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Everyday Life:
ANCIENT TIMES
WITH CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN EACH CHAPTER

WALTER A. HAZEN

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Dedication

To the memory of my brother, Walton, and my sister, Betty.

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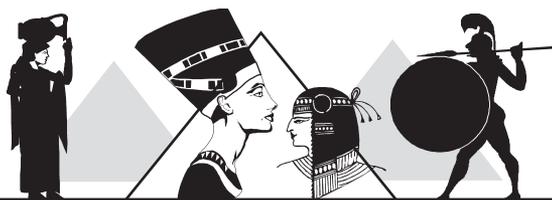
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Introduction

Strange as it may seem, most of human history has taken place in ancient times. Some 6,000 years have passed since early cities appeared in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China. All but about 1,500 of those years are included in what is termed “ancient history.”

It therefore seems appropriate that we know something about the lives and achievements of the many ancient peoples on whose thoughts and accomplishments our own civilization is based. I speak primarily of the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks, and the Romans, and it is on these groups that *Everyday Life: Ancient Times* focuses. Although each chapter mentions life in ancient India and China, the emphasis is always on the former civilizations.

Because of space limitations, the many peoples whose civilizations rose and fell in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of the Middle East are, for the most part, referred to collectively as “Mesopotamians” and are generally treated as one group. For the same reason, the highly developed civilizations of the various Indian tribes in what later became Central and South America, as well as a number of advanced African civilizations south of Egypt, are not covered in this book. Another book would be required to address these deserving ancient peoples.

As with previous *Everyday Life* books, *Everyday Life: Ancient Times* does not dwell on governments and leaders. Nor does it discuss wars, battles, natural resources, and other topics covered in general history texts. Instead, it centers on everyday life: how ancient peoples thought, what they ate, what they wore, what their houses were like, and how they looked at marriage and family life. It is a book you should enjoy.

Walter A. Hazen



Marriage and Family Life

If you could be whisked back to ancient times by way of a time machine, you would naturally find life very different from your life today. Houses would be different, clothing would be different, and what people did for fun and amusement would be different. So would their views on marriage and the home. Because marriage and family life form the cornerstone of any society, it is here that we begin our study of ancient times. As you read the following pages, you will be introduced to some unusual customs and beliefs. Some will shock you; others will probably make you laugh. But every one should hold your attention and interest to the end.

Marriage in ancient societies was, for the most part, a prearranged affair. The father of the bride-to-be struck a deal with either a professional matchmaker or with the prospective groom's family, a suitable dowry was agreed upon, and the young lady in question was officially betrothed. There was no dating involved and often no courtship. In most cases, the girl never saw her future husband until the day of the wedding. She could only hope that he turned out to be kind and not abusive.

Nowhere were ancient views concerning marriage and the home more firmly established than in Greece. In the various Greek city-states, women had different rights. In Athens, the husband ruled supreme and the wife's place was in the home. The typical wife had no rights and did not participate in public affairs, except for a few religious festivals or funerals. She could not own a business or inherit property. She was not even allowed to join her husband in entertaining guests. When her husband had male friends over, the Athenian wife was expected to retire to the back of the house and stay out of sight. In Sparta, women fared much better. For example, they could read and write, unlike other Greek women, and could own property.

But this is only the beginning! In ancient Greece, romantic love was looked upon as a form of madness. The purpose of marriage was to have



A young Greek bride readies herself for her wedding; from a fifth-century BCE vase painting.





children; love never entered the picture. Marriages were arranged; husbands were usually around thirty years of age and in most city-states brides were fourteen or fifteen. Girls, we are told, played with dolls right up to their wedding day, when they were expected to leave the dolls at the altar of Artemis, the goddess of unmarried girls.

Because the sole purpose of marriage was to have children, single people in Greece were frowned upon. Most city-states even had laws forbidding being single. Little was done, however, to enforce these measures. Except in Sparta. Sparta viewed bachelorhood as a serious offense and took steps to prod unmarried males to action. Military commanders would force bachelors to march naked through the marketplace. They were jeered at and sometimes even assaulted, and, because this event always took place in the dead of winter, it is safe to assume that they were also uncomfortable. History does not reveal the number of bachelors who consented to a trip to the altar because of this annual humiliation.

The Greeks were equally as stern with their children. Even in Athens, the most democratic of the city-states, a father had the right to reject a child shortly after birth if the family was too poor or had too many girls or the child was disabled. He had the right to leave the child in some public place to die. Matters were worse in Sparta, where weak or deformed babies were left on a mountainside to die of exposure. If, however, a child was accepted by the father, he or she led a carefree existence for the next six years.

In Rome, as in Greece, life centered around the father. In the early republic, the father or oldest male, in fact, held the power of life and death over his entire family. Any member who incurred his wrath could be killed or sold into slavery. Unwanted children were often abandoned to “the elements.” Fortunately, such extreme action was seldom taken. In addition to the husband, the extended Roman family consisted of the wife, the children, married sons and their families, the grandparents, and all the slaves.

As in Greece, all Roman men were expected to marry and raise a family. Those who did not had to pay a bachelor tax. Marriages were often prearranged, sometimes when boys and girls were no more than infants. Girls were officially engaged when they were ten years old and married by their mid-teens. Their husbands were usually in their twenties.

The Roman groom presented his fiancée with an engagement ring, which he placed on the third finger of her left hand, the same finger on which people wear wedding rings today. The Romans believed that a nerve ran from the





ring finger directly to the heart. The ring was symbolic of the gentleman's pledge to honor his promise of marriage.

Once married, Roman wives were not confined to the home as were their Greek counterparts. They could go about freely, and many held jobs. They could even join their husbands in entertaining guests. But they lacked political rights; they could neither vote nor hold public office. Politics was a domain reserved exclusively for their husbands.



Sculpture of an Etruscan couple from the sixth century BCE. The Etruscans were the rulers of early Rome.

During the years of the Roman republic, which extended from 509–27 BCE, the family was a strong and close-knit unit. The father taught his sons obedience and good citizenship, while the mother taught her daughters how to cook, spin, and weave. Sometimes she even taught them to read, write, and do math. Family life changed sometime after the republic became the Roman Empire in 27 BCE (The Western Roman Empire lasted until CE 476, while the Eastern Roman Empire, known as the Byzantine Empire, fell apart in 1453.) In the years when the Eastern Roman

Empire was on the verge of collapse, family life broke down, and virtues once held dear disappeared.

If you are thinking that all ancient societies had similar views about marriage and the family, you will surely be surprised when you read about the Egyptians. It was in ancient Egypt that women enjoyed more rights and held a higher position than women in any other ancient civilization.

In Egypt, such a thing as courtship really existed, and likely as not it was the female who took the initiative. Many love letters written from women to men have survived the centuries. Here is an excerpt from a real letter that illustrates quite well how forward Egyptian women could be: “Oh my beautiful friend, my desire is to become, as thy wife, the mistress (manager or possessor) of all thy possessions.”

Now that is about as blunt as one can put it! Such directness probably stemmed from the fact that women in Egypt could inherit and own property.





Even though her husband might take over responsibility for any property she brought to the marriage, the wife still maintained its ownership. She could then pass on the property to her children. Furthermore, she could operate a business if she chose to do so. The rights granted to Egyptian women stunned visitors from outside Egypt. Greeks who visited the land of the Nile referred to Egyptian men as “henpecked.”

Because women in Egypt were held in such high esteem, it naturally follows that children were also treated well. This was not the case in Mesopotamia, where many kingdoms rose and fell in a region that roughly corresponds to present-day Iraq. Parents in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, where Mesopotamia lay, could disown their children and have them exiled to the countryside to fend for themselves.

Women in Mesopotamia enjoyed many of the same rights as those in Egypt. They could own property, open shops, and serve as priestesses in the temples. They fared less well, however, when it came to marriage. Their husbands could divorce them for the flimsiest of reasons or sell them to pay off debts. If accused and found guilty of infidelity, their punishment was quite severe. They were drowned.

In both ancient China and ancient India, girls were married very young. In India, they were no more than seven or eight years old when they were wed to men often four times their age. Still, they were treated quite well compared to women in China. In China, wives were subservient in all things. They did not eat with their husbands nor live in the same parts of the house. Their seclusion was shared in part by their children, who could only see their fathers once every ten days, and then only if they were on their best behavior.

You learned earlier about sickly babies in Sparta being abandoned to die. But the fate that befell some Chinese girl babies was even worse. Because their fathers considered girls a burden, they were sometimes left outside to die from the cold or to be eaten by the pigs!

Now that you’ve studied marriage and family life in ancient times, aren’t you glad you were born a few thousand years later?



The back of the throne of Tutankhamen depicting an Egyptian pharaoh and his wife. She is helping him get dressed.





Name _____ Date _____

Research the Ancient World

How familiar are you with the ancient world? Can you go to a wall map and point out the locations of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia? Can you locate Athens and Sparta or indicate the boundaries of the Roman Empire? Are you familiar with the types of government that ruled these ancient states and kingdoms?

Here are six questions concerning early civilizations and societies. You can find answers to them by consulting either your textbook, an encyclopedia, the Internet or any book dealing with the ancient world.

1. Early civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China sprang up around four famous river valleys. These rivers and their locations are as follows:

River(s)	Location
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. The word Mesopotamia means _____

3. Many peoples and empires rose and fell in Mesopotamia in ancient times. Four of these were _____, _____, _____, and _____.

4. The ancient Greeks never united to form one nation. Instead, they remained separated into city-states. A city-state is _____

5. Ancient Rome was a republic long before it became an empire. A republic is _____

6. Rome was an empire for some 500 years. An empire is defined as _____

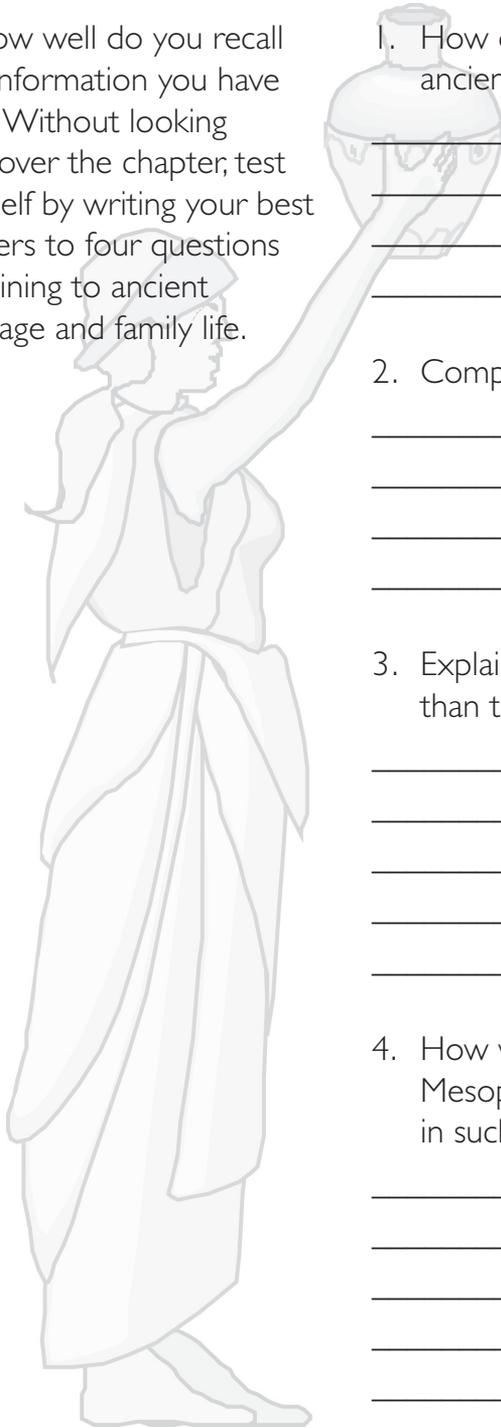




Name _____ Date _____

Recall Information You Have Read

How well do you recall information you have read? Without looking back over the chapter, test yourself by writing your best answers to four questions pertaining to ancient marriage and family life.



1. How did betrothals, or engagements, come about in most ancient societies?

2. Compare the status of women in Greece and Rome.

3. Explain how women in Ancient Egypt were far better off than their counterparts in other places.

4. How were children looked upon and treated in Greece, Mesopotamia, and China? Compare their lot with children in such places as Rome and Egypt.





Name _____ Date _____

Fill in a Venn Diagram

Fill in the Venn diagram to compare home life in ancient times with home life today. Write facts about each in the appropriate place. List characteristics common to both where the circles overlap.

