rivers in what is now Iraq. Those two rivers so defined this ancient society that historians refer to the land as its later Greek conquerors did: Mesopotamia, “the land between the rivers.” By about 3500 BC, some of those early villages had combined or grown into large settlements, into cities with large buildings and fortifications, so Mesopotamia produced the world’s first civilization. Egypt, where communities clustered along the Nile River, produced another. The large arc of the Nile and Tigris and Euphrates rivers marked out especially productive lands, now referred to as the “fertile crescent” (see Map 1.1). This pattern offers a clue regarding the origins of civilization: rivers.

Why were the rivers so important? In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, they provided water for irrigation, partly freeing farmers from the tyranny of the weather. This more efficient agriculture must have meant a larger total surplus of food for the community as a whole. Thus, fewer farmers could support the population, allowing some people to take up occupations other than farming. And so were born denser settlements of full-time merchants, artists, prostitutes, and priests—in other words, cities and civilization. The specialization allowed by cities began a process of refining the conditions of human life that