAMIA AND THE INDUS VALLEY

[] = historical context; [] = thesis/topic sentences (structure); [] = evidence; [] = analysis

Early civilizations started to emerge in Asia and North Africa by 3000 B.C. as small farming villages evolved into more complex societies. The earliest civilizations developed in major river valleys where they could rely on a source of fresh water to sustain agricultural development and population growth. Two of these river valley civilizations arose in Mesopotamia in the Fertile Crescent of southwestern Asia and in the Indus River valley of the Indian subcontinent. Although these two civilizations shared qualities that allowed them to develop prosperous economies and structured societies, they nevertheless had many geographic and political differences that gave rise to unique cultures. Therefore, Mesopotamian and Harappan civilizations were more different than similar.

Both Mesopotamia and the Indus River valley sustained complex societies that grew wealthy from agriculture and trade. In both regions, major rivers provided life-giving silt that supported large-scale agriculture. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers gave rise to the first known civilization, Sumer, around 3500 B.C. in Mesopotamia. Soon after this time, farming arose along the Indus River and, by 2500 B.C., city-states such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa emerged there as well. Both civilizations utilized irrigation systems to water arid plains and maximize the growth of crops such as wheat and barley. Despite the unpredictability of flooding in both valleys, successful harvests in most years enabled these civilizations to support multiple urban centers that served as centers for specialized labor and trade. Both Sumerian and Harappan (Indus) cultures thrived on the development of advanced technologies such as bronze working and the rise of artisanship as evidenced by the production of beautiful and varied works of jewelry, pottery, sculpture, and even toys. These artifacts prove that both civilizations were able to reach a level of development in which they had the time and ability to produce luxury items that were unnecessary for basic survival. The city-states of both river valleys became so prosperous that they developed extensive trade networks that offered artisanal works and surplus food in exchange for items such as precious metals not readily available to them. There is even clear archaeological evidence that both civilizations were trading with each other by 2300 B.C., most likely thanks to coastal trade routes stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and beyond. The Sumerians were the first to develop a more stratified social class system, with priests and kings at the top, wealthy merchants next, and the vast majority of everyday farmers and workers filling out the third tier, with slaves at the very bottom level of society. Slaves were most likely made up of prisoners taken in wars with rival city-states or those who fell into debt slavery because they were unable to pay off their creditors. While the standardized housing units of the Harappan civilization’s cities suggest that it had a more egalitarian (equal) society, its cities were built around citadels, which served as government centers, much like the Sumerian ziggurats found in cities like Ur, Lagash, and Nippur. In both civilizations, these large and impressive structures symbolized the power of their societies and the apex of their cultural achievements.

While developing along mostly similar social and economic lines, the geography of Mesopotamia and the Indus valley differed markedly in a way that significantly influenced their cultures. Both civilizations relied on major rivers to supply life-giving water and silt for growing crops in an otherwise arid environment. However, the Indus valley was much more isolated than Mesopotamia thanks to distinctive geographic features. Constituting the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent, Mesopotamia, literally the “land between the rivers” in Greek, was a vast plain traversed by the unpredictable Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flowed southwards from the highlands of Anatolia to the Persian Gulf. Bordered by the Arabian Desert to the south and west and the foothills of the Zagros Mountains to the north and east, Mesopotamia was wide open to invasion from all directions. The Semitic peoples of the surrounding desert and hill country found wealthy Sumerian city-states to be irresistible sitting targets. Several centuries of warfare among the Sumerian city-states weakened them enough to allow for takeover by Semitic groups such as the Akkadians around 2350 B.C. and the nomadic Amorites around 2000 B.C. The flat expanse of the Mesopotamian valley itself served as a pathway for invasion, allowing empires to expand rapidly but also leaving them open to attacks by rivals. By contrast, the Indus valley was surrounded by mountains and deserts that protected the Harrapan civilization from invasion until the Indo-Aryan migration by around 1500 B.C. The Hindu Kush to the northwest and the Himalayas to the northeast created a nearly-impenetrable barrier that fenced in the city-states of the Indus River valley. The forbidding Thar Desert to the southeast helped to isolate the valley even further by protecting it from invasion from the rest of the Indian subcontinent. This cocoon of relative isolation helped the Harappan civilization survive and thrive for nearly a thousand years, while also permitting it to benefit from trade overseas thanks to access to the Arabian Sea. The peoples of the Indus Valley shared this relative isolation in common with the civilizations of China to the east and Egypt to the west, both of which were also relatively isolated due to surrounding deserts, mountains, and seas. These features provided them with some protection from outside forces but still gave them opportunities to trade with other cultures via the sea.

In addition to differences in geography, Mesopotamia and the Indus valley experienced differing political histories. Both Sumer and the Harappan civilizations developed around multiple city-states, each controlling a central city and surrounding territory and villages. Sumerian cities were ruled over by priest-kings, who combined both political and religious authority and governed from their ziggurat complexes. Although not certain, it is likely that Indus valley kings also held religious authority as a mediator of sorts between their people and the gods. These kings often ruled from the prominent citadels that stood at the center of Indus valley cities and served as palaces. The similarities between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley end there, however, as it is clear from the historical record that Mesopotamians experienced a much more chaotic and violent political environment than their Indus valley counterparts. While there is relatively little evidence of weapons or warfare in the Indus valley archaeological record, the ancient history of Mesopotamia is rife with conflict. From the start of their civilization, Sumerian rulers vied with each other for control over more land. As city-states such as Ur and Lagash fought with each other, Sumerians placed more power and confidence in their warrior kings, hoping to gain wealth and slaves at the expense of their neighbors. This near-constant fighting ultimately weakened the Sumerians, leaving them susceptible to conquest by an outside power. Around 2350 B.C., Akkad, a city-state just to the north of Sumer that had been settled by formerly nomadic Semites, took advantage of this weakness and, under the leadership of its king, Sargon, united the Sumerian city-states into the world’s first empire. Embracing Sumerian culture, the Akkadians sought to unite Mesopotamia and ended up promoting cultural diffusion in the process. After the decline of the Akkadian Empire, the Amorites invaded around 2000 B.C. and founded the even greater Babylonian Empire that reached the height of its power and influence under the great king Hammurabi, who ruled from around 1790 to 1750 B.C. and who instituted the first significant law code in the history of the world. Even as empires rose and fell in the plains of Mesopotamia, the Indus valley city-states retained their independence and relative peacefulness until a combination of unknown natural disasters and the Indo-Aryan invasions through the Khyber Pass of the Hindu Kush mountains spelled the end of the Harappan civilization.

**CONCLUSION – NOT NEEDED, BUT HERE’S ONE POSSIBILITY**

While their differences outweighed their similarities, both the Mesopotamian and Indus valley civilizations produced unique cultures that helped to provide the foundations for even greater civilizations of the future. Both civilizations sought to overcome the unpredictability and danger of the very rivers that gave them life.

The planned cities of the Indus Valley with their carefully laid out streets, indoor plumbing, and mighty citadels foreshadowed the potential for a world of order, peace, and prosperity. The achievements of the Sumerians and their conquerors, the Akkadians and Babylonians, provided a legacy of technological and cultural achievement that proved humanity’s ability to aspire to greatness even during chaos and uncertainty. Gilgamesh’s search for immortality in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Hammurabi’s attempt to produce a just society through his legal code are just two examples of how Mesopotamians sought a better, more hopeful future, whether in their mythology or in their political and social reality. Along with Egypt and China, the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus valley proved that humanity was capable of building civilizations that would stand the test of time and provide the essential foundation stones for humanity’s future.

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