Social Structures (SOC)

Early Civilizations
Mesopotamia

Sumer

- Specialization of labor
- Distinct social classes
- Growing gap between rich and poor
- Bottom of society was slaves - foreign prisoners of war or families who could not pay their debts
  - Estimates are that as much as 40% of people in cities may have been slaves
  - Necessary to build massive stone structures and maintain the vast irrigation system
- Upper-class women enjoyed some freedom - could own property and have separate incomes
  - All marriages were arranged by men

Babylon

- Patriarchal society but women enjoyed more rights than women in Sumer - could be merchants, traders, and even scribes.
  - Marriages were arranged by parents
  - A woman could leave her husband if he was cruel but could not divorce him (but she could take her property with her)
Egypt

Complex social structure

- Royal families, nobles, and priests at the top
  - Artisans were paid by the government
  - Farmers' crops belonged to the owner of the land
    - They were also required to work on irrigation and other government construction projects
  - Slaves were acquired from lands conquered by Egypt
  - All classes of people were equal under the law except slaves, but the class system was very rigid—difficult to advance to higher class
- Egyptian women had more rights and freedoms than most ancient women
  - Could own property, make contracts, divorce, and pursue legal disputes in court
  - Two Egyptian pharaohs: Hatshepsut and Cleopatra
  - However, most women were not educated and did not take part in government
Indus Valley

Social structure is based on the Upanishads (a collection of religious thought based on the interaction of Aryan and Dravidian beliefs)

- Sharp, hereditary distinctions between individuals and groups according to their occupations and roles in society (varna)
- Maintained order and stability
- Foundation of the caste system

Source: Guide to the Essentials of World History, Prentice Hall, 1999 (adapted)
Indus Valley

Patriarchal society

- Women had no public authority, could not inherit land, could not preside over family rituals, and received almost no education

Lawbook of Manu

- Rules for proper moral behavior and social relationships
- Most important duty for women is to have children and maintain the home

Sati (the sacrifice of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre - wooden structure for burning a body)

- an example of extreme patriarchy but not widely practiced
China

- Ruling elites lived off the agricultural surpluses and taxes provided by their subjects. Their monopoly of bronze items set them apart from less privileged classes.
- Hereditary aristocracy were political allies of the rulers. They filled administrative or military leadership positions and had extensive landholdings worked by commoners or slaves. They often lived in cities and had at least an elementary education. They developed an elaborate tradition of etiquette.
- Small class of free craftsmen and artisans
- Little is known about a merchant class but there is definitely evidence of trade in the region.
- Peasants owned no land but provided agriculture and military labor in exchange for land to cultivate and the promise of protection (early feudalism).
- Slaves (usually enemy warriors) performed the hard labor.
- Women managed households and produced children.
China

- Ancestor Veneration
  - Family was the principal social institution
  - Family linked departed generations to the living
  - A family could expect to prosper only if all its members - living and dead - worked cooperatively
  - Father possessed the authority and was responsible for rites and ceremonies honoring ancestors’ spirits
Americas

Chavin

- Very little is known however there must have been some social stratification to allow for specialization of labor - evidence of pottery, cotton textiles, fishnets, and irrigation systems

Olmec

- Evidence suggests some sort of social class system which allowed for the construction of large public works projects like drainage systems and the large human heads they are known for
Oceania

Lapita had elaborate societies with complex social classes including chiefs, priests, administrators, soldiers, and servants.

Other societies likely had similar social structures but were spread out over the vast number of islands.