From Human Prehistory to the Early Civilizations

The Heritage of the River Valley Civilizations

THINKING HISTORICALLY: The Idea of Civilization in World Historical Perspective

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS: The Early Civilizations and the World

The creation of fire-starters and other tools, including weapons, proved critical to the survival of early humans and to the development of ever larger communities and eventually whole societies. In the chapter that follows we will trace the successive stages of the early material and social development of the human species. We will explore the technological and organizational innovations that made it possible for what became the great majority of humans to move from tiny bands of wandering hunters and gatherers to sedentary village dwellers and then the builders of walled cities with populations in the thousands. More than any other factor, these transformations were made possible by the development of agriculture that increased and made more secure the supply of food by which more and more humans could be sustained.

The domestication of animals and the shift to agriculture was accompanied by major changes in the roles and relationships between men and women and patterns of childrearing. They also led to increasing social stratification, new forms of political organization, increasingly elaborate means of artistic expression, and more lethal ways of waging war. During these millennia of transition farming communities occupied only small pockets of the earth's land area and only rarely ventured out on the sea or large rivers. Pastoral peoples who depended on herds of domesticated animals for their livelihood occupied a far greater share of the space where there was a human presence. An uneasy balance between the peoples who followed those two main adaptations to the diverse ecosystems in which humans proved able to survive was a dominant feature of the history of the species and the planet until five or six centuries.

Figure 1.1. Onching against a wall to shelter the first sparks from wind, a Neolithic woman spins a dried yucca stalk against a much-used fire-starter to generate heat that will kindle a fire on the dried plant material she has placed under the fire-starting stick.

Human Life in the Era of Hunters and Gatherers

The human species has accomplished a great deal in a relatively short period of time. There are significant disagreements over how long an essentially human species, as distinct from other primates, has existed. However, a figure of 2 or 2.5 million years seems acceptable. This is approximately 1/4000 of the time the earth has existed. That is, if one thinks of the whole history of the earth to date as a 24-hour day, the human species began at about 5 minutes before midnight. Human beings have existed for less than 5 percent of the time mammals of any sort have lived. Yet in this brief span of time—by earth-history standards—humankind has spread to every landmass (with the exception of the polar regions) and, for better or worse, has taken control of the destinies of countless other species.

To be sure, human beings have some drawbacks as a species, compared to other existing models. They are unusually aggressive against their own kind. While some of the great apes, notably chimpanzees, engage in periodic wars, these conflicts can hardly rival human violence. Human beings are also dependent for a long period, which requires some special child-care arrangements and often has limited the activities of many adult women. Certain ailments, such as back problems resulting from an upright stature, also burden the species. And, insofar as we know, the human species is alone in its awareness of the inevitability of death—a knowledge that imparts some unique fears and tensions.
2.5 Million B.C.

25,000 Migration of people from Siberia to tip of South America
14,000 End of ice age
12,000 Fashioning of stone tools

Paleolithic Age: The Old Stone Age ending in 12,000 B.C., typified by use of crude stone tools and hunting and gathering for subsistence.

Neolithic Age: 10,000-8000 Development of farming in the Middle East
9000 Domestication of sheep, pigs, goats, cattle
8000 Transition of agriculture; introduction of silk weaving in China

Neolithic Age:
30,000 B.C.
10,000 B.C.

6000 First potter's wheel
5500 Çatal Höyük at its peak
5000 Domestication of maize (corn) in Mesoamerica

Neolithic Age:
4000 B.C.
3000 B.C.
2000 B.C.

4000 Yangshao culture in China
3000-3000 Age of innovation in the Middle East; introduction of writing, bronze metallwork, wheel, plow
3500-1800 Civilization of Sumer; cuneiform alphabet
3100 Rise of Egyptian civilization

Metal Age:
2500 Emergence of Harappa (India) civilization

2000 Kotoshi culture in Peru
2000 Conversion to agriculture in northern Europe, southern Africa
1500 Emergence of Shang kingdom in China; writing develops
1500 First ironwork in the Middle East
1200 Jews settle near the Mediterranean; first monotheistic religion
1122 Western Zhou kings

Distinctive features of the human species account for considerable achievement as well. Like other primates, but unlike most other mammals, people can manipulate objects fairly readily because of the grip provided by an opposable thumb on each hand. Compared to other primates, human beings have a relatively high and regular sexual drive, which aids reproduction. Being omnivores, they are not dependent exclusively on plants or animals for food, which helps explain why they can live in so many different climates and settings. The unusual variety of their facial expressions aids communication and enhances social life. The unusual human brain and a facility for elaborate speech are even more important: much of human history depends on the knowledge, inventions, and social contracts that resulted from these assets. Features of this sort explain why many human cultures, including the Western cultures that many Americans share, promote a firm separation between human and animal, seeing in our own species a power and rationality, and possibly a spark of the divine, that "lower" creatures lack.

Although the rise of humankind has been impressively rapid, its early stages can also be viewed as painfully long and slow. Most of the two million plus years during which our species has existed can be described by the term Paleolithic (Old Stone) Age. Throughout this long time span, which runs until about 14,000 years ago, human beings learned only simple tool use, mainly through employing suitably shaped rocks and sticks for hunting and warfare. Fire was tamed around 750,000 years ago. The nature of the species also gradually changed during the Paleolithic, with emphasis on more erect stature and growing brain capacity. Archeological evidence, remnants of tools from early settlements, also indicates some increases in average size. A less apelike species, whose larger brain and erect stance allowed better tool use, emerged between 500,000 and 750,000 years ago; it is called, appropriately enough, Homo erectus. Several species of Homo erectus developed and spread in Africa, then to Asia and Europe, reaching a population size of perhaps 1.5 million 100,000 years ago.

Late Paleolithic Developments

Considerable evidence suggests that more advanced types of humans killed off or displaced many competitors over time, which explains why there is only one basic human type throughout the world today, rather than a number of very similar human species, as among monkeys and apes. There was also a certain amount of interbreeding. The newest human breed, Homo sapiens sapiens, of which all humans in the world today are descendants, originated about 240,000 years ago, also in Africa. The success of this subspecies means that no major changes to the basic human physique or brain size have occurred since its advent.

Even after the appearance of Homo sapiens sapiens, human life faced important constraints. People who hunted food and gathered nuts and berries could not support large numbers or elaborate societies. Most hunting groups were small, and they had to roam widely for food. Two people required at least one square mile for survival. Population growth was slow, partly because women breast-fed infants for several years to limit their own fertility. On the other hand, people did not have to work very hard—hunting took about seven hours every three days on average. Women, who gathered fruits and vegetables, worked harder, but there was significant equality between the sexes based on common economic contributions.

Paleolithic people gradually improved their tool use, beginning with the crude shaping of stone and wood implements. Speech developed with Homo erectus 100,000 years ago, allowing more group cooperation and the transmission of technical knowledge. By the later Paleolithic period, people had developed rituals to lessen the fear of death and created cave paintings to express a sense of nature's beauty and power (Figure 1.2). Goddesses often played a prominent role in the religious pantheon. Thus, the human species came to develop cultures—that is, systems of belief that helped explain the environment and set up rules for various kinds of social behavior. The development of speech provided rich language and symbols for the transmission of culture and its growing sophistication. At the same time, different groups of humans, in different locations, developed quite varied belief systems and corresponding languages.

The greatest achievement of Paleolithic people was the sheer spread of the human species over much of the earth's surface. The species originated in eastern Africa; most of the earliest types of human remains come from this region, in the present-day countries of Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. But gradual migration, disabled by the need to find scarce food; steadily pushed the human race to other areas. Key discoveries, notably fire and the use of animal skins for clothing—both of which enabled people to live in colder climates—facilitated the spread of Paleolithic groups. The first people moved out of Africa about 750,000 years ago. Human remains (Peking man, Java man) dating from 600,000 and 350,000 years ago have been found in China and southeast Asia, respectively. Humans inhabited Britain 250,000 years ago. They first crossed to Australia 60,000 years ago, followed by another group 20,000 years later; these combined to form the continent's Aboriginal population. Dates of the migration from Asia to the Americas are under debate. Most scholars now believe that humans crossed what was then a land bridge from Siberia to Alaska about 30,000 years ago, with several subsequent migratory waves until warmer climates and rising ocean levels eliminated the land bridge by 8000 B.C.E.4

4 De Christianis, societies, historical dating divides between years "before the birth of Christ" (B.C.) and after A.D., anno Di

According to the Christian calendar, Jesus was born 2014 years ago (7 B.C.), but the date is often rounded to 2000 years ago (6 B.C.) as a historical convenience. The calendar is also based on the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. The Gregorian calendar is the most widely used civil calendar in the world today. It is based on the Julian calendar, which was introduced by the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar in 45 B.C. The Julian calendar was based on the ancient Roman calendar, which was based on the ancient Egyptian calendar. The ancient Egyptian calendar was based on the cycle of the sun and the Moon. The Julian calendar was based on the cycle of the sun, and the Gregorian calendar was based on the cycle of the sun and the Moon, and has been in use since 1582.

The Spread of Human Populations

Figure 1.2 In Laussel, France, in 1940, four lines happened upon a long-hidden cave filled with thousands of complex and beautiful Stone Age paintings like this one. Most of the paintings are of animals, some of which were extinct by the time they were painted. No one knows for sure why Stone Age artists painted these pictures, but they remain a powerful reminder of the sophistication of so-called primitive peoples.
and manipulate tools thus depends directly on what our Stone Age ancestors learned about physical matter.

However, it was the invention of agriculture that most clearly moved the human species toward more elaborate social and cultural patterns of the sort that people today would find recognizable. With agriculture, human beings were able to settle in one spot and focus on particular economic, political, and religious goals and activities. Agriculture also spawned a great increase in the sheer number of people in the world—from about 6 to 8 million across the earth’s surface during early Neolithic times, to about 100 million some 3000 years later.

The initial development of agriculture—that is, the deliberate planting of grains for later harvest—was probably triggered by two results of the ice age’s end. First, population increases, stemming from improved climate, prompted people to search for new and more reliable sources of food. Second, at the end of the ice age saw the retreat of certain big game animals, such as mastodons. Human hunters had turned to smaller game, such as deer and wild boar, in many forested areas. Hunting’s overall yield declined. Here was the basis for new interest in other sources of food. There is evidence that by 9000 B.C., in certain parts of the world, people were becoming increasingly dependent on regular harvests of wild grains, berries, and nuts. This undoubtedly set the stage for the deliberate planting of seeds (probably accidental to begin with) and the improvement of key grains through the selection of seeds from the best plants.

As farming evolved, new animals were also domesticated. Particularly in the Middle East and parts of Asia, by 9000 B.C.E. pigs, sheep, goats, and cattle were being raised. Farmers used these animals for meat and skins and soon discovered dairying as well. These results not only contributed to the development of agriculture but also served as the basis for nomadic herding societies.

The Geography of Early Agriculture

Farming was initially developed in the Middle East, in an arc of territory running from present-day Turkey to Iraq and Israel. This was a very fertile area, more fertile in those days than at present. Grains such as barley and wild wheat were abundant. At the same time, this area was not heavily forested, and animals were in short supply, presenting a challenge to hunters. In the Middle East, the development of agriculture may have begun as early as 10,000 B.C., and it gained ground rapidly after 8000 B.C.E. Gradually during the Neolithic centuries, knowledge of agriculture spread to other centers, including parts of India, north Africa, and Europe. Agriculture also developed independently for example, with the rise of rice cultivation in southeast Asia, from which it spread to China. Thus, within a few thousand years agriculture had spread to the parts of the world that would produce the first human civilizations (Map 1.2). We will see that agriculture spread later to much of Africa south of the Mediterranean coast, reaching west Africa by 2000 B.C., although here, too, there were additional developments with an emphasis on local grains and also root crops such as yams. Agriculture had to be invented separately in the Americas, based on corn cultivation, where it also was a slightly later development (about 5000 B.C.).

Many scholars have termed the development of agriculture a Neolithic revolution. The term is obviously misleading in one sense: agriculture was no sudden transformation, even in the Middle East where the new system had its roots. Learning the new agricultural methods was difficult, and many peoples long combined a bit of agriculture with considerable reliance on the older systems of hunting and gathering. A "revolution" that took over a thousand years, and then several thousand more to spread to key population centers in Asia, Europe, and Africa, is hardly dramatic by modern standards.

Patterns of Change

The concept of revolution is, however, appropriate in demonstrating the magnitude of change involved. Early agriculture could support far more people per square mile than hunting ever could; it also allowed people to settle more permanently in one area. The system was nonetheless not easy. Agriculture required more regular work, at least on, than hunting did. Hunting groups today, such as the pygmies of the Kalahari Desert in southwest Africa, work an average of 2.5 hours a day, alternating long, intense hunts with periods of idleness. As much as agriculture was demanding, it
Further Technological Change

Development possibilities among people who became agriculturalists were more obvious than those among smaller populations who resisted or simply did not know of the systems. Agriculture set the basis for more rapid change in human societies. Greater wealth and larger populations freed some people for other specializations, from which new ideas or techniques might spring. Agriculture itself depended on control over nature that could be facilitated by newly developed techniques and objects. For example, during the Neolithic period, farming people needed storage facilities, from which a potter's wheel came into existence around 6000 B.C.E., and this, in turn, encouraged faster and higher-quality pottery production. Agricultural needs also encouraged certain kinds of science, supporting the human inclination to learn more about weather or flooding.

Much of what we think of as human history involves the doings of agricultural societies—societies, that is, in which most people are farmers and in which the production of food is the central economic activity. Nonagricultural groups, like the nomadic hunters in central Asia, made their own mark, but their greatest influence usually occurred in interactions with agricultural societies. Many societies remain largely agricultural today. The huge time span we have thus far considered, including the Neolithic revolution itself, is all technically "prehistoric"—involved with human patterns before the invention of writing allowed the kinds of recordkeeping historians prefer. In fact, since we now know how to use surviving tools and burial sites as records, the prehistoric-historic distinction means less than it once did. The preagricultural-agricultural distinction is more central. Fairly soon after the development of agriculture—although not, admittedly, right away—significant human change began to occur in its decades and centuries, rather than in the sizeable blocks of time, several thousand years or more, that describe preagricultural ages.

Indeed, one basic change took place fairly soon after the introduction of agriculture, and, again, societies in the Middle East served as its birthplace. The discovery of metal tools dates back to about 4000 B.C.E. Copper was the first metal with which people learned how to work, although a more resilient metal, bronze, soon entered the picture. In fact, the next basic age of human existence was the Bronze Age. By about 3000 B.C.E., metalworking had become so commonplace in the Middle East that the use of stone tools diminished, and the long stone ages were over at last—although, of course, an essentially Neolithic technology persisted in many parts of the world, even among some agricultural peoples.

Metalworking was extremely useful to agricultural and herding societies. Metal hoes and other tools allowed farmers to work the ground more efficiently. Metal weapons were obviously superior to those made from stone and wood. Agricultural peoples had the resources to free up a small number of individuals as toolmakers, who would specialize in this activity and exchange their products with farmers for food. Specialization of this sort did not, however, guarantee rapid rates of invention; indeed, many specialized artisans seemed so conservative, eager to preserve methods, that their methods had been inherited. Specialization did improve the conditions or climate for discovery, and the invention of metalworking was a key result. Like agriculture, knowledge of metals gradually spread to other parts of the world and to Africa and Europe.

Gradually, the knowledge of metal tools created further change, for not only farmers but also manufacturers of these tools benefited from better tools. Woodworking, for example, became steadily more elaborate as metal replaced stone, bone, and fire in the cutting and connecting of wood. We, too, are still living in the metal ages today, although we rely primarily on iron—whose working was introduced around 1500 B.C.E.—by herding peoples who invaded the Middle East rather than copper and bronze.

Civilization

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### Figure 1.2

In Lucerne, France, in 1940, four boys happened upon a long-hidden cave filled with thousands of complex and beautiful Stone Age paintings in this one. Most of the paintings are of animals, some of which were extinct by the time they were painted. No one knows for sure why Stone Age artists painted these pictures, but they remain a powerful reminder of the sophistication of our early ancestors.
The Neolithic Age

The Neolithic Age (between 8000 and 6000 B.C.E.) was a period in which agriculture rose to prominence, leading to a decrease in the reliance on hunting and gathering.

Origins of Agriculture

The invention of agriculture, which occurred around 8000 B.C.E., marked a significant shift in human societies. Agriculture allowed people to settle in one place, leading to the development of permanent settlements.

Early Agriculture

The development of agriculture was a slow process, occurring gradually over time. The transition from hunting and gathering to settled farming was not an immediate change but rather a gradual evolution.

Agriculture and Civilization

The spread of agriculture allowed for the growth of civilizations, which led to the development of societies with complex social structures and political systems.

The Spread of Agriculture

The spread of agriculture occurred gradually, with people gradually moving from one area to another. The spread of agriculture was not a sudden event but rather a gradual process that took place over many centuries.

The Geography of Early Agriculture

In the Middle East, the spread of agriculture was particularly significant, as it led to the development of civilizations and the growth of cities.

Modern Agriculture

Today, agriculture continues to be a vital part of human life, providing food and resources for billions of people around the world. The evolution of agriculture has been influenced by technological advancements and changing environmental conditions.

Conclusion

The invention of agriculture was a significant milestone in human history, leading to the development of societies with complex social structures and political systems.

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Further Technological Change

Development possibilities among people who became agriculturists were more obvious than those among smaller populations who resisted or simply did not know of the system. Agriculture set the basis for more rapid change in human societies. Greater wealth and larger populations freed some people for other specializations, from which new ideas or techniques might spring. Agriculture itself was also important.

The Neolithic period, farming people needed storage facilities for grains and seeds, which promoted the development of basket-making and pottery. The first potter's wheel came into existence around 6000 B.C.E., and this, in turn, encouraged faster and higher-quality pottery production. Agricultural needs also encouraged certain kinds of science, supporting the human inclination to learn more about weather or flooding.

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Indeed, one basic change took place fairly soon after the introduction of agriculture, and again, societies in the Middle East served as its birthplace. The discovery of metal tools dates back to about 8000 B.C.E. Copper was the first metal with which people learned how to work, although the more resilient metal, bronze, soon entered the picture. In fact, the next basic age of human existence was the Bronze Age. By about 3000 B.C.E., metalworking had become so commonplace in the Middle East that the use of stone tools dissolved, and the long stone ages were over at last—although, of course, an essentially Neolithic technology persisted in many parts of the world, even among some agricultural peoples.

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Gradually, the knowledge of metal tools created further change, for not only farmers but also manufacturing artisans benefited from better tools. Woodworking, for example, became steadily more elaborate as metal replaced stone, bone, and fire in the cutting and connecting of wood. We are still living in the metal ages today, although we rely primarily on iron—whose working was introduced around 1500 B.C.E. by herding peoples who invaded the Middle East—rather than copper and bronze.

Civilization

Agriculture encouraged the formation of larger as well as more stable human communities than had existed before Neolithic times. A few Mesolithic groups had formed villages, particularly where opportunities for fishing were good, as around some of the lakes in Switzerland. However, most
settled societies. The major agricultural regions, however, involved more permanent settlements. There were advantages to staying put: houses could be built to last, wells built to bring up water, and other "expensive" improvements afforded because they would serve many generations. In the Middle East, China, and parts of Africa and India, a key incentive to stability was the need for irrigation devices to channel river water to the fields. This same need helps explain why agriculture generated communities and not a series of isolated farms. Small groups simply could not regulate a river's flow or build and maintain irrigation ditches and sluices. Irrigation and defense encouraged villages—groupings of several hundred people—at the characteristic pattern of residence in almost all agricultural societies from Neolithic days until our own century. Neolithic settlements spread widely in agricultural societies. New ones continued to be founded as agriculture spread to regions such as northern Europe, as late as 1500 B.C.E. (Figure 1.5).

One Neolithic village, Catal Hüyük (kah-THAL HOWY-uuh) in southern Turkey, has been elaborately studied by archaeologists. It was founded around 7000 B.C.E. and was unusually large, covering about 32 acres. Houses were made of mud bricks set in timber frameworks and crowded together, with few windows. People seem to have spent a good bit of time on their rooftops in order to experience daylight and make social contacts—many broken bones attest to frequent falls. Some houses were lavishly decorated, mainly with hunting scenes. Religious images, both of powerful male hunters and "mother goddesses" devoted to agricultural fertility, were common. Some people in the village seem to have had special religious responsibilities. The village produced almost all the goods it consumed. Some trade was conducted with hunting peoples who lived in the hills surrounding the village, but apparently it was initiated more to keep the peace than to produce economic gain (Figure 1.4). By 5500 B.C.E., the important production activities developed in the village, including those of skilled toolmakers and jewelers. With time also came links with other communities. Large villages like Catal Hüyük ruled over smaller communities. This meant that some families began to specialize in politics, and military forces were organized. Some villages became small cities, ruled by kings who were typically given divine status. By 3000 B.C.E., Catal Hüyük had become part of a civilization. Although many of the characteristics of civilization had existed by 6000 B.C.E. in this Middle Eastern region, the origins of civilization, strictly speaking, approximately date to only 3500 B.C.E. The first civilization arose in the Middle East along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Another center of civilization started soon thereafter in northeast Africa (Egypt), and a third by around 2500 B.C.E. along the banks of the Indus River in northern India. These three early centers of civilization had some interaction. The fourth and fifth early civilizations, a bit later and considerably more separate, arose in China and Central America.

Figure 1.4 This artist's rendering depicts the ancient settlement at Catal Hüyük, in what is now southern Turkey. Movement within the settlement was mainly across the roofs and terraces of the houses. Because each dwelling had a substantial storeroom for food, the settlement was often the target of attacks by outsiders. As the painting shows, the houses were joined together to provide protection from such attacks; when the outside entrances were barricaded, the complex was transformed into a fortress.

Defining Civilization

Unlike an agricultural society, which can be rather precisely defined, civilization is a more subjective construct. Some scholars prefer to define civilizations only with societies as enough economic surplus to form divisions of labor and a social hierarchy involving significant inequalities. This is a very inclusive definition, and under it most agricultural societies and even some groups like North American Indians who combined farming with hunting would be drawn in. Others, however, press the concept of civilization further, arguing, for example, that a chief difference between civilizations and other societies (whether hunting or agricultural) involves the emergence of formal political organizations, or states, as opposed to dependence on family or tribal ties. Most civilizations produce political units capable of ruling large regions, and some characteristically produce huge kingdoms or empires.

The word civilization itself comes from the Latin term for city, and in truth most civilizations do depend on the existence of significant cities. In agricultural civilizations, most people do not live in cities. But cities are crucial because they amass wealth and power, and they allow the rapid exchange of ideas among relatively large numbers of people, thereby encouraging intellectual thought and artistic expression. Cities also promote specialization in manufacturing and trade and encourage the emergence of centers of political power.

Major civilizations developed writing, starting with the emergence of cuneiform (kyoo-NAY-uh-form) (writing based on wedge-like characters) in the Middle East around 3500 B.C.E. Societies that employ writing can organize more elaborate political structures because of their ability to send messages and keep records. They can tax more efficiently and make contracts and treaties. Societies with writing also generate a more explicit intellectual climate because of their ability to record data and build on past, written wisdom. (One of the early written records from the Middle East is a recipe for making beer—a science of sorts.) Some experts argue that the very fact of becoming literate changes the way people think, encouraging them to consider the world as a place that can be understood by organized human inquiry, or "rationally," and less by a host of spiritual beliefs. In all agricultural civilizations—that is, in all human history until less than 200 years ago—only a minority
of people was literate, and usually that was a small minority. Nonetheless, the existence of writing did make a difference in such societies.

Since civilizations employ writing and are by definition unusually well organized, it is not surprising that almost all recorded history is about what has happened to civilized societies. We simply know the most about such societies, and we often are particularly impressed by what they produce in the way of great art or powerful rulers. It is also true that civilizations tend to be far more populous than nomadic or hunting-and-gathering societies. Therefore, the history of civilization covers the history of most people.

But the history of civilization does not include everybody. Few hunting or nomadic peoples could generate a civilization—they lacked the stability of resources, and, therefore, of a limited number of signs and symbols, they never developed writing, unless it came from the outside. Furthermore, some agricultural peoples did not develop a full civilization, if our definition of civilization goes beyond the simple acquisition of economic surplus to formal states, cities, and writing. Portions of west Africa, fully agricultural and capable of impressive art, have long lacked writing, major cities, or more than loose regional government.

People in civilizations, particularly during the long centuries when they were surrounded by nomadic peoples, characteristically looked down on any society lacking in civilization. The ancient Greeks coined the word barbarian to describe such societies—and they were prone to regard all barbarians as primitives. As a result of labels like this, it is easy to think of much human history as divided between civilizations and primitive nomads.

Such a distinction is incorrect, however, and it does not follow from the real historical meaning of civilization. In the first place, like agricultural production, losses being losses as well as gains. As Caius Huyck moved toward civilization, distinctions based on social class and wealth increased. Civilizations often have finer classes or caste divisions, including slavery, than do "simpler" societies. They also promote greater separation between the rulers and ruled, monasteries and subjects. Frequently, they are quite warlike, with greater inequality between men and women than in hunter-gatherer societies. With civilization, more fully patriarchal structures emerged. In cities, male superiority was even clearer, and even greater than in agriculture, as men did most of the manufacturing and assumed political and religious leadership, than relegating women to subordinate roles. "Civilizations," then, is not a synonym for "good."

By the same token, nomadic or hunter-gatherer societies may be exceptionally well regulated, with complex and imaginative cultures. Many such societies, in fact, have more regulations—in part, because they depend on rules transmitted by word of mouth—than did civilized societies. Some hunting-gathering societies treat old people cruelly, others display more respect and generosity toward elders than civilizations do. Many nomadic societies may be shocked by the doings of civilized peoples. For example, American Indians were appalled at the insensitivity of European settlers on spanning their children, a behavior they regarded as vicious and unnecessary. A fascinating, although probably unanswerable, question involves determining whether or not the civilization form has left more or less good in its wake.

While many remaining hunting-and-gathering peoples became increasingly isolated, except in parts of the Americas, nomadic herding economies continued to flourish in many places. They depended on the domestication of animals and on key technological improvements, for example in how they domesticated the animals and weapons. Precisely because they traveled widely, nomadic peoples could ride horses and carry on long-distance trade, thus providing them with a means of survival in times of crisis. Their trade routes were important in the spread of ideas and goods. Nomadic traders often acted as agents of cultural exchange, transmitting knowledge and skills from one place to another.

Despite the importance of alternative views, it remains true that the development of civilization was most obviously continued the process of technological change and political organization. Civilizations also generated the largest populations and the most elaborate artistic and intellectual forms. It is important to note that the term has real meaning and in which it legitimately commands the attention of most historians.

Civilizations also increased human impact on the environment. For example, the first center of copper production in Europe, along the Danube valley, led to such deforestation that the fuel source was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agricultural supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agricultural supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agricultural supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agricultural supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E.
Mesopotamia in Maps

Throughout their centuries of existence, the Mesopotamian civilizations steadily expanded from their roots in the fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Reading the maps can help explain the nature of the civilizations in the region.

**Questions:**
What do these maps suggest about the relationship between Mesopotamian civilizations and the topography of the Middle East? Does geography suggest reasons for invasion and political instability in this civilization center? Did later empires in the region have the same relationship to river valleys as did the earlier states? What were the potential contacts between Mesopotamia and other river valley civilizations? Why has the Middle East been so significant in European, African, and Asian history?

**Map 1.4 Mesopotamia and the Middle East**

This map shows the location of Sumer and two later empires in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.

City-state
A basic unit of political organization typical of Mesopotamian civilizations consisted of agrarian groups ruled by an urban-based king.

Babylonian Empire
(Until fall of Mesopotamia c. 1800 B.C.E., collapsed due to foreign invasions c. 1600 B.C.E.)

Hammurabi (c. 1792-1750 B.C.E.)
The most important ruler of the Babylonian empire responsible for codification of laws.

pharaoh
Title of kings of ancient Egypt.

pyramid
Monumental architecture typical of Old Kingdom Egypt used as burial sites for pharaohs.

enforce its duties; it also provided a court system in the interests of justice. Kings were originally military leaders during times of war, and the function of defense and war, including leadership of a trained army, remained vital in Sumerian politics. Kings and the noble class, along with the priesthood, controlled considerable land, which was worked by slaves. Thus began a tradition of slavery that would long mark Middle Eastern societies. Warfare remained vital to ensure supplies of slaves taken as prisoners during combat. At the same time, slavery was a variable state of existence, and many slaves were able to earn money and even buy their freedom.

The Sumerians added to their region’s agricultural prosperity not only by using wheeled carts but also by learning about fertilizers and by adopting silver as a means of exchange for buying and selling—an early form of money. However, the region was also hard to defend and proved a constant temptation to outside invaders from Sumerian times to the present. The Sumerians themselves fell to a people called the Akkadians, who continued much of Sumerian culture. Another period of decline was followed by conquest by the Babylonians, who extended their own empire and thus helped bring civilization to other parts of the Middle East. It was under Babylonian rule that the king Hammurabi introduced the most famous early code of law, boasting of his purpose: “to promote the welfare of the people, I, Hammurabi, the devout, god-fearing prince, cause justice to prevail in the land by destroying the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak.” Hammurabi’s code established rules of procedure for courts of law and regulated property rights and the duties of family members, setting harsh punishments for crimes.

For many centuries during and after the heyday of Babylon, peace and civilization in the Middle East were troubled by the invasions of hunting and herding groups. Indo-European peoples pressed in from the north, starting about 2100 B.C.E. In the Middle East itself, invasions by Semitic peoples from the south were more important, and Semitic peoples and languages increasingly dominated the region. The new arrivals adopted the culture of the conquered peoples as their own, so the key features of the civilization persisted. But large political units declined in favor of smaller city-states or regional kingdoms, particularly during the centuries of greatest turmoil, between 1200 and 900 B.C.E. Thereafter, new invaders, first the Assyrians and then the Persians, created large new empires in the Middle East.

**Egyptian Civilization**

A second center of civilization sprang up in northern Africa, along the Nile River. Egyptian civilization, formed by 3100 B.C.E., benefited from the trade and technological influence of Mesopotamia, but it produced a quite different society and culture. Less open to invasion, Egypt retained a unified state throughout most of its history. The king, or pharaoh, possessed immense power. The Egyptian economy was more fully government-directed than its Mesopotamian counterpart, which had a more independent business class. Government control may have been necessary because of the complexity of equalizing irrigation along the Nile. It nonetheless resulted in godlike status for the pharaohs, who built splendid tombs for themselves—the Pyramids—from 2700 B.C.E. onward. During periods of weak rule and occasional invasions, Egyptian society suffered a decline, but revivals kept the framework of Egyptian civilization intact until after 1000 B.C.E. (Map 1.5). At key points, Egyptian influence spread up the Nile to the area now known as the Sudan, with an impact on the later development of African culture. The kingdom of Kush interacted with Egypt and invaded it at some point.

Neither Egyptian science nor the Egyptian alphabet was as elaborate as its Mesopotamian equal, although mathematics was more advanced in this civilization. Egyptian art was exceptionally lively, cheerful and colorful belief in many powerful gods, for the nature on which their agriculture depended often seemed swift and unpredictable. Prayers and offerings to prevent floods as well as to protect good health were a vital part of Sumerian life. Sumerian ideas about the divine force in natural objects—in rivers, trees, and mountains—were common among early agricultural peoples. A religion of this sort, which sees gods in many aspects of nature, is known as polytheism. More specifically, Sumerian religious notions, notably their ideas about the god Ishtar’s creation of the waters from water and about the divine punishment of humans through floods, later influenced the writers of the Old Testament and thus continue to play a role in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures. Sumerian religious ideas, which had a decidedly gloomy cast, also included a belief in an afterlife of punishment—an original version of the concept of hell.

Sumerian political structures stressed tightly organized city-states, ruled by a king who claimed divine authority. The Sumerian state had carefully defined boundaries, unlike the less formal territories of precivilized villages in the region. Here is a key early example of how civilization and a more formal political structure came together. The government helped regulate religion and
Aryan Poetry in Praise of a War Horse

The following early Vedic hymn extolls in the power of a great Aryan war horse.

Rushing to glory, to the capture of herds, Sweeping down like a hungry falcon, Eager to be first, to defeat the men of the chariot Happy as a bridegroom making a garland, Spurring the dart and chewing at the bit. And the victorious and faithful, his body obedient to his driver in battle, Speeding on through the melee, Stirs up the dust to fall on his hooves.

But most of their implementations were inferior to those of Mesopotamian peoples, with whom they had contact. Their weapons were even more primitive and would have left them vulnerable to invasions by peoples more adapted to warfare.

Harappan society appears to have been dominated by a powerful priestly class, which ruled from the citadel of each capital. The priests would have derived this control from their role as intermediaries between the Harappan populace and a number of gods and goddesses, who controlled fertility. Representations of mother goddesses appear to have been objects of worship for the common people, whereas a horned god was apparently favored by the priests and upper classes. The presence of these figures in Sumer and other urban sites in the Persian Gulf region suggests that large quantities of various commodities were traded in the region spanning Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley.

It is likely that a combination of factors led to Harappa’s demise. There is evidence of severe flooding at Mohenjo Daro and other sites. Short-term natural disasters, including severe earthquakes, may have compounded the adverse effects of long-term climatic changes. Shifts in the monsoon pattern and changes in temperature may have begun the process of desertification that eventually transformed the region into the arid steppe that it has been for most of recorded history. Rapid changes in pottery types suggest sudden waves of migrants into the region. It is possible that the Harappans were too weak militarily to prevent these incoming peoples from settling down or taking over their towns and cities. In many cases these centers of urban life had already been abandoned in response to natural calamities, particularly flooding. A marked decline in the quality of building and town planning suggests that the priestly elite may have lost control over the artisans and laborers.

Some of the migrants were bands of Aryan hiders who entered the Indus region over an extended period of time rather than in militant waves. But the Aryan pastoralists may have consciously destroyed or neglected the dikes and canals on which the agrarian life of the Harappans peoples had once depended. Cattle raising then would have replaced crop cultivation, further undermining the economic basis of the civilization. That there was a good deal of violent conflict in this transition cannot be ruled out. Groups of skeletons with smashed skulls or in postures of flight from floods or foreign invaders have been found on the stairways at some sites. Thus, environmental changes and related administrative decline may have combined with the effects of nomadic migrations to undermine south Asia’s first civilization.

Early Civilization in China

Civilization along the Yellow River in China developed in considerable isolation, although some overland trading contact with India and the Middle East did develop. Huang he civilization was the subject of much later Chinese legend, which praised the godlike kings of early civilization, starting with the mythic ancestor of the Chinese, Pan Ku. The Chinese had an unusually elaborate concept of their remote origins, and they began early to record a part-fact, part-fiction history of their early kings. What is clear is the following: First, an organized state existed that carefully regulated irrigation in the fertile Ping river valley. Second, by about 2000 B.C.E., the Chinese had developed an advanced technology and developed an elaborate intellectual life. They had learned how
to ride horses and were skilled in pottery; they used bronze well and by 1000 BCE had invented iron, which they soon learned to work with coal. Their writing progressed from scratches on bones to the invention of ideographic symbols. Science, particularly astronomy, arose early. Chinese art emphasized delicate designs, and the Chinese claim an early interest in music (Figure 1.6).

By 1500 BCE, one of the tribes in the north of the China, the Shang, conquered most of the other tribes and established a kingdom that would lay the foundations of Chinese civilization. Until recent decades we know little more about the Shang than about their Xia predecessors. But extensive excavations of Shang sites at Anyang (Lonom-yang), and other sites, and elsewhere have given us insights into many aspects of Shang culture and society. In those respects they were very much like the Aryans, who were conquering northern India during this same period. Like the Aryans, the Shang were warlike. They fought on horseback and from chariots with deadly bronze weapons. Non-Shang subject peoples provided the foot soldiers that made up the bulk of their armies. Like those of Aryan India and Homeric Greece, Shang battles were wild clashes between massed soldiers that hinged on hand-to-hand combat between a few champions on each side. But unlike the Aryans and ancient Greeks, the Shang warriors were ruled by strong kings, who drew on their vassals' energies and military prowess to build an extensive empire.

The Shang monarch was seen as the intermediary between the supreme being, Shangdi (shahng-dee), and ordinary mortals. His kingdom was viewed as the center of the world, and he claimed dominion over all humankind. Shang rulers directed the affairs of state and bore ritual responsibilities for the fertility of their kingdom and the well-being of their subjects. In the springtime, they participated in special ceremonies, at a symbolic meeting with female fertility spirits. In times of drought and famine, Shang rulers, or perhaps designated surrogates, were obliged to perform rituals in the dance. The dancer—presumably the surrogate—was later burned alive to placate the spirits whose anger had caused the natural calamities.

Shang monarchs were served by a siecle bureaucracy in the capital city at Anyang and the surrounding areas. But most of the peasant and artisans populations of the kingdom were governed by vassal retainers: subordinate leaders serving the king and great lords and usually bound to them by personal ties. These officials were recruited from the former ruling families and the aristocratic lineages of the many subordinate states. The vassals depended on the produce and labor of the commoners in these areas to support their household and military forces. In return for grants of control over varying numbers of peasants, warrior aristocrats collected tribute (usually in the form of agricultural produce), which went to the next monarch in the court. They supplied soldiers for the king's armies in times of war, and they protected the peace and administered justice among the peasants and townspeople.

Like the elites of many early civilizations, the Shang rulers and nobility were preoccupied with rituals, oracles, and sacrifices. In addition to the fertility functions of the ruler, the entire elite were involved in persuading spirits and larger families. Shang artistic expression reached its peak in the ornately carved and expertly cast bronze vessels that were used to make these offerings. Offerings included fine grain, incense, wine, and animals, but Shang records also tell of water festivals at which ritual contests were waged between rival boats, each attempting to sink the other. Those aboard the losing craft drowned when it capsize, and they were offered up to the deities responsible for fertility and good harvests.

Concern for abundant harvests and victory in war led the Shang elite to put great effort in the predictions of shaman, or priests, who served as oracles—sacred people who could prophesy the future. Each Shang artistic expression went into producing the ritual objects used by the oracles. Warriors about to go into battle, officials embarking on long journeys, or families negotiating marriage alliances routinely consulted these oracles to ensure that their efforts would turn out well. This reverence on the shamans strongly influenced beliefs and behavior in the Shang era.

The actual procedures followed by the shamans who presided over these rituals gave rise to perhaps the single most important element in Chinese culture—writing. Since pre-Shang times, Chinese oracles had based their predictions on readings taken from tortoise shells and animal bones. A shaman shell was drilled with a hole and seared with a red-hot iron rod. The bone or shell cracked, and the patterns of the cracks were interpreted by a shaman or priest. Over time the practice evolved of inscribing the bones and shells with painted designs that became part of the patterns used in the shaman reads. These designs gradually were standardized and came to form the basis of a written Chinese language.

Like the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians, early Chinese characters were pictographic. Thus, they readily conveyed the ideas they were intended to express. The original character for the sun, for example, was a circle with a dot in the center, the character for a tree was a single tree, and a forest was a set of three trees. Combinations of characters made it possible for the Chinese elite to convey increasingly complex ideas. The character for emperor, for example, combined elements of the ideographs for king, heaven, earth, and harmony.

Over time the number of characters increased substantially. By the end of the Shang period, there were an estimated 3000 characters. A well-educated scholar in the modern era would need to master some 8000 characters, along with their 20,000 or more different stove-iron red-hot iron rod of Chinese writing.

The Heritages of the River Valley Civilizations

Many accomplishments of the river valley civilizations had a lasting impact. Monuments such as the Egyptian pyramids have long been regarded as one of the wonders of the world. Other achievements, through their proxy, are fundamental to world history even today: the invention of the wheel, the taming of the horse, the construction of usable alphabets and writing implements, the production of key mathematical concepts such as square roots, the development of well organized monarchies and bureaucracies, and the invention of functional calendars. These long ago, basic developments and the entire early civilizations continue to inspire, are vital legacies to the whole of human history. Almost all the alphabets in the world are derived from the writing forms pioneered in the river valleys, apart from the even more recent inventions of civilization, a writing between the river valley pioneers and later cultures.

Despite these accomplishments, most of the river valley civilizations were in decline by 1000 BCE. The civilizations flourished for as many as 2500 years, although of course with periodic disruptions and revivals. But, particularly in India, the new waves of irruption did produce something of a break in the history of civilizations, a dividing line between the river valley pioneers and later cultures.

Heritage of Early Civilizations

This break raises one final question: Despite the vital achievements—the fascinating monuments and the substantial advances in technology, science, and art—what legacies did the river valley civilizations impart for later age? The question is particularly important for the Middle East and Egypt. In India, there is still much ignorance about possible links between Indian River accomplishments and what came later. In China, there is a definite connection between the first civilization and subsequent forms. Indeed, the new dynasties in China, the Zhou, took over from the Shang about 1000 BCE, ruling a loose coalition of regional lords; recorded Chinese history flowed smoothly at this point. But what was the legacy of Mesopotamia and Egypt for later civilizations in or near their centers?

Europeans, even North Americans, are sometimes prone to claim these cultures as the "origins" of the Western civilization in which we live. These claims should not be taken too literally. It is
The Idea of Civilization in World Historical Perspective

The belief that there are fundamental differences between civilized and "barbaric" or "savagery" peoples is very ancient and widespread. From the thousands of years the Chinese set themselves off from cattle- and sheep-herding peoples of the vast plains to the north and west of China proper, whom they saw as barbarians, to the modern preoccupation with the ethnocentric classification of human races, the concept of civilization has been used to distinguish between what were considered civilized and uncivilized. This concept has been employed in a variety of ways, from the ancient Greeks, who used it to distinguish between their own society and that of other peoples, to the modern preoccupation with the ethnocentric classification of human races.

A similar pattern of demarcation and cultural absorption was seen among the American Indian peoples of present-day Mexico. They who settled in the valleys of the mountainous interior, where they built great civilizations, lived in fear of invasion by peoples regarded as barbarous and called Chichimecs, meaning "sons of the dog." The latter were nomadic hunters and gatherers who periodically moved down from the desert regions of north Mexico to the fertile central valleys in search of game and settlements to visit. The Aztecs were simply the last, and perhaps the finest, of the Chichimecs peoples who entered the valleys and con- quered the urban-based empires that had developed there. But after the conquerors settled down, they adopted many of the religious beliefs and institutional patterns and much of the material culture of the defeated peoples.

The word civilization is derived from the Latin word civis, meaning "the citizen." The term was coined by the Romans. They used it to distinguish between their own society and that of other peoples, as citizens of a cosmopolitan, urban-based civilization and the "inferior" peoples who lived in the forests and deserts to the fringes of their Mediterranean empire. Centuries earlier, the Greeks, who had contributed much to the rise of Roman civilization, made a similar distinction between themselves and outsiders. Because the languages of the non-Greek peoples to the north of the Greek heartlands sounded like a language to the Greeks, they lumped all the outsiders together as barbarians, which means "those who cannot speak Greek." In the case of the Chinese and Aztecs, the boundaries between civilized and barbarian for the Greeks and Romans were cultural, not biological.

Until the 17th and 18th centuries C.E., the priority given to cultural attributes (e.g., language, dress, manners) as the means by which civilized peoples set themselves off from barbaric ones was rarely challenged. But in those centuries, a major change occurred among thinkers in Western Europe. Efforts were made not only to define the differences between civilized and barbarian but to identify a series of stages in human development that ranged from the lowest savagery to the highest civilization. Depending on the writer in question, categories for civilization ranged from Greece and Rome to (not surprisingly) Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries. Most of the other peoples of the globe, whose "discovery" since the 15th century had prompted the efforts to classify them in the first place, were ranked in increasingly complex hierarchies. Nomadic cattle- and sheep-herding peoples, such as the Mongols of central Asia, usually were classified as barbarians. In the 19th century, racial differences were added to the hierarchy, and white people were seen as having evolved the most advanced civilizations.

The second major shift in Western ideas about civilization began at the end of the 18th century but did not really take hold until a century later. In keeping with a growing emphasis in Euro- pean philosophical and social biological differences, modes of human social organization and cultural expression were increasingly linked to what were alleged to be the innate capacities of each human race. Although no one could agree on what a race was or how many races there were, most European writers agreed that some races were more inventive, moral, courageous, and artistic—thus more capable of building civilizations—than others. Of course, white (or Caucasian) Europeans were considered by white European authors to be the most capable of all. The hierarchy from savage to civilized took on a color dimension, with white at the top, the civilized peoples clustered, to yellow, red, brown, and black in descending order.

Some authors sought to reserve all the attainments of civilization for whites, or peoples of European stock. As the evolutionary theories of thinkers such as Charles Darwin came into vogue in the late 1800s, race and level of cultural development were seen in the perspective of thousands of years of human change and adaptation rather than as being fixed in time. Nevertheless, this new perspective had little effect on the rankings of different human groups. Civilized whites were simply seen as having evolved much further than backward and barbaric peoples.

The perceived correspondence between race and level of and the boundaries of the civilizations between civilized and "inferior" peoples affected much more than intellectual discourse about the nature and history of human society. These beliefs were used to justify European imperialist expansion, which was seen as a "civilizing mission" aimed at uplifting barbaric and savage people across the globe. In the last half of the 19th century, virtually all non-Western peoples were to be dominated by the Europeans, who were confident that, with the representation of the highest civilization ever created, were best equipped to govern lesser breeds of humans.

In the 20th century, much of the intellectual baggage that once gave credibility to the racially embelished hierarchies of civilized and savage peoples was discarded. Racist thinking was discredit- ed by 20th-century developments, including the revolt of the colonized peoples and the crimes committed by the Nazis before and during World War II in the name of racial purification. In addi- tion, these ideas have failed because racial supremacists cannot pro- vide convincing proof of innate differences in mental and physical aptitude between various human groups. These trends, as well as research that has resulted in a much more sophisticated under- standing of evolution, have led to the abandonment of rigid and self-serving 19th-century ideas about civilization. Yet even though non-European peoples such as the Indians and Chinese are increas- ingly given credit for their civilized attainments, much ethnocen- trism remains in the ways social theorists determine who is civilized and who is not.

Perhaps the best way to avoid the tendency to define the term with reference to one's own society is to view civilization as one of several human approaches to social organization rather than at- tempting to identify specific kinds of cultural achievement (e.g., writing, cities, monumental architecture). All peoples, from small bands of hunters and gatherers to farmers and factory workers, live in societies. All societies produce cultures: combinations of the ideas, objects, and patterns of behavior that result from human social interaction. But not all societies and cultures generate the sur- plus production that permits the levels of specialization, scale, and complexity that distinguish civilizations from other modes of social organization. All peoples are intrinsically capable of building civili- lizations, but many have lacked the resource base, historical circum- stances, or desire to do so.

New Societies in the Middle East

There was a final connection between early and later civilizations in the form of regional cultures that sprang up under the influence of Mesopotamia and Egypt, along the eastern shores of the Mediter- ranean Sea after 4000 B.C.E. Although the great developments from Sumer through Babylonia were dis- rupted and the Egyptian state finally declined, civilization in the Middle East had spread widely enough to encourage a set of smaller cultures capable of surviving and even flourishing after the great empires became too weak. These cultures produced important innovations that would affect later civilizations in the Middle East and throughout the Mediterranean. They also created a diverse array of regional identi- ties that would continue to mark the Middle East even as other forces, like the Roman Empire or the later religion of Islam, took center stage. Several of these small cultures proved immensely durable, and in their complexity and capacity to survive, they would influence other parts of the world.

A people called the Phoenixes, for example, devised a greatly simplified alphabet with 22 letters, around 1300 B.C.E.; this alphabet, in turn, became the predecessor of Greek and Latin alphabets. The Phoenixes also improved the Egyptian numbering system and, as great traders, set up trading posts in north Africa and on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean. In other regions, the Lydians, first introduced coined money.
Judaism

The most influential of the smaller Middle Eastern groups, however, were the Jews, who gave the world the first clearly developed monotheistic religion. They have seen that early religions, both before and after the beginnings of civilization, were polytheistic, claiming that many gods and goddesses worked to control nature and human destiny. The Jews, a Semitic people influenced by Babylonian civilization, settled near the Mediterranean around 1200 B.C.E. The Jewish state was small, retaining independence only when other parts of the region were dominated by political turmoil. What was distinctive about this culture was its firm belief that a single God guided the destiny of the Jewish people. Priests and prophets defined and emphasized this belief, and their history of God’s guidance formed the basis for the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish religion and moral code persisted even as the Jewish state suffered domination by a series of foreign rulers, from 772 B.C.E. until the Romans seized the state outright in 63 B.C.E. Jewish monotheism has sustained a distinctive Jewish culture to our own day; it would also serve as a key basis for the development of both Christianity and Islam as major world religions.

The early civilizations stressed God’s special compact with the chosen Jewish people, there was no premium placed on converting non-Jews. This belief helped explain the durability of the Jewish faith itself; it also kept the Jewish people in a minority position in the Middle East as a whole. However, the elaboration of monotheism had a wide, if not immediate, significance. In Jewish culture, God became less humanlike, more abstract. This represented a basic change in not only religion but also humankind’s overall outlook. God had not only a power but also a rationality far different from what the traditional gods of the Middle East or Egypt possessed. These gods were whimsical and capricious, and the Jewish God was orderly and just, and individuals would know what to expect if they obeyed God’s rules. God was also linked to ethical conduct, to proper moral behavior. Religion for the Jews was a way of life, not merely a set of rituals and ceremonies. The full impact of this religious transformation on Middle Eastern civilization would be realized only later, when Jewish beliefs were embraced by other, proselytizing faiths. However, the basic concept of monotheistic religion was one of the legacies of the end of the first great civilization period to the new cultures that would soon arise.

Assessing the Early Civilization Period

Overall, the river valley civilizations, flourishing for many centuries, created a basic set of tools, including tools such as writing and mathematics, and political forms that would persist and spread to other parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Invasion and natural calamities in India, and invasion and political decline in Egypt, marked a fairly firm break between the institutions of these river valley civilizations and those that would later develop. Huang he civilization, in contrast, flowered more fully and had more extensive Chinese civilization that would follow. The Middle East, where civilization had first been born, provided the most complex heritage of all. Here too there was a break between the initial series of riverine empires and the civilizations of Greece and Persia that would later dominate the region. However, the development of smaller cultures, such as that of the Jews, provided a bridge between the river valley period and later Middle Eastern society, producing a rapidly developing Egypt, and eventually spread to other parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. This includes the diffusion of Homa sapiens sapiens set the initial stage. Small groups of people spread to almost every corner of the world but maintained little contact with each other. After separate languages and cultures developed widely. The rise of agriculture stimulated new links, and the spread of farming and new technologies began to cut into local isolation. Trade soon entered the picture. Although most commerce centered within a region, linking a city to its hinterland, a few routes traveled greater distances. By 1000 B.C.E., Phenicians traded with Britain for metals (they bought lead to make bronze), while Chinese silk was reaching Egypt. Here we have one of the basic themes of world history: steadily proliferating contacts against a background of often fierce local identity.

The rise of civilization further reduced local autonomy, as kings and priests tried to spread trade contacts and cultural forms and warred to gain new territory. Civilization itself was an integrative force at a larger regional level, although, as we have seen in the Middle East, smaller identities persisted. However, individual civilizations had only sporadic contacts with each other. They, and their leading institutions and cultural forms, developed separately. Thus, four distinct centers of civilization developed (five, if the emerging Olmec culture in Mexico is included), each with widely varied patterns, from style of writing to beliefs about nature.

The early civilizations shared important features, including cities, trade, and writing, that helped them meet the common basic definition of civilization in the first place. They also frequently developed some mutual relationships, although the Huang he culture in China is one example of a civilization that flourished in isolation. Egypt and Mesopotamia, in particular, had recurrent contacts through trade and war. But the values or belief systems of each civilization, and their manifestation in political and business styles, were not so easily disseminated. Even relatively close neighbors, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, developed radically different political attitudes, beliefs about death, and artistic styles. Civilization and considerable diversity thus coexisted hand in hand.

Global Connections

The Early Civilizations and the World

Mesopotamia and Egypt presented two different approaches to relationships outside the home region. Mesopotamia was flat, with few natural barriers to recntcity or expansion. Perhaps for this reason, Mesopotamian leaders thought in terms of expansion. Many conquering empires expanded their territory, though within the Middle East. Many traders pushed outward, dealing either with merchants and local officials or sending expeditions into the Mediterranean and beyond, and also to India. The Middle East’s role as active agent in wider contact was clearly being established.

Egypt, though not isolated, was more self-contained. There was constant trade and interaction along the Nile to the south, which brought mutual influences with the peoples of Kush and Ethiopia. Trade and influence also linked Egypt to Mediterranean lands like Crete, south of Greece. A few interactions, finally, occurred with Mesopotamia. But most Egyptians, including the leaders, thought of Egypt as its own world. There was less need or desire for forms of wider horizons. Correspondingly, ancient Egypt played less of a role as intermediary among regions than did Mesopotamia.

River valley civilization in China had fewer far-reaching contacts than its counterpart in Mesopotamia. Ultimately, however, contacts with China would shape developments in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Already in the river valley period, the Chinese were advancing new technologies, for example in the manufacture of silk, which would have wide influence on later interregional trade. Chinese irrigation systems became increasingly sophisticated, involving engineering principles that would gain wider scope later on.

Harappan society traded widely with Mesopotamia, but there is little evidence of significant influence. The decline of Harappan civilization also limited its civilization’s impact on later developments in world history. Harappan civilization remained much more vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change, particularly in contrast to China. Comparison of the early civilizations that emphasizes quite different patterns of scope and legacy.

Further Readings

World historians have been drawn to Ronald Wright’s A Short History of the Human Predilection for the Early Civilizations (2004), which attempts to show how even the most recent of humanity’s strategies can be better understood by examining its origins and early history. Perhaps the fullest account of human predilection available is Brian Fagan’s People of the Earth (1998), which includes an extensive bibliography on prehistoric developments in virtually all regions of the world. A considerable literature has developed in recent years on early humans and the critical Neolithic transformations. John Meadow’s An Early Potential for Agricultural Origins in Global Perspective (American Historical Association, 2001) provides a concise and authoritative survey of this process in key regions over much of the globe. For other broad overviews that trace the archaeological and historical discoveries that made it possible for us to understand these critical processes in the shaping of human history, see Robert J. Wenke’s Peoples in Prehistory (1984) and C. Wesley Cowan’s noodles and Winans, eds., The Origins of Agriculture: An International Perspective (1992).

For a clear discussion of debates on the Neolithic revolution and references to major authors and works, see Stephen K. Sanderson, Social Transformations (1995). Several of these works are of special relevance, despite their sometimes technical language and detail, especially Donald O. Henry’s From Foraging to Agriculture (1989), Douglas Price and James A. Brown, eds., Prehistoric Human Predilection: The Emergence of Cultural Complexity (1986), and Allen W. Johnson and Timothy Earle, The Evolution of Human Predilection: From Foraging to Agriculture (1987).

Two excellent studies can guide additional work on early civilization in Mesopotamia: C. L. Redman’s The Rise of Civilization: From Early Farmers to Urban Society in the Ancient Near East (1988) and Marc van De Mieroop, King Hammurabi of Babylon: A Biography (2000). See also Trevor Bryce, The Tigris Valley and Their Neighbors (2006); Sarah Is Johnstone, Ancient Religions (2007); C. B. F. Walker, Cuneiform (1987); G. W. Bowersock, Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam (2006); and

Ancient mathematical and writing systems are examined at http://www.math.wichita.edu/history/topics/ancient.html, http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/indexes/egyptian.html, and at the amazingly colorful http://www eyeball.co.uk/touregmenu.html.

The history of early Judaism and its traditions can be studied at http://www.fit.edu/Lisk/persianhistory/index.htm, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/heritage/index.html, etc. The reader is urged to see http://www.nmsu.edu/~history/ancient.html. The Chinese are also possible to follow at http://library.thinkquest.org/22133/history/chinese/index.html.

The emergence of sedentary agriculture (A) occurred simultaneously in various places and spread around the world. (B) began only in the savannas of West Africa. (C) started in the Middle East first but developed independently in other areas. (D) arose in the river valleys of the Huang he and Yangzte.

3. Cuneiform and other types of writing are important in part because they (A) help organize elaborate political structures. (B) normally reduce social stratification. (C) can compel leaders to follow written guidelines of behavior. (D) hinder economic development in certain circumstances.

4. Which of the following is NOT a feature of Sumerian civilization? (A) a simplified alphabet of 22 letters. (B) ziggurats. (C) cuneiform. (D) a numeric system based on 10, 60, and 360.

Free-Response Question: To what extent was the Neolithic revolution responsible for the development of early civilizations? What are the problems in proving a direct connection?