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Beginnings of Civilization

Guide for Reading

- What are the basic features of civilizations?
- How did the first cities emerge?
- What developments can cause cultures to change?
- **Vocabulary** *bureaucracy, polytheistic, artisan, pictogram, scribe, city-state, empire, steppe, cultural diffusion*

Perhaps the best-known monuments of the ancient world are the great pyramids of Egypt. More than 100,000 workers labored for years under the hot North African sun to build these giant tombs. Without modern machinery, they fit into place more than two million stones *weighing an average of 2 1/2 tons each!*

Clearly, pyramid building required a society more highly organized and technologically advanced than Neolithic farming villages. In fact, the pyramids were created by one of the world's first civilizations. In Egypt, as in other parts of the world, people were taking a giant step from prehistory into history.

Dawn of Civilization *The development of cities marked the beginning of civilization. In the Americas, cities such as this Mayan one at Uxmal served as political and religious centers. The temple-pyramid towering above the surrounding landscape offers lasting evidence of Mayan devotion to their gods.*

Religions and Value Systems *Why do you think nature gods were so important to people of early civilizations?*

Features of Civilization

What do we mean by civilization? What did the early civilizations that rose in different parts of the globe have in common? Historians distinguish eight basic features found in most early civilizations. These eight features are (1) cities, (2) well-organized central governments, (3) complex religions, (4) job specialization, (5) social classes, (6) arts and architecture, (7) public works, and (8) writing.

Rise of cities. The central feature of civilization was the rise of cities. The first cities emerged after farmers began cultivating fertile lands along river valleys and producing surplus, or extra, food. These surpluses in turn helped populations to expand. As populations grew, some villages swelled into cities.

River valley civilizations. Cities rose independently in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East, the Nile River in Egypt, the Indus River in India, and the Yellow River, or Huang He, in China. (See the map on page 1.) Conditions in these river valleys favored farming. Flood waters spread silt across the valleys, renewing the soil and keeping it fertile. The animals that flocked to the rivers to drink were another source of food. In addition, rivers provided a regular water supply and a means of transporting people and goods.

Rivers also posed challenges. Farmers had to control flooding and channel waters to the fields. To meet these challenges, cooperation was needed. Early farmers worked together to build dikes, dig canals, and carve out irrigation ditches. Such large-scale projects required leadership and a well-organized government.

Civilizations in the Americas. Unlike the civilizations in Asia, Africa, and Europe, civilizations in the Americas often did not rise in



river valleys. Two major civilizations, the Aztecs and Incas, eventually emerged in the highlands of Mexico and Peru.

In the Americas, the first cities may have begun as religious centers. There, powerful priests inspired people from nearby villages to build temples to their gods. Villagers would gather at the temples for regular worship. In time, many may have remained permanently, creating cities like those elsewhere.

Organized Governments

As cities grew, they needed to maintain a steady food supply. To produce large amounts of food and oversee irrigation projects, new forms of government arose. City governments were far more powerful than the councils of elders and local chiefs of farming villages.

At first, priests probably had the greatest power. In time, warrior kings emerged as the chief political leaders. They took over the powers of the old councils of elders and set themselves up as hereditary rulers who passed power from father to son.

Almost always, rulers claimed that their right to rule came from the gods. They thus gained religious power as well. Darius the Great, ruler of the vast Persian empire, proclaimed that his power came directly from Ahura Mazda, the supreme Persian god:

“Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me. Ahura Mazda bore me aid until I got possession of this kingdom. By the favor of Ahura Mazda I hold this kingdom.”

Government became more complex as rulers issued laws, collected taxes, and organized systems of defense. To enforce order, rulers relied on royal officials. Over time, government bureaucracies evolved. A **bureaucracy** is a system of managing government through departments run by appointed officials. Separate departments oversaw tax collection, irrigation projects, or the military.

Complex Religions

Like their Stone Age ancestors, most ancient people were **polytheistic**. That is, they be-

lieved in many gods. People appealed to sun gods, river goddesses, and other spirits that they believed controlled natural forces. Other gods were thought to control human activities such as birth, trade, or war.

In ancient religions, priests and worshipers sought to gain the favor of the gods through complex rituals such as ceremonies, dances, prayers, and hymns. In one hymn of ancient India, a sick man humbly appeals to the god Varuna for help:

“Let me not go to the House of Clay,
O Varuna!
Forgive, O gracious Lord,
forgive! . . .
Whatever sin we mortals have
committed against . . . the gods,
If, foolish, we have thwarted your
commands,
O god, do not destroy us in your
anger!”

To ensure divine help, people built temples and sacrificed animals, crops, or sometimes other humans to the gods. Sacrifices and other ceremonies required the full-time attention of priests, who had special training and knowledge.

Job Specialization and Social Classes

The lives of city dwellers differed from those of their Stone Age ancestors. Urban people developed so many new crafts that a single individual could no longer master all the skills needed to make tools, weapons, or other goods.

Skilled artisans. For the first time, individuals began to specialize in certain jobs. Some became **artisans**, or skilled craftworkers, who made pottery or finely carved or woven goods. Among the crafts that developed in cities, metalworking was particularly important. People learned to make tools and weapons, first out of copper, then later out of bronze, a more durable mixture of copper and tin.

Cities had other specialists, too. Bricklayers built city walls. Soldiers defended them. Merchants sold goods in the marketplace. Singers, dancers, and storytellers entertained on public occasions. Such specialization made people dependent on others for their various needs.

PARALLELS THROUGH TIME

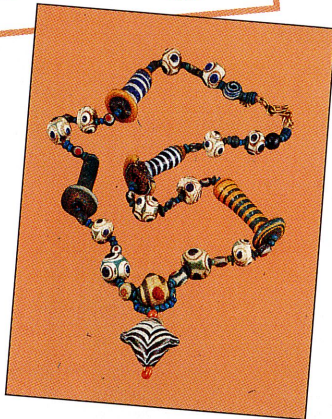
Jewelry

Since the rise of civilization, skilled artisans have engaged in many different crafts. One such craft is the creation of jewelry for the personal adornment of both men and women. With the passage of time, styles may change, but the human desire for beauty endures.

Linking Past and Present What precious materials have artisans of both the past and present used in their jewelry? Why do people consider these materials so valuable?



PAST The jade and gold necklace with a pair of female dancers was crafted during the Zhou dynasty in China more than 2,000 years ago. Some 1,000 years earlier, skillful Egyptian artisans made necklaces of multicolored glass, such as the one shown below.



PRESENT Today's artisans continue to create necklaces of gold, silver, and other materials. They often imitate the designs and styles of ancient civilizations.

Social ranking. In cities, social organization became more complex. People were ranked according to their jobs. Such ranking led to the growth of social classes. Priests and nobles usually occupied the top level of an ancient society. Next came a small class of wealthy merchants, followed by humbler artisans. Below them stood the vast majority of people, peasant farmers who lived in the

surrounding villages and produced food for the city.

Slaves occupied the lowest social level. Slaves sometimes came from poor families who sold themselves into slavery to pay their debts. Others were prisoners captured in war. Since male captives were often killed, women and children made up the largest number of these slaves.

Arts, Architecture, and Public Works

The arts and architecture of ancient civilizations expressed the beliefs and values of the people who created them. Temples and palaces dominated the city scenery. Such buildings reassured people of the strength and power of their government and religion.

Skilled workers built and decorated these massive buildings. In museums today, you can see statues of gods and goddesses, temple wall paintings, as well as furniture and jewelry found in ancient tombs from around the world. They give ample evidence of the artistic genius of the first civilizations.

Closely linked to temples and palaces were vast public works that strong rulers ordered to be built. Such projects included irrigation systems, roads, bridges, and defensive walls. Although they were costly in human labor and even lives, such projects were meant to benefit the city, protecting it from attack and ensuring its food supply.

Writing

A critical new skill developed by the earliest civilizations was the art of writing. It may have begun in temples, where priests needed to record amounts of grain collected, accurate information about the seasons, and precise rituals and prayers.

Archaeologists have found masses of ancient writings, ranging from treaties and tax rolls to business and marriage contracts. Early writing was made up of **pictograms**, or simple drawings to show the words represented. In time, symbols were added. They might stand for sounds of words or for ideas that could not be expressed easily in pictures.

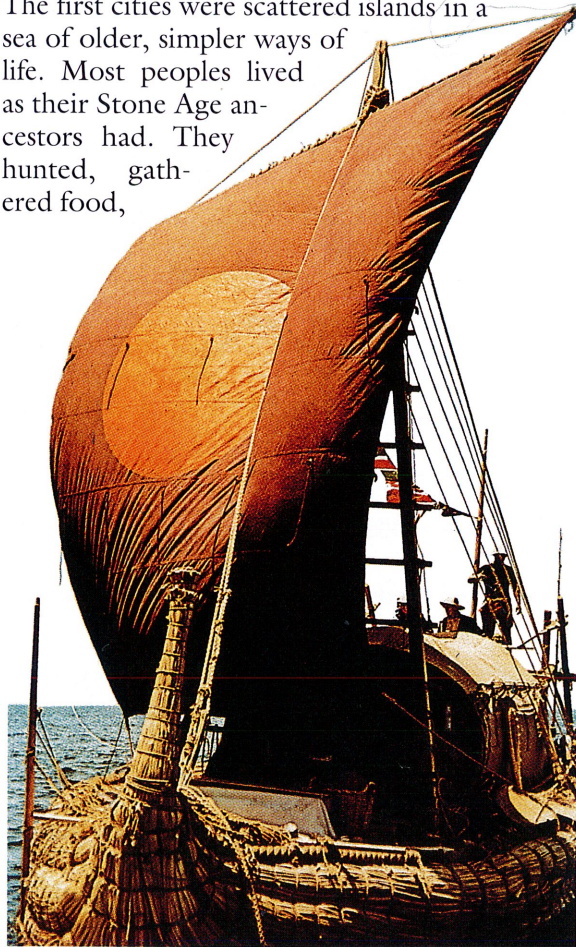
As writing grew more complex, only specially trained people called **scribes** learned to read and write. Scribes were educated in temple schools and kept records for priests, rulers, and merchants. In only a few societies were women permitted to attend temple schools. As a result, women were generally excluded from becoming scribes, an occupation that could lead to political power.

Spread of Civilization

As ancient rulers gained more power, they conquered territories beyond their cities. This expansion led to the rise of the **city-state**, a political unit that included a city and its surrounding lands and villages. Rulers, nobles, and priests often controlled the land outside the city and forced peasants to grow crops on it. A large portion of each harvest went to support the government and temples.

The first empires. Rival leaders often battled for power. Sometimes, ambitious rulers conquered many cities and villages, creating the first empires. An **empire** is a group of states or territories controlled by one ruler. For the conquered people, defeat was painful and often cruel. At the same time, empire building also brought benefits. It helped end war between neighboring communities and created common bonds among people.

Interactions with nomadic peoples. The first cities were scattered islands in a sea of older, simpler ways of life. Most peoples lived as their Stone Age ancestors had. They hunted, gathered food,



▲ Replica of ancient Egyptian reed boat

or lived in simple farming villages. On some less-fertile lands or on sparse, dry grasslands, called **steppes**, nomadic herders tended cattle, sheep, goats, or other animals. Because the lands were poor in water and grass, these nomads had to keep moving to find new pasture.

Nomadic cultures were not “civilized,” in the sense that they did not exhibit the characteristics of city life. However, many nomadic peoples developed sophisticated traditions in oral poetry, music, weaving, animal raising, and other areas of the arts and sciences.

Throughout history, relations between nomads and city dwellers have been complex. At times, the two groups cooperated in political, economic, or military matters. At other times, they have been in conflict, with cities subduing nomadic peoples or nomads overrunning cities. You will read about such encounters in later chapters.

Civilizations and Change

All societies and civilizations change. In fact, history itself might be defined as the story of these changes. Ancient civilizations changed in many ways over the centuries. Among the chief causes of change were shifts in the physical environment and interactions among people.

Environmental changes. Like their Stone Age ancestors, people of early civilizations depended heavily on the physical environment. They needed rain and fertile soil to produce crops. Resources such as stone, timber, or metals were also essential. Changes in the environment could have an immediate impact on people’s lives.

At times, sudden, drastic events devastated a community. A tremendous volcano may have wiped out Minoan civilization on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. (See Chapter 5.) Overfarming could destroy soil fertility, or rivers might become too salty. Cities would then suffer famine, and survivors would be forced to move away.

If people used up nearby timber or ran out of other building resources, they would have to adapt to this scarcity. They might, for example, trade with areas where such resources were available. Or they might use alternate building materials such as reeds.

Interactions among people. An even more important source of change was **cultural diffusion**, the spread of ideas, customs, and technologies from one people to another. Cultural diffusion occurred through migration, trade, and warfare.

As famine, drought, or other disasters led people to migrate, they came into contact with others whose lives differed from their own. As a result of such interactions, people often shared and adapted customs. Trade, too, introduced people to new goods or better methods of producing them. In ancient times, skills such as working bronze and writing, as well as religious beliefs, passed from one people to another.

Warfare also brought change. Often, victorious armies forced their way of life upon the people they defeated. On other occasions, the victors adopted the ways of conquered people. Sometimes, nomadic rulers would become absorbed in city life. At other times, they would rule from camps outside the city limits, keeping their own customs.

Looking ahead. In the next two chapters, you will read about the earliest civilizations that developed in the river valleys of Africa and Asia. They differed in significant ways, each developing its own traditions. At the same time, the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China all fit our definition of a civilization.

SECTION 3 REVIEW

1. **Define** (a) bureaucracy, (b) polytheistic, (c) artisan, (d) pictogram, (e) scribe, (f) city-state, (g) empire, (h) steppe, (i) cultural diffusion.
2. How did conditions in some river valleys favor the rise of civilization?
3. How were government and religion linked in early civilizations?
4. What are three causes of cultural change?
5. **Critical Thinking Recognizing Causes and Effects** How did job specialization lead to the emergence of social classes?
6. **ACTIVITY** Draw a three-column chart. In the first column, list the eight basic features of a civilization. In the second column, describe each feature. In the third column, give an example of each feature from modern society.

CHAPTER REVIEW

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

Review the vocabulary words in this chapter. Then, use *ten* of these words to create a cross-word puzzle. Exchange puzzles with a classmate. Complete the puzzles and then check each other's answers.

REVIEWING FACTS

1. List some kinds of modern technology that can be used to study and interpret the past.
2. What are the five themes of geography?
3. What change marked the beginning of the New Stone Age?

4. How did the change from a nomadic to settled lifestyle affect the number of personal possessions that people owned?
5. List the eight features found in most early civilizations.
6. In which four river valleys did early civilizations emerge?
7. How can interactions among people cause changes in civilizations?

REVIEWING CHAPTER THEMES

Review the "Focus On" questions at the start of this chapter. Then select *three* of those questions and answer them, using information from the chapter.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

RECOGNIZING CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Causes are the reasons why an event happened. Effects are what followed as a result of the event. The words *since* and *because* often indicate causes. The words *therefore* and *as a result* often indicate effects.

Cause-and-effect charts, like this one, organize information on causes and effects into usable form. You will encounter other, more complex cause-and-effect charts throughout this book. Those charts will show both long-term and short-term causes and effects, as well as connections to today.

Use the chart and the information in Chapter 1 to answer the following questions.

1. **Identify the causes and effects.** (a) What is the subject of the chart? (b) What were the causes? (c) What were the effects?
2. **Analyze the causes and effects.** (a) What role did technology play in the rise of civilization? (b) How did the rise of civilization lead to a more complex system of social classes?
3. **Draw conclusions based on the cause-effect relationship.** (a) What do you think was the most important effect of the rise of civilizations? (b) Why do you think cities can now exist far from fertile river valleys?

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Causes

New technologies improve farming
Food surpluses support rising populations
First cities built in fertile valleys
Farmers cooperate to control flooding and channel water

RISE OF RIVER VALLEY CIVILIZATIONS

Effects

Complex forms of government develop
Arts become more elaborate
Job specialization leads to social classes
Writing is invented