

First Civilizations: Cities, States, and Unequal Societies

to 3,500 B.C.E.–500 B.C.E.

CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To establish the relationship between the First Civilizations and the Agricultural Revolution
- To contrast civilizations with other forms of human communities
- To explore when, where, and how the First Civilizations arose in human history
- To explore how the emergence of civilizations transformed how humans lived and how their societies were structured
- To show the various ways in which civilizations differed from one another
- To explore the outcomes of the emergence of civilizations, both positive and negative, for humankind

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Opening Vignette

- A. The contrast between “artificial” life as a “civilized” city dweller and the spacious freedom and imagined simplicity of earlier times still resonates today.
- B. “Civilizations” are a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, made possible

by the surpluses produced by the Agricultural Revolution.

- C. The distinctive features of civilizations are:
 1. cities with monumental architecture and populations in the tens of thousands
 2. powerful states that could compel obedience and wage large-scale warfare
 3. much greater inequality in economic function, wealth, and social status

II. Something New: The Emergence of Civilizations

- A. Civilization was a global phenomenon
 1. seven major civilizations and some smaller manifestations
 2. scattered around world
 3. developed after 3500 B.C.E.
- B. Introducing the First Civilizations
 1. one of the earliest civilizations emerged in Sumer (in southern Mesopotamia) between 3500 and 3000 B.C.E.
 - a. first written language
 - b. appearance of Egyptian civilization in Nile River Valley (northeast Africa) and smaller Nubian civilization to its south at about the same time
 2. Norte Chico (central coastal Peru), emerged between 3000 and 1800 B.C.E.

- a. twenty-five urban centers
 - b. Norte Chico differed in several ways from Mesopotamia and Egypt
 - c. unusually self-contained; only import was maize, derived from Mesoamerica
3. Indus Valley civilization in Indus and Saraswati river valleys of present-day Pakistan arose between 3000 and 2000 B.C.E.
- a. elaborately planned cities and standardized weights, measures, architectural styles, and brick sizes
 - b. written script that remains thus far undeciphered
 - c. unlike other civilizations, it generated no palaces, temples, elaborate graves, kings, or warrior classes
 - d. scholars remain uncertain as to how society was organized; theories include a series of small republics, rule by priests, or an early form of the caste system
 - e. environmental degradation led to the collapse of this civilization by about 1700 B.C.E., but several aspects of its culture shaped later Indian societies
4. around 2200 B.C.E., a First Civilization took shape in China
- a. from the start, China was defined by the ideal of a centralized state
 - b. the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties enlarged the Chinese state
 - c. ruler was the “Son of Heaven,” an intermediary between heaven and earth
 - d. early written language with oracle bones as early documents
 - e. China has maintained impressive cultural continuity into modern times
5. in central Asia another First Civilization known as the Central Asian or Oxus civilization arose around 2200 B.C.E.
- a. centered on the Oxus or Amu Darya river valley in modern northern Afghanistan
 - b. possessed a number of fortified centers
 - c. practiced irrigation agriculture
- d. possessed a distinctive culture, art and burial rituals, but not literate
 - e. included an aristocratic hierarchy
 - f. was the focal point of Eurasian wide system of exchange
 - g. by 1700 B.C.E. had faded as a civilization
 - h. but influence persisted on the cultures of Iran, India, and the eastern Mediterranean
6. the Olmec produced a First Civilization much later (around 1200 B.C.E.) on coast of Gulf of Mexico, near present-day Veracruz
- a. cities arose from competing chiefdoms and produced elaborate ceremonial centers
 - b. created the first written language in the Americas by about 900 B.C.E.
 - c. culture influenced later civilizations in Mesoamerica, including the Maya and Teotihuacán
7. other smaller civilizations also flourished
- a. Nubian civilization south of Egypt was distinctive and independent
 - b. city of Sanxingdui in China arose separately from the more well-known Shang Dynasty
- C. The Question of Origins
1. First Civilizations had their roots in the Agricultural Revolution
 2. First Civilizations tended to develop from earlier, competing chiefdoms that already had some social rank and economic specialization
 3. process was gradual and evolutionary
 4. why did some chiefdoms develop into civilizations and others did not?
 - a. one argument: the need to organize large-scale irrigation projects (archeologists have found that these projects appeared long after civilizations began)
 - b. another argument: the needs of elite groups, warfare, and trade all played roles as well

- c. Robert Carneiro's argument: population density created competition, especially when agricultural land was limited
 - 5. the creation of the First Civilizations was quick by world history standards but was an unconscious undertaking for those involved
 - 6. all First Civilizations relied on highly productive agriculture
- D. An Urban Revolution
- 1. cities were one of the most distinctive features of First Civilizations
 - 2. the scale, layout, and specialized industries of cities would have impressed visitors from villages
 - 3. cities lay at the heart of all First Civilizations because they were:
 - a. political/administrative capitals
 - b. centers of cultural production—art, architecture, literature, ritual, and ceremony
 - c. places of local and long-distance exchange
 - d. centers of manufacturing activity
 - 4. cities produced new societies with greater specialization and inequality

III. The Erosion of Equality

- A. Professional and craft specialization marked early urban life.
- B. Hierarchies of Class
- 1. First Civilizations had vast inequalities in wealth, status, and power
 - 2. civilizations multiplied and magnified inequalities that already existed in complex gathering and hunting societies and agricultural chiefdoms
 - 3. these new levels of inequality represent one of the major turning points in the social history of humankind
 - 4. upper classes:
 - a. enjoyed great wealth
 - b. avoided physical labor
 - c. had the finest in everything
 - d. occupied the top positions in political, military, and religious life

- 5. free commoners formed the vast majority of the population and included artisans of all kinds, lower-level officials, soldiers and police, servants, and farmers
 - a. their surplus production was appropriated to support the upper classes
 - b. some members of these classes recognized and resented their situation
- 6. slaves were at the bottom of social hierarchies everywhere
 - a. slavery and civilization seem to have emerged together
 - b. first-generation slaves were prisoners of war, criminals, and debtors
 - c. worked in fields, mines, homes, and shops
 - d. more rarely, they were sacrificed
 - e. slavery varied from place to place
 - f. most ancient slavery differed from the recent American variety

C. Hierarchies of Gender

- 1. civilizations everywhere undermined the earlier and more equal relationships between men and women
- 2. women in horticultural societies remained relatively equal to men
- 3. but patriarchy gradually emerged in First Civilizations
 - a. more intensive agriculture with animal-drawn plows and large dairy herds favored male labor over female
 - b. patriarchy also developed in civilizations without plow agriculture, such as Mesoamerica and the Andes
 - c. David Christian: the declining position of women was a product of growing social complexity
 - d. the association of women with nature because of their role in reproduction may also have played a role
 - e. warfare may also have contributed to patriarchy
 - f. private property and commerce also may have played a role

- g. need to restrict female sexual activities to assure inheritance by *father's* offspring

D. Patriarchy in Practice

1. Gerda Lerner: emergence of patriarchy in Mesopotamia
 - a. written law codes codified patriarchal family life
 - b. regulation of female sexuality was central
 - c. women in Mesopotamia were sometimes divided into two sharply distinguished categories, depending on protection of one man
 - d. powerful goddesses of Mesopotamia were gradually replaced by male deities
2. Egyptian patriarchy gave women greater opportunities than in most First Civilizations, including ability to:
 - a. own property and slaves
 - b. administer and sell land
 - c. make their own wills
 - d. sign their own marriage contracts
 - e. initiate divorce
3. royal women occasionally wielded political power as regents for their sons or, more rarely, as queens in their own right

IV. The Rise of the State

- A. States were central to the organization and stability of First Civilizations.
- B. Coercion and Consent
 1. the state fulfilled a variety of roles in coordinating and regulating the First Civilizations, including:
 - a. organizing irrigation systems
 - b. adjudicating conflicts
 - c. defense
 2. the state served the needs of the upper classes by:
 - a. protecting the privileges of the elites
 - b. requiring farmers to give up a portion of their product to support city people
 - c. demanding labor on large public projects

3. the state frequently used force to secure its will
4. force was not always necessary because the state often claimed that its authority was normal, natural, and ordained by the gods
 - a. rule by divine right
 - b. deference to religion restrained or even undermined the right to rule, as in the rule of Chinese emperors by the Mandate of Heaven

C. Writing and Accounting

1. writing provided support for the state and emerged in all of the First Civilizations except the Andes (though some scholars now regard their knotted strings, or quipus, as a kind of writing)
2. writing sustained the First Civilizations by:
 - a. defining elite status and conveying prestige on those who wrote
 - b. allowing some commoners to join the elite through literacy
 - c. providing a means for propaganda
 - d. providing a means to keep accurate accounts and complex calendars
 - e. giving weight to regulations and laws
3. writing also served functions beyond the state
 - a. fostered literature, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, and history
 - b. sometimes threatened rulers

D. The Grandeur of Kings

1. source of state authority
2. monumental residences and temples
3. luxurious dress
4. elaborate burials

V. Comparing Mesopotamia and Egypt

- A. Environment and Culture
 1. both depended on rivers, but were very different
 - a. erratic and destructive flooding in Mesopotamia
 - b. Nile flooded more predictably and less destructively

2. Mesopotamia was less geographically isolated than Egypt
 - a. Mesopotamia was vulnerable to external attack
 - b. Egypt was usually protected from external attack
 3. many scholars see a relationship between physical setting and culture
 - a. more negative Mesopotamian worldview seems to reflect its precarious and violent environment
 - b. Egyptian worldview reflected the more stable, predictable, and beneficent environment in which it took shape
 4. environmental impact of rising population
 - a. in southern Mesopotamia, deforestation, soil erosion, and salinization of the soil weakened Sumerian city-states, leading to foreign conquest and the northward shift of Mesopotamia's cultural centers
 - b. Egypt built a more sustainable agricultural system that contributed to the remarkable continuity of its civilization
- B. Cities and States
1. the political systems of Mesopotamia and Egypt differed sharply
 2. Mesopotamia for its first thousand years was organized into a dozen or more separate city-states
 - a. each city-state was ruled by a king
 - b. 80 percent of the population lived in city-states for protection
 - c. environmental devastation and endemic warfare ultimately led to conquest by outside forces after about 2350 B.C.E.
 - d. these outside powers built large territorial states or bureaucratic empires encompassing all or most of Mesopotamia
 3. Egypt
 - a. around 3100 B.C.E., several earlier states or chiefdoms merged into a unified territory that stretched some 1,000 miles along the Nile
 - b. for 3,000 years, Egypt maintained its unity and independence with few interruptions
 - c. most Egyptians lived in agricultural villages, perhaps because of greater security
 - d. the pharaoh, a god in human form, was the focus of the Egyptian state
 - e. from 2200 to 2000 B.C.E., anarchy; when state was restored, pharaohs never regained their old power
- C. Interaction and Exchange
1. Egypt and Mesopotamia frequently interacted
 2. Egypt's agriculture benefited from interaction
 3. Egypt's "divine kingship" seems to have been derived from central or eastern Sudan
 4. both Mesopotamia and Egypt carried on extensive long-distance trade
 - a. Mesopotamian sea trade with the Indus Valley civilization as early as 2300 B.C.E.
 - b. Mesopotamian trade with Anatolia, Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan
 - c. Egyptian trade in the Mediterranean and Middle East
 - d. Egyptian trade in Nubia and along the East African coast
 5. Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural influences moved along trade routes
 - a. Hebrews migrated from Mesopotamia to Palestine and Egypt early in their history
 - b. Phoenicians (in present-day Lebanon) were commercially active in the Mediterranean basin; adapted Sumerian cuneiform to an easier alphabet
 - c. some Indo-European peoples settled in north-central Anatolia
 - d. sustained contact between Nubia and Egypt

- e. in the Mediterranean basin
- 6. Mesopotamia and Egypt were also influenced by their neighbors
 - a. Indo-Europeans brought horse-and-chariot-based armies to Mesopotamia; Indo-European Hittites conquered the Babylonian empire in 1595 B.C.E.
 - b. beginning in 1650 B.C.E., foreigners from surrounding regions migrated into the Nile Valley
 - c. Mesopotamians and Egyptians adopted chariot technology
 - d. arrival of the Hyksos spurred further innovations in Egypt
- 7. by 1500 B.C.E., Egypt had become an imperial state
 - a. rule over non-Egyptian peoples in both Africa and Asia
 - b. regular diplomatic correspondence with Middle Eastern empires

VI. Reflections: “Civilization”: What’s in a Word?

- A. Some scholars have reservations about the use of the word “civilizations” to describe the cultures studied in this chapter.
- B. Modern assessments of the First Civilizations reveal a profound ambiguity.
 - 1. they gave us inspiring art, profound reflections on life, more productive technologies, increased control over nature, and writing
 - 2. but they also produced massive inequalities, state oppression, slavery, large-scale warfare, the subordination of women, and epidemic disease
 - 3. some scholars prefer more neutral terms, such as complex societies, urban-based societies, or state-organized societies
- C. Scholars object to the term “civilization,” because it implies more clear-cut boundaries from other societies than was actually the case.
 - 1. aside from elites, most of the people living in the First Civilizations probably defined themselves more by occupation, clan,

- village, city, or region than as a member of some larger “civilization”
- 2. First Civilizations lacked clear borders
- 3. unclear line between civilizations and other kinds of societies
- D. This book continues to use the term because:
 - 1. it is so deeply embedded in our way of thinking about the world
 - 2. no alternative concept has achieved widespread usage
 - 3. we need to make distinctions among different kinds of human communities
- E. But in using this term, we must remember:
 - 1. historians use “civilization” as a purely descriptive term designating a particular type of human society—one with cities and states—without implying any judgment or assessment, any sense of superiority or inferiority
 - 2. it is used to define broad cultural patterns in particular geographic regions while recognizing that many people living in those regions may have been more aware of differences and conflicts than of those commonalities