

THE BROADER INFLUENCE OF MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIETY pages 37-46

While building cities and regional states, Mesopotamians deeply influenced the development and experiences of peoples living far beyond Mesopotamia. Often their wealth and power attracted the attention of neighboring peoples. Sometimes Mesopotamians projected their power to foreign lands and imposed their ways by force. Occasionally migrants left Mesopotamia and carried their inherited traditions to new lands. Mesopotamian influence did not completely transform other peoples and turn them into carbon copies of Mesopotamians. On the contrary, other peoples adopted Mesopotamian ways selectively and adapted them to their needs and interests. Yet the broader impact of Mesopotamian society shows that, even in early times, complex agricultural societies organized around cities had strong potential to influence the development of distant human communities.

Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews

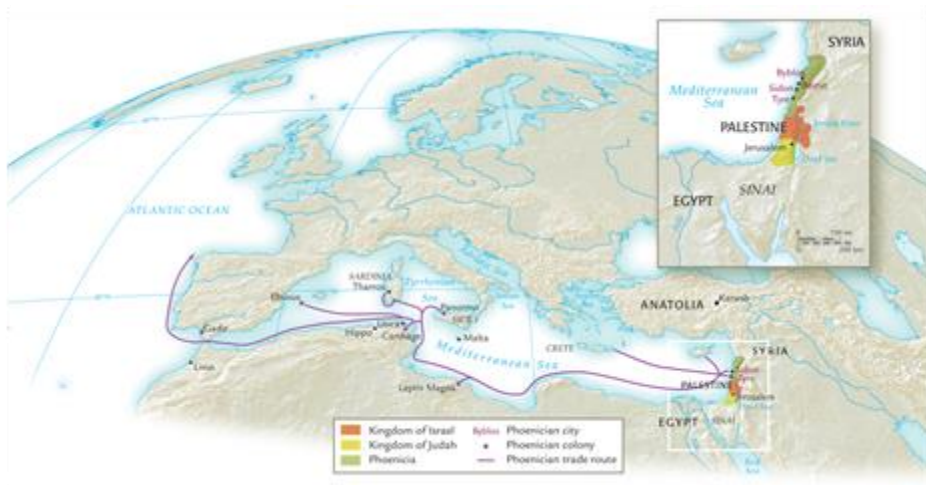
The best-known cases of early Mesopotamian influence involved Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews, who preserved memories of their historical experiences in an extensive collection of sacred writings. Hebrews were speakers of the ancient Hebrew language. Israelites formed a branch of Hebrews who settled in Palestine (modern-day Israel) after 1200 B.C.E. Jews descended from southern Israelites who inhabited the kingdom of Judah. For more than two thousand years, Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews interacted constantly with Mesopotamians and other peoples as well, with profound consequences for the development of their societies.

The Early Hebrews

The earliest Hebrews were pastoral nomads who inhabited lands between Mesopotamia and Egypt during the second millennium B.C.E. As Mesopotamia prospered, some Hebrews settled in the region's cities. According to the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament of the Christian Bible), the Hebrew patriarch Abraham came from the Sumerian city of Ur, but he migrated to northern Mesopotamia about 1850 B.C.E., perhaps because of disorder in Sumer. Abraham's descendants continued to recognize many of the deities, values, and customs common to Mesopotamian peoples. Hebrew law, for example, borrowed the principle of *lex talionis* from Hammurabi's code. The Hebrews also told the story of a devastating flood that had destroyed all early human society. Their account was a variation on similar flood stories related from the earliest days of Sumerian society. One early version of the story made its way into the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Hebrews altered the story and adapted it to their own interests and purposes, but their familiarity with the flood story shows that they participated fully in the larger society of Mesopotamia.

Migrations and Settlement in Palestine

The Hebrew scriptures do not offer reliable historical accounts of early times, but they present memories and interpretations of Hebrew experience from the perspectives of later religious leaders who collected oral reports and edited them into a body of writings after 800 B.C.E. According to those scriptures, some Hebrews migrated to Egypt during the eighteenth century B.C.E. About 1300 B.C.E., however, this branch of the Hebrews departed under the leadership of Moses and went to Palestine. Organized into a loose federation of twelve tribes, these Hebrews, known as the Israelites, fought bitterly with other inhabitants of Palestine and carved out a territory for themselves. Eventually the Israelites abandoned their inherited tribal structure in favor of a Mesopotamian-style monarchy that brought the twelve tribes under unified rule. During the reigns of King David (1000–970 B.C.E.) and King Solomon (970–930 B.C.E.), Israelites dominated the territory between Syria and the Sinai peninsula. They built an elaborate and cosmopolitan capital city at Jerusalem and entered into diplomatic and commercial relations with Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Arabian peoples.



MAP 2.3

Israel and Phoenicia, 1500–600 B.C.E. Note the location of Israel and Phoenicia with respect to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean Sea.

How might geographic location have influenced communications and exchanges between Israel, Phoenicia, and other lands of the region?

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Moses and Monotheism

The Hebrew scriptures also teach that after the time of Moses, the religious beliefs of the Israelites developed along increasingly distinctive lines. The early Hebrews had recognized many of the same gods as their Mesopotamian neighbors: they believed that nature spirits inhabited trees, rocks, and mountains, for example, and they honored various deities as patrons or protectors of their clans. Moses, however, embraced monotheism: he taught that there was only one god, known as **Yahweh**, who was a supremely powerful deity, the creator and sustainer of the world. All other gods, including the various Mesopotamian deities, were impostors—figments of the human imagination rather than true and powerful gods. When the kings of the Israelites established their capital at Jerusalem, they did not build a ziggurat, which they associated with false Mesopotamian gods but, rather, a magnificent, lavishly decorated temple in honor of Yahweh.

Yahweh (YAH-way)

Although he was the omnipotent creator of the universe, Yahweh was also a personal god. He expected his followers to worship him alone, and he demanded that they observe high moral and ethical standards. In the Ten Commandments, a set of religious and ethical principles that Moses announced to the Israelites, Yahweh warned his followers against destructive and antisocial behaviors such as lying, theft, adultery, and murder. A detailed and elaborate legal code prepared after Moses's death instructed the Israelites to provide relief and protection for widows, orphans, slaves, and the poor. Between about 800 and 400 B.C.E., the Israelites' religious leaders compiled their teachings in a set of holy scriptures known as the Torah (Hebrew for “doctrine” or “teaching”), which laid down Yahweh's laws and outlined his role in creating the world and guiding human affairs. The Torah taught that Yahweh would reward individuals who obeyed his will and punish those who did not. It also taught that Yahweh would reward or punish the whole community collectively, according to its observance of his commandments.

Historical and archaeological records tell a less colorful story than the account preserved in the Hebrew scriptures. Archaeological evidence shows that Israelites maintained communities in the hills of central Palestine after 1200 B.C.E. and that they formed several small kingdoms in the region after 1000 B.C.E. There are signs of intermittent conflicts with neighboring peoples, but there is no indication that Israelites conquered all of Palestine. On the contrary, they interacted and sometimes intermarried with other peoples of the region. Like their neighbors, they learned to use iron to fabricate weapons and tools. They even honored some of the deities of other Palestinian peoples: the Hebrew scriptures themselves mention that the Israelites worshiped gods other than Yahweh. The recognition of Yahweh as the only true god seems to have emerged about the eighth century B.C.E. rather than in the early days of the Hebrews' history.

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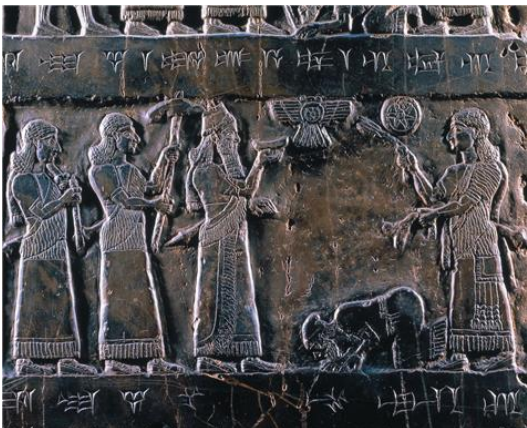
Assyrian and Babylonian Conquests

The Israelites placed increasing emphasis on devotion to Yahweh as they experienced a series of political and military setbacks. Following King Solomon's reign, tribal tensions led to the division of the community into a large kingdom of Israel in the north and a smaller kingdom of Judah in the land known as Judea to the south. During the ninth century B.C.E., the kingdom of Israel came under pressure of the expanding Assyrian empire and even had to pay tribute to Assyrian rulers. In 722 B.C.E. Assyrian forces conquered the northern kingdom and deported many of its inhabitants to other regions. Most of these exiles assimilated into other communities and lost their identity as Israelites. The kingdom of Judah retained its independence only temporarily: founders of the New Babylonian empire toppled the Assyrians, then looked south, conquered the kingdom of Judah, and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Again, the conquerors forced many residents into exile. Unlike their cousins to the north, however, most of these Israelites maintained their religious identity, and many of the deportees eventually returned to Judea, where they became known as Jews.

Ironically, perhaps, the Israelites' devotion to Yahweh intensified during this era of turmoil. Between the ninth and sixth centuries B.C.E., a series of prophets urged the Israelites to rededicate themselves to their faith and obey Yahweh's commandments. These prophets were moral and social critics who blasted their compatriots for their materialism, their neglect of the needy, and their abominable interest in the fertility gods and nature deities worshiped by neighboring peoples. The prophets warned the Israelites that unless they mended their ways, Yahweh would punish them by sending conquerors to humiliate and enslave them. Many Israelites took the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests as proof that the prophets accurately represented Yahweh's mind and will.

The Early Jewish Community

The exiles who returned to Judea after the Babylonian conquest did not abandon hope for a state of their own, and indeed they organized several small Jewish states as tributaries to the great empires that dominated southwest Asia after the sixth century B.C.E. But the returnees also built a distinctive religious community based on their conviction that they had a special relationship with Yahweh, their devotion to Yahweh's teachings as expressed in the Torah, and their concern for justice and righteousness. These elements enabled the Jews to maintain a strong sense of identity as a people distinct from Mesopotamians and others, even as they participated fully in the development of a larger complex society in southwest Asia. Over the longer term, Jewish monotheism, scriptures, and moral concerns also profoundly influenced the development of Christianity and Islam.



Unnumbered

An Assyrian relief sculpture depicts King Jehu of Israel paying tribute to King Shalmaneser III of Assyria about the middle of the ninth century B.C.E. The Phoenicians

North of the Israelites' kingdom in Palestine, the Phoenicians occupied a narrow coastal plain between the Mediterranean Sea and the Lebanon Mountains. They spoke a Semitic language, referring to themselves as Canaanites and their land as Canaan. (The term *Phoenician* comes from early Greek references.)

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The Early Phoenicians

Ancestors of the Phoenicians migrated to the Mediterranean coast and built their first settlements sometime after 3000 B.C.E. They did not establish a unified monarchy but, rather, organized a series of independent city-states ruled by local kings. The major cities—Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, and Byblos—had considerable influence over their smaller neighbors, and during the tenth century B.C.E. Tyre dominated southern Phoenicia. Generally speaking, however, the Phoenicians showed more interest in pursuing commercial

opportunities than in state building or military expansion. Indeed, Phoenician cities were often subject to imperial rule from Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Phoenician Trade Networks

Though not a numerous or militarily powerful people, the Phoenicians influenced societies throughout the Mediterranean basin because of their maritime trade and communication networks. Their meager lands did not permit development of a large agricultural society, so after about 2500 B.C.E. the Phoenicians turned increasingly to industry and trade. They traded overland with Mesopotamian and other peoples, and they provided much of the cedar timber, furnishings, and decorative items that went into the Israelites' temple in Jerusalem. Soon the Phoenicians ventured onto the seas and engaged also in maritime trade. They imported food and raw materials in exchange for high-quality metal goods, textiles, pottery, glass, and works of art that they produced for export. They enjoyed a special reputation for brilliant red and purple textiles colored with dyes extracted from several species of mollusc that were common in waters near Phoenicia. They also supplied Mesopotamians and Egyptians with cedar logs from the Lebanon Mountains for construction and shipbuilding.

The Phoenicians were excellent sailors, and they built the best ships of their times. Between 1200 and 800 B.C.E., they dominated Mediterranean trade. They established commercial colonies in Rhodes, Cyprus, Sicily, Sardinia, Spain, and north Africa. They sailed far and wide in search of raw materials such as copper and tin, which they used to make bronze, as well as more exotic items such as ivory and semiprecious stones, which they fashioned into works of decorative art. Their quest for raw materials took them well beyond the Mediterranean: Phoenician merchant ships visited the Canary Islands, coastal ports in Portugal and France, and even the distant British Isles, and adventurous Phoenician mariners made exploratory voyages to the Azores Islands and down the west coast of Africa as far as the Gulf of Guinea.

Like the Hebrews, the Phoenicians largely adapted Mesopotamian cultural traditions to their own needs. Their gods, for example, mostly came from Mesopotamia. The Phoenicians' most prominent female deity was Astarte, a fertility goddess known in Babylon and Assyria as Ishtar. Like the Mesopotamians, the Phoenicians associated other deities with mountains, the sky, lightning, and other natural phenomena. Yet the Phoenicians did not blindly follow Mesopotamian examples: each city built temples to its favored deities and devised rituals and ceremonies to honor them.



Unnumbered

A relief sculpture from an Assyrian palace depicts Phoenician ships transporting cedar logs, both by towing them and by hauling them on top of the boats.

Alphabetic Writing

The Phoenicians' tradition of writing also illustrates their creative adaptation of Mesopotamian practices to their own needs. For a millennium or more, they relied on cuneiform writing to preserve information, and they compiled a vast collection of religious, historical, and literary writings. (Most Phoenician writing has perished, although some fragments have survived.) After 2000 B.C.E. Syrian, Phoenician, and other peoples began experimenting with simpler alternatives to cuneiform. By 1500 B.C.E. Phoenician scribes

had devised an early alphabetic script consisting of twenty-two symbols representing consonants—the Phoenician alphabet had no symbols for vowels. Learning twenty-two letters and building words with them was much easier than memorizing the hundreds of symbols employed in cuneiform. Because alphabetic writing required much less investment in education than did cuneiform writing, more people were able to become literate than ever before.

Alphabetic writing spread widely as the Phoenicians traveled and traded throughout the Mediterranean basin. About the ninth century B.C.E., for example, Greeks modified the Phoenician alphabet and added symbols representing vowels. Romans later adapted the Greek alphabet to their language and passed it along to their cultural heirs in Europe. In later centuries alphabetic writing spread to central Asia, south Asia, southeast Asia, and ultimately throughout most of the world.

NORTH SEMITIC			GREEK		ETRUSCAN	LATIN	
Early Phoenician	Early Hebrew	Phoenician	Early	Classical	Early	Early	Classical
𐤀	כ	𐤁	Α	Α	𐌀	A	A
𐤂	ג	𐤂	Β	Β	𐌁		B
𐤃	ד	𐤃	Γ	Γ	𐌂		C
𐤄	ה	𐤄	Δ	Δ	𐌃	Q	D

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THE INDO-EUROPEAN MIGRATIONS

After 3000 B.C.E. Mesopotamia was a prosperous, productive region where peoples from many different communities mixed and mingled. But Mesopotamia was only one region in a much larger world of interaction and exchange. Mesopotamians and their neighbors all dealt frequently with peoples from regions far beyond southwest Asia. Among the most influential of these peoples in the third and second millennia B.C.E. were those who spoke various Indo-European languages. Their migrations throughout much of Eurasia profoundly influenced historical development in both southwest Asia and the larger world as well.

Indo-European Origins

Indo-European Languages

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, linguists noticed that many languages of Europe, southwest Asia, and India featured remarkable similarities in vocabulary and grammatical structure. Ancient languages displaying these similarities included Sanskrit (the sacred language of ancient India), Old Persian, Greek, and Latin. Modern descendants of these languages include Hindi and other languages of northern India, Farsi (the language of modern Iran), and most European languages, excepting only a few, such as Basque, Finnish, and Hungarian. Because of the geographic regions where these tongues are found, scholars refer to them as Indo-European languages. Major subgroups of the Indo-European family of languages include Indo-Iranian, Greek, Balto-Slavic, Germanic, Italic, and Celtic. English belongs to the Germanic subgroup of the Indo-European family of languages.

After noticing linguistic similarities, scholars sought a way to explain the close relationship between the Indo-European languages. It was inconceivable that speakers of all these languages independently adopted similar vocabularies and grammatical structures. The only persuasive explanation for the high degree of linguistic coincidence was that speakers of Indo-European languages were all descendants of ancestors who spoke a common tongue and migrated from their original homeland. As migrants established separate communities and lost touch with one another, their languages evolved along different lines, adding new words and expressing ideas in different ways. Yet they retained the basic grammatical structure of their original speech, and they also kept much of their ancestors' vocabulary, even though they often adopted different pronunciations (and consequently different spellings) of the words they inherited from the earliest Indo-European language.

TABLE 1.1

Similarities in Vocabulary Indicating Close Relationships between Select Indo-European Languages

English	German	Spanish	Greek	Latin	Sanskrit
father	vater	padre	pater	pater	pitar
one	ein	uno	hen	unus	ekam
fire	feuer	fuego	pyr	ignis	agnis
field	feld	campo	agros	ager	ajras

sun	sonne	sol	helios	sol	surya
king	könig	rey	basileus	rex	raja
god	gott	dios	theos	deus	devas

The Indo-European Homeland

The original homeland of Indo-European speakers was probably the steppe region of modern-day Ukraine and southern Russia, the region just north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The earliest Indo-European speakers built their society there between about 4500 and 2500 B.C.E. They lived mostly by herding cattle, sheep, and goats, while cultivating barley and millet in small quantities. They also hunted horses, which flourished in the vast grasslands of the Eurasian steppe stretching from Hungary in the west to Mongolia in the east.

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Horses

Because they had observed horses closely and learned the animals' behavioral patterns, Indo-European speakers were able to domesticate horses about 4000 B.C.E. They probably used horses originally as a source of food, but they also began to ride them soon after domesticating them. By 3000 B.C.E. Sumerian knowledge of bronze metallurgy and wheels had spread north to the Indo-European homeland, and soon thereafter Indo-European speakers devised ways to hitch horses to carts, wagons, and chariots. The earliest Indo-European language had words not only for cattle, sheep, goats, and horses, but also for wheels, axles, shafts, harnesses, hubs, and linchpins—all of the latter learned from Mesopotamian examples.

The possession of domesticated horses vastly magnified the power of Indo-European speakers. Once they had domesticated horses, Indo-European speakers were able to exploit the grasslands of southern Russia, where they relied on horses and wheeled vehicles for transport and on cattle and sheep for meat, milk, leather, and wool. Horses also enabled them to develop transportation technologies that were much faster and more efficient than alternatives that relied on cattle, donkey, or human power. Furthermore, because of their strength and speed, horses provided Indo-European speakers with a tremendous military advantage over peoples they encountered. It is perhaps significant that many groups of Indo-European speakers considered themselves superior to other peoples: the terms *Aryan*, *Iran*, and *Eire* (the official name of the modern Republic of Ireland) all derive from the Indo-European word *aryo*, meaning “nobleman” or “lord.”

Indo-European Expansion and Its Effects

The Nature of Indo-European Migrations

Horses also provided Indo-European speakers with a means of expanding far beyond their original homeland. As they flourished in southern Russia, Indo-European speakers experienced a population explosion, which prompted some of them to move into the sparsely inhabited eastern steppe or even beyond the grasslands altogether. The earliest Indo-European society began to break up about 3000 B.C.E., as migrants took their horses and other animals and made their way to new lands. Intermittent migrations of Indo-European peoples continued until about 1000 C.E. Like early movements of other peoples, these were not mass migrations so much as gradual and incremental processes that resulted in the spread of Indo-European languages and ethnic communities, as small groups of people established settlements in new lands, which then became foundations for further expansion.

The Hittites

Some of the most influential Indo-European migrants in ancient times were the Hittites. About 1900 B.C.E. the Hittites migrated to the central plain of Anatolia, where they imposed their language and rule on the region's inhabitants. During the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries B.C.E., they built a powerful kingdom and established close relations with Mesopotamian peoples. They traded with Babylonians and Assyrians, adapted cuneiform writing to their Indo-European language, and accepted many Mesopotamian deities into their pantheon. In 1595 B.C.E. the Hittites toppled the mighty Babylonian empire, and for several centuries thereafter they were the dominant power in southwest Asia. Between 1450 and 1200 B.C.E., their authority extended to eastern Anatolia, northern Mesopotamia, and Syria down to Phoenicia. After 1200 B.C.E. the unified Hittite state dissolved, as waves of invaders attacked societies throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. Nevertheless, a Hittite identity survived, along with the Hittite language, throughout the era of the Assyrian empire and beyond.



Unnumbered

A stone carving from about 1200 B.C.E. depicts a Hittite chariot with spoked wheels during a lion hunt. A horse pulls the chariot bearing one driver and one archer.

War Chariots

The Hittites were responsible for two technological innovations—the construction of light, horse-drawn war chariots and the refinement of iron metallurgy—that greatly strengthened their society and influenced other peoples throughout much of the ancient world. Sumerian armies had sometimes used heavy chariots with solid wooden wheels, but they were so slow and cumbersome that they had limited military value. About 2000 B.C.E. Hittites fitted chariots with recently invented spoked wheels, which were much lighter and more maneuverable than Sumerian wheels. The Hittites' speedy chariots were crucial in their campaign to establish a state in Anatolia. Following the Hittites' example, Mesopotamians soon added chariot teams to their armies, and Assyrians made especially effective use of chariots in building their empire. Indeed, chariot warfare was so effective—and its techniques spread so widely—that charioteers became the elite strike forces in armies throughout much of the ancient world from Rome to China.



MAP 2.4

Indo-European migrations, 3000–1000 B.C.E. Consider the vast distances over which Indo-European migrants established communities. ***Would it have been possible for speakers of Indo-European languages to spread so widely without the aid of domesticated horses?***

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Iron Metallurgy

After about 1300 B.C.E. the Hittites also refined the technology of iron metallurgy, which enabled them to produce effective weapons cheaply and in large quantities. Other peoples had tried casting iron into molds, but cast iron was too brittle for use as tools or weapons. Hittite craftsmen discovered that by heating iron in a bed of charcoal, then hammering it into the desired shape, they could forge strong, durable implements. Hittite methods of iron production diffused rapidly—especially after the collapse of their kingdom in 1200 B.C.E. and the subsequent dispersal of Hittite craftsmen—and eventually spread throughout all of Eurasia. (Peoples of sub-Saharan Africa independently invented iron metallurgy.) Hittites were not the original inventors either of horse-drawn chariots or of iron metallurgy: in both cases they built on Mesopotamian precedents. But in both cases they clearly improved on existing technologies and introduced innovations that other peoples readily adopted.

Indo-European Migrations to the East

While the Hittites were building a state in Anatolia, other Indo-European speakers migrated from the steppe to different regions. Some went east into central Asia, venturing as far as the Tarim Basin (now western China) by 2000 B.C.E. Stunning evidence of those migrations came to light recently when archaeologists excavated burials of individuals with European features in China's Xinjiang province. Because of the region's extremely dry atmosphere, the remains of some deceased individuals are so well preserved that their fair skin, light hair, and brightly colored garments are still clearly visible. Descendants of these migrants survived in central Asia and spoke Indo-European languages until well after 1000 C.E., but most of them were later absorbed into societies of Turkish-speaking peoples.

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Indo-European Migrations to the West

Meanwhile, other Indo-European migrants moved west. One wave of migration took Indo-European speakers into Greece after 2200 B.C.E., with their descendants moving into central Italy by 1000 B.C.E. Another migratory wave established an Indo-European presence farther to the west. By 2300 B.C.E. some Indo-European speakers had made their way from southern Russia into central Europe (modern Germany and Austria), by 1200 B.C.E. to western Europe (modern France), and shortly thereafter to the British Isles, the Baltic region, and the Iberian peninsula. These migrants depended on a pastoral and agricultural economy: none of them built cities or organized large states. For most of the first millennium B.C.E., however, Indo-European Celtic peoples largely dominated Europe north of the Mediterranean, speaking related languages and honoring similar deities throughout the region. They recognized three principal social groups: a military ruling elite, a small group of priests, and a large class of commoners. Most of the commoners tended herds and cultivated crops, but some also worked as miners, craftsmen, or producers of metal goods. Even without large states, Celtic peoples traded copper, tin, and handicrafts throughout much of Europe.

Indo-European Migrations to the South

Yet another, later wave of migrations established an Indo-European presence in Iran and India. About 1500 B.C.E. the Medes and Persians migrated into the Iranian plateau, while the Aryans began filtering into northern India. Like the Indo-European Celts in Europe, the Medes, Persians, and Aryans herded animals, cultivated grains, and divided themselves into classes of rulers, priests, and commoners. Unlike the Celts, though, the Medes, Persians, and Aryans soon built powerful states (discussed in later chapters) on the basis of their horse-based military technologies and later their possession also of iron weapons.