Chapter I

From Human Prehistory to the Early Civilizations

One day in 10,000 B.C.E. a solitary figure walked by the edge of the Pecos River in the American Southwest. He may have been out hunting or traveling between settlements, but he stopped there to gather up some dead grass and driftwood into a pile. He used his sharpened spear to cut a dead twig from an overhanging cottonwood tree and took a long, dried yucca leaf from his leather belt. He knelt down and held the twig upright on the centerline of the leaf. Then, as he had done many times before, he twirled the stick between his hands until the friction between twig and leaf produced a gleam, or glowing ember, which he quickly transferred to the grass and wood he had gathered. He tended the flame until it grew into a fire that provided not only some warmth, but a means of cooking a meal. When he subsequently rejoined others of his kind, he may have talked about his journey and how he lost his yucca leaf fire-started at that campsite by the river. Of course we have no evidence of his conversation, just the yucca leaf he left behind, found by an archaeologist more than 9000 years later.

Our Neolithic (New Stone Age) traveler sends us a number of messages about early world history. Most obviously, he was a tool user who not only picked up natural objects but deliberately crafted them to hunt for and prepare his food. As such, he differed from all other animals (a few other kinds of animals are tool users, but none make their tools). He also knew how to use fire, a major human discovery that had occurred many thousands of years before. The use of fire for cooking allowed early humans to eat a wider variety of foods, particularly animal protein.

This traveler was in what we now call America, far from eastern Africa, where human beings first evolved. Just decades ago, it was believed that the first humans migrated from northeast Asia into what is no Alaska only 12,000 years ago. Vastly improved archeological techniques have recently revealed that the crossing was made at least as early as 25,000 B.C.E. and that the migrants spread out quickly, probably traveling both overland and by boat along the Pacific coast, from Alaska to Chile.

Finally, we know our friend could talk. Human beings had developed what some call the "speech gene" about 70,000 years earlier, vastly improving the species' capacity to communicate beyond the sounds and gestures common to a number of animal groups. Neolithic humans were what we sometimes call "primitive," but they had already experienced a number of fundamental changes, and in some places they were poised to introduce more.

Human Life in the Era of Hunters & Gatherers

*Hunting and gathering economies dominated human history until 9000 B.C.E. These economies helped propel migration over most of the lands of the earth.

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 until 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 babies are dependent for a long period, which requires some special family or 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.

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 distinctive 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 culture 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.

**Human Life Before Agriculture**

*Human societies spread widely geographically.*  
*Tool use gradually improved in the hunter-gatherer economy*  

Although the rise of humankind has been impressively rapid, however, its early stages can also be viewed as painfully long and slow. Most of the 2 million plus years during which our species has existed are described by the term **Paleolithic (Old Stone) Age**. Throughout this long timespan, 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 about 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 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, 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 rather similar human species, as among monkeys and apes. 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 there have been no major changes in the basic human physique or brain size 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 wooden 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. 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 setup 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, doubtless caused by the need to find scarce food, steadily pushed the human reach 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) have been found in China and Southeast Asia dating from 600,000 and 350,000 years ago, 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 believe that humans crossed what was then a land bridge from Siberia to Alaska about 30,000 years ago, with several subsequent migrations waves until warmer climates and rising ocean levels eliminated the land bridge by 8000 B.C.E. Many of the new arrivals quickly spread out, reaching the tip of the South American continent possibly within a mere thousand years. Settlers from China reached Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia 4500 to 3500 years ago.

In addition, soon after this time—roughly 14,000 years ago—the last great ice age ended, which did wonders for living conditions over much of the Northern Hemisphere. Human development began to accelerate. A new term, *Mesolithic*, or Middle Stone Age designates a span of several thousand years, from about 12,000 to 8000 B.C.E.,* in which human ability to fashion stone tools and other implements improved greatly. People

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*In Christian societies, historical dating divides between years "before the birth of Christ" (B.C.) and after (A.D. anno Domini, or "year of our Lord"). This system came into wide acceptance in Europe in the eighteenth century, as formal historical consciousness increased (although ironically, 1 A.D. is a few years late for Jesus' actual birth). China, Islam, Judaism, and many other societies use different dating systems, referring to their own history. This text, like many recent world history materials, uses the Christian chronology (one has to choose some system) but changes the terms to B.C.E. ("before the common era") and C.E. ("of the common era") as a gesture to less Christian-centric labeling.
learned to sharpen and shape stone, to make better weapons and cutting edges. Animal bones were used to make needles and other precise tools. From the Mesolithic also date the increased numbers of log rafts and dugouts, which improved fishing, and the manufacture of pots and baskets for food storage. Mesolithic people domesticated more animals, such as cows, which again improved food supply. Population growth accelerated, which also resulted in more conflicts and wars. Skeletons from this period show frequent bone breaks and skull fractures caused by weapons. In time, better tool use, somewhat more elaborate social organization, and still more population pressure led people in many parts of the world to the final Stone Age—the Neolithic, (New Stone) Age. (see Map 1.1). From Neolithic people, in turn, came several more dramatic developments that changed the nature of human existence—the invention of agriculture, the creation of cities, and other foreshadowings of civilization, which ended the Stone Age altogether throughout much of the world.

THE NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION

*The Neolithic Revolution centered on the development of agriculture. This occurred in different times in different places.*

Agriculture generated important changes from humankind's hunting and gathering past, going well beyond food supply. Human achievements during the various ages of stone are both fascinating and fundamental, and some points are hotly debated. Our knowledge of Stone Age society is of course limited, although archeologists have been creative in their interpretations of tool remains and other evidence, such as cave paintings and burial sites, that Stone Age people produced in various parts of the world. What people accomplished during this long period of prehistory remains essential to human life today; our ability to make 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, the end of the ice age saw the retreat of certain big game animals, such as mastodons. Human hunters had to turn 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.E., 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, they also served as the basis for nomadic herding societies.

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.E., 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, including rice cultivation, soon developed independently in 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.E., 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, which was also a slightly later development (about 5000 B.C.E.).

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.

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 of men, than hunting did. Hunting groups today, such as the pygmies of the Kalihari 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 was also rewarding: Agriculture supported larger populations, and with better food supplies and a more settled existence, agricultural peoples could afford to build houses and villages. Animals provided not only hides but also wool for more varied clothing.

We know next to nothing of the debates that must have raged when people were first confronted with agriculture, but it is not hard to imagine that many would have found the new life too complicated, too difficult, or too unexciting. Most evidence suggests that gathering and hunting peoples resisted agriculture as long as they could. Gradually, of course, agriculture did gain ground. Its success was hard to deny. And as farmers cleared new land from forests, they automatically drove out or converted many hunters. Disease played a role: Settled agricultural societies suffered from more contagious diseases because of denser population concentrations. Hunting and gathering peoples lacked resistance and often died when agriculturists who had developed immunity to these diseases carried them into their areas.

Not all the peoples of the world came to embrace the slowly spreading wave of agriculture, at least not until very recently. Important small societies in southern Africa, Australia, the islands of Southeast Asia, and even northern Japan were isolated for so long that news of this economic system simply did not reach them. The white-skinned hunting tribes of northern Japan disappeared only about a hundred years ago. Northern Europeans and southern Africans converted to agriculture earlier, about 2000 years ago, but well after the Neolithic revolution had transformed other parts of their continents. Agriculture was initiated in the Americas as early as 5000 B.C.E. and developed vigorously in Central America and the northern part of South America. However, most Indian tribes in North America continued a hunting and gathering existence, sometimes combined with limited agriculture, until recent centuries. Finally, the peoples of the vast plains of central Asia long resisted a complete conversion to agriculture, in part because of a harsh climate; herding, rather than grain-growing, became the basic socioeconomic system of this part of the world. From this area would
come waves of tough, nomadic invaders whose role in linking major civilizations was a vital force in world history until a few centuries ago.

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 depended on control over nature that could be facilitated by newly developed techniques and objects. For example, during the Neolithic period itself, the needs of farming people for storage facilities, for grains and seeds, 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.

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 herders in Central Asia, made their own mark, but their greatest influence usually occurred in interactions with agricultural peoples. Many societies remain largely agricultural still today. The huge time span we have thus far considered, including the Neolithic revolution itself, is all technically "prehistorical"—involved with human patterns before the invention of writing allowed the kinds of records-keeping 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, admitted, right away—significant human change began to occur in decades and centuries, rather than in the sizable blocks of time, several thousand years or more, that describe preagricultural peoples.

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 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 dissipated, 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 or 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 very conservative, eager to preserve methods that had been inherited. But, specialization did improve the conditions or climate for discovery, and the invention of metalworking was a key result. Like agriculture, knowledge of metals gradually fanned out to other parts of Asia and to Africa and Europe.

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, of course, 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

* The emergence of civilization occurred in many though not all agricultural societies.

* Early civilizations formed in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River basin, and China.

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 hunting peoples moved in relatively small groups, or tribes, each containing anywhere from 40 to 60 individuals, and they could not settle in a single spot without the game running out. With agriculture, these constraints changed. To be sure, some agricultural peoples did move around. A system called slash and burn agriculture existed in a few parts of the world, including portions of the American South, until about 150 years ago. Here, people would burn off trees in an area, farm intensively for a few years until the soil was depleted, and then move on—often returning to earlier sites every 20-30 years. Herding peoples also moved in tribal bands, with strong kinship ties. The rise of nomadic herding economies was a vital development in Central Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

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--as 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 1.1).

One Neolithic village, Çatal Hüyük in southern Turkey, has been elaborately studied by archaeologists. It was founded about 7000 B.C.E. and was unusually large, covering about 32 acres. Houses were made of mud bricks set in timber frameworks, 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, and 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. By 5500 B.C.E., 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 Çatal 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., Çatal Hüyük had become part of a civilization. Although many of the characteristics of civilization had existed by 6000 or 5000 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 northwestern India. These three early centers of civilization had some interaction. The fourth and fifth early civilization centers, a bit later and considerably more separate, arose in China and Central America.

Unlike an agricultural society, which can be rather precisely defined, civilization is a more subjective construct. Some scholars prefer to define civilizations only as societies with 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 concepts 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, of course, 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, they allow the rapid exchange of ideas among relatively large numbers of people, thereby encouraging intellectual thought and artistic expression, and they promote specialization in manufacturing and trade.

Most civilizations developed writing, starting with the emergence of cuneiform (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 a sort.) 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 were 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 generally covers the history of most people.

But, the history of civilization does not include everybody. No hunting or nomadic peoples could generate a civilization—they lacked the stability and resources, and, with the exception 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 cases indeed, they were prone to regard all
non-Greeks as barbarians. 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 agriculture, civilization brings losses as well as gains. As Çatal Hüyük moved toward civilization, distinctions based on social class and wealth increased. Civilizations often have firmer class or caste divisions, including slavery, than do "simpler" societies. They also often promote greater separation between the rulers and ruled, monarchs and subjects. Frequently, they are quite warlike, and there is 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 than in agriculture, as men did most of the manufacturing and assumed political and religious leadership, thus relegating women to subordinate roles. "Civilization," then, is not a synonym for "good."

By the same token, nomadic or hunter-gatherer societies may be exceptionally well regulated and have interesting, important cultures. Many such societies, in fact, have more regulations--in part, because they depend on rules transmitted by word of mouth--than civilized societies. Some of the societies most eager to repress anger and aggression in human dealings, such as Zuni Indians in the American Southwest, are based at least in part on hunting and gathering. Although some hunting-gathering societies treat old people cruelly, others display more respect and veneration toward elders than most civilizations do. Many nomadic societies may be shocked by the doings of civilized peoples. For example, American Indians were appalled at the insistence of European settlers on spanking 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.

It is also important to note that many nomadic peoples contributed greatly to world history. 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 riding equipment and weaponry. Precisely because they traveled widely, nomadic peoples could play vital roles in world trade and in developing contacts among more settled areas. Nomadic groups in central Asia would play a particularly great role in world history, but groups in the Middle East and Africa were significant as well.

Despite the importance of alternatives, it remains true that the development of civilization most obviously continued the process of technological change ad political organization. Civilizations also generated the largest populations and the most elaborate artistic and intellectual forms. It is in this context that the terms has real meaning and in which it legitimately commands the attention of 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 supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agriculture needed to support Indus river cities opened the land to erosion and flooding because of overuse of the soil and removal of trees.

Having started in 3500 B.C.E., civilization developed in its four initial centers--the Middle East, Egypt, northwestern India, and northern China--over the following 2500 years. These areas covered only a tiny portion of the inhabited parts of the world, although they were the most densely populated. Such early civilizations, all clustered in key river valleys, were in a way pilot tests of the new form of social organization. Only after about 1000 B.C.E. did a more consistent process of development and spread of civilization begin--and with it, came the main threads of world history.
However, the great civilizations unquestionably built on the achievements of the river valley pioneers, and so some understanding of this contribution to the list of early human accomplishments is essential.

**Tigris-Euphrates Civilization**

The most noteworthy achievements of the earliest civilizations were early versions of organizational and cultural forms that most of us now take for granted—writing itself, formal codes of law, city planning and architecture, and institutions for trade, including the use of money. Once developed, most of these building blocks of human organization did not have to be reinvented, although in some cases they spread slowly to other parts of the world.

It is not surprising then, given its lead in agriculture, metalworking, and village structure, that the Middle East generated the first example of human civilization. Indeed, the first civilization, founded in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in a part of the Middle East long called Mesopotamia, forms one of only a few cases of a civilization developed absolutely from scratch—and with no examples from any place else to imitate. (Chinese civilization and civilization in Central America also developed independently.) By 4000 B.C.E., the farmers of Mesopotamia were familiar with bronze and copper and had already invented the wheel for transportation. They had a well-established pottery industry and interesting artistic forms. Farming in this area, because of the need for irrigation, required considerable coordination among communities, and this in turn served as the basis for complex political structures.

By about 3500 B.C.E., a people who had recently invaded this region, the Sumerians, developed a cuneiform alphabet, the first known case of human writing. Their alphabet at first used different pictures to represent various objects but soon shifted to the use of geometric shapes to symbolize spoken sounds. The early Sumerian alphabet may have had as many as 2000 such symbols, but this number was later reduced to about 300. Even so, writing and reading remained complex skills, which only a few had time to master. Scribes wrote on clay tablets, using styluses shaped quite like the modern ballpoint pen.

Sumerian art developed steadily, as statues and painted frescoes were used to adorn the temples of the gods. Statues of the gods also decorated individual homes. Sumerian science aided a complex agricultural society, as people sought to learn more about the movement of the sun and stars—thus founding the science of astronomy—and improved their mathematical knowledge. (Astronomy defined the calendar and provided the astrological forecasts widely used in politics and religion.) The Sumerians employed a system of numbers based on units of 10, 60, and 360 that we still use in calculating circles and hours. In other words, Sumerians and their successors in Mesopotamia created patterns of observation and abstract thought about nature that a number of civilizations, including our own, still rely on, and they also introduced specific systems, such as charts of major constellations, that have been current at least among educated people for 5000 years, not only in the Middle East but, by later imitation, in India and Europe as well.

Sumerians developed complex religious rituals. Each city had a patron god and erected impressive shrines to please and honor this and other deities. Massive towers, called ziggurats, formed the first monumental architecture in this civilization. Professional priests operated these temples and conducted the rituals within. Sumerians believed 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—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 gods'
creation of the earth 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 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, me Hammurabi, the devout, god-fearing prince,
to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy 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.

**Document: Hammurabi’s Law Code**

Hammurabi, as king of Babylon, united Mesopotamia under his rule from about 1800 to 1750 B.C.E. His law code, the earliest such compilation still in existence, was discovered on a stone slab in Iran in 1901 CE. Not a systematic presentation, it was a collection of exemplary cases designed to set general standards of justice. The code provides vital insights into the nature of social relations and family structure in this ancient civilization. Examples of the Hammurabic code follow:

When Marduk commanded me to give justice to the people of the land and to let [them] have [good] governance, I set forth truth and justice throughout the land [and] prospered the people. At that time: If a man has accused a man and has charged him with manslaughter and then has not proved [it against] him, his accuser shall be put to death.

If a man has charged a man with sorcery and then has not proved [it against] him, he who is charged with the sorcery shall go to the holy river; he shall leap into the holy river and, if the holy river overwhets him, his accuser shall take and keep his house; if the holy river proves that man clear [of the offense] and he comes back safe, he who has charged him with sorcery shall be put to death; he who leapt into the holy river shall take and keep the house of his accuser.

If a man has come forward in a case to bear witness to a felony and then has not proved the statement he has made, if that case is a capital one, that man shall be put to death. If he has come forward to bear witness to [a claim for] corn or money, he shall remain liable for the penalty for that suit. If a judge has tried a suit, given a decision, caused a sealed tablet to be executed, [and] there after varies his judgment, they shall convict that judge of varying [his] judgment and he shall pay twelxfold the claim in that suit; then they shall remove him from his place on the bench of judges in the assembly, and he shall not [again] sit in judgment with the judges.

If a free person helps a slave to escape, the free person will be put to death.

If a man has committed robbery and is caught, that man shall be put to death. If the robber is not caught, the man who has been robbed shall formally declare whatever he has lost before a god, and the city and the mayor in whose territory or district the robbery has been committed shall replace whatever he has lost for him. If [it is] the life [of the owner that is lost], the city or the mayor shall pay one maneh of silver to his kinsfolk.

If a person owes money and Adad [the river god] has flooded the person’s field, the person will not give any grain [tax] or pay any interest in that year. If a person is too lazy to make the dike of his field strong and there is a break in the dike and water destroys his own farmland, that person will make good the grain [tax] that is destroyed.

If a merchant increases interest beyond that set by the king and collects it, that merchant will lose what was lent.

If a trader borrows money from a merchant and then denies the fact, that merchant in the presence of god and witnesses will prove the trader borrowed the money and the trader will pay the merchant three times the amount borrowed.

If the husband of a married lady has accused her but she is not caught lying with another man, she shall take an oath by the life of a god and return to her house.

If a man takes himself off and there is not the [necessary] maintenance in his house, his wife [so long as] her [husband is delayed], shall keep [herself chaste; she shall not] enter [another man’s house]. If that woman has not kept herself chaste but enters another man’s house, they shall convict that woman and cast her into the water.

If a son strikes his father, they shall cut off his fore hand.

If a man has put out the eye of a free man, they shall put out his eye. If he breaks the bone of a [free] man, they shall break his bone. If he puts out the eye of a villain or breaks the bone of a villain, he shall pay one maneh of silver. If he puts out the eye of a [free] man’s slave or breaks the bone of a [free] man’s slave, he shall pay half his price. If a man knocks out the tooth of a [free] man equal [in rank] to him [self], they shall knock out his tooth. If he knocks out the tooth of a villain, he shall pay one-third maneh of silver. If a man strikes the cheek of a [free] man who is superior [in rank] to him [self], he shall be beaten with 60 stripes with a whip of ox-hide in the assembly. If the man strikes the cheek of a free man equal to him [self in rank], he shall pay one maneh of silver. If a villain strikes the cheek of a villain, he shall pay ten shekels of silver. If the slave of a [free] man strikes the cheek of a free man, they shall cut off his ear.

Questions:
What can you tell from the Hammurabic code about the social and family structure of Mesopotamia? What is the relationship between law and trade? Why did agricultural civilizations such as Babylon insist on harsh punishments for crimes? What religious and magical beliefs does the document suggest? Using specific examples, show how interpreting this document for significant historical meaning differs from simply reading it.
Egyptian Civilization

A second center of civilization sprang up in northern Africa, along the Nile River. Egyptian civilization, formed by 3000 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 counter part, which had a more independent business class. Government control may have been necessary because of the complexity of coordinating 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. 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 pictures decorated not only the tombs—where the belief in an afterlife made people want to be surrounded by objects of beauty—but also palaces and furnishings. Egyptian architectural forms were also quite influential, not only in Egypt but in other parts of the Mediterranean as well. Egyptian mathematics produced the idea of a day divided into 24 hours, and here too Egypt influenced the development of later Mediterranean cultures.

Indian and Chinese River Valley Civilizations

River valley civilizations developed in two other centers. A prosperous urban civilization emerged along the Indus River by 2500 B.C.E., supporting several large cities, including Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, whose houses even had running water. Indus River peoples had trading contacts with Mesopotamia, but they developed their own distinctive alphabet and artistic forms. Invasions by Indo-Europeans, however, resulted in such complete destruction of this culture that we know little about its nature or its subsequent influence on India. Harappan writing, for example, has yet to be deciphered. It remains true that civilization never had to be fully reinvented in India. The Indo-European invaders combined their religious and political ideas with those that had taken root in the early cities. In recent times, Indians' pride in their early civilized history has become an important part of their national identity.

Civilization along the Huang He (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, P'an 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, the existence of an organized state that carefully regulated irrigation in the fertile but flood-prone river valley. Second, by about 2000 B.C.E. the Chinese had produced 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 B.C.E. had introduced iron, which they soon learned to work with coal. Their writing progressed from knotted ropes to scratches of lines on bone 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.
Because of limits on building materials in the region, the Chinese did not construct many massive monuments, choosing to live in simple houses built of mud. By about 1500 B.C.E., a line of kings called the Shang ruled over the Huang He valley, and these rulers did construct some impressive tombs and palaces. Invasions disrupted the Shang dynasty and caused a temporary decline in civilization. However, there was less of a break between the river valley society and the later, fuller development of civilization in China than occurred in other centers.

THE HERITAGE OF THE RIVER VALLEY CIVILIZATIONS

*Most river valley civilizations declined after about 1200 B.C.E.*

*A number of small centers emerged in the Middle East that introduced further innovations, including the religion of Judaism*

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, although more prosaic, are fundamental to world history even today: the invention of the wheel, the taming of the horse, the creation 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 and other divisions of time. These basic achievements, along with the awe that the early civilizations continue to inspire, are vital legacies to the whole of human history. Almost all the major alphabets in the world today are derived from the writing forms pioneered in the river valleys, apart from the even more durable concept of writing itself. Almost all later civilizations, then, built on the massive foundations first constructed in the river valleys.

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

This break raises one final question: Besides the vital achievements—the fascinating monuments and the indispensable advances in technology, science, and art—what legacies did the river valley civilizations impart for later ages? The question is particularly important for the Middle East and Egypt. In India, we must frankly admit much ignorance about possible links between Indus River accomplishments and what came later; in China, there is a definite connection between the first civilization and subsequent forms. Indeed, the new dynasty in China, the Zhou, took over from the Shang about 1000 B.C.E., 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 not altogether clear that either Egypt or Mesopotamia contributed much to later political traditions, although the Roman Empire emulated the concept of a godlike king, as evidenced in the trappings of the office, and the existence of strong city-state governments in the Middle East itself continued to be significant. Ideas about slavery may also have been passed on from these early civilizations. Specific scientific achievements are vital, as the Greeks, for example, carefully studied Egyptian mathematics. Scholars argue, however, over how much of a connection exists between Mesopotamian and Egyptian science and later Greek thinking, aside from certain techniques of measuring time or charting the stars.
Some historians of philosophy have asserted a basic division between a Mesopotamian and Chinese understanding of nature, which they claim affected later civilizations around the Mediterranean in contrast to China. Mesopotamians were prone to stress a gap between humankind and nature, whereas Chinese thinking developed along ideas of basic harmony. It is possible, then, that some fundamental thinking helped shape later outlooks, but the continuities here are not easy to assess. Mesopotamian art and Egyptian architecture had a more measurable influence on Greek styles, and through these, in turn, later European and Muslim cultures. The Greeks thus learned much about temple building from the Egyptians, whose culture had influenced island civilizations, such as Crete, which then affected later Greek styles.

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 Mediterranean mainly after 1200 B.C.E. Although the great empires from Sumer through Babylon were disrupted 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 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 identities 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 as well.

A people called the Phoenicians, 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 Phoenicians also improved the Egyptian numbering system and, as great traders, set up colony cities in North Africa and on the coasts of Europe. Another regional group, the Lydians, first introduced coined money.

The most influential of the smaller Middle Eastern groups, however, were the Jews, who gave the world the first clearly developed monotheistic religion. We 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 and relatively weak, retaining independence only when other parts of the Middle East were in political turmoil. What was distinctive about this culture was its firm belief that a single God guided the destinies of the Jewish people. Priests and prophets defined and emphasized this belief, and their history of God's guidance of the Jews 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.

Because Judaism stressed God's special compact with the chosen Jewish people, there was no premium placed on converting non-Jews. This belief helps 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 hands, the concept of 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; 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.

Conclusion
The First Civilizations

Overall, then, the river valley civilizations, flourishing for many centuries, created a basic set of tools, intellectual concepts such as writing and mathematics, and political forms that would persist and spread to other parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Invasion in India, and invasion and political decline in Egypt, marked a fairly firm break between river valley institutions and those that would later develop. Huang He civilization, in contrast, flowed more fully into the 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 vital new inventions and ideas. The smaller cultures also generated a deeply entrenched network of regional or minority values and institutions that would continue to make the Middle East a complex, vibrant, and sometimes troubled part of the world.

One final result of the first, long period of human civilization is certainly clear: a pattern of division among the world’s peoples. The diffusion of Homo 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 thereafter. 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., Phoenicians 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 integrating 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 relative 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 co-existed hand in hand.
IN DEPTH:
The Idea of Civilization in World Historical Perspective

The belief that there are fundamental differences between civilized and "barbaric" or "savage" peoples is very ancient and widespread. For 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 Chinese, being civilized was cultural, not biological or racial. If barbarians learned the Chinese language and adopted Chinese ways—from the clothes they wore to the food they ate—they were regarded as civilized. A similar pattern of demarcation and cultural absorption was found among the American Indian peoples of present-day Mexico. Those who settled in the valleys of the mountainous interior, where they built great civilizations, lived in fear of invasions by peoples they 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 into the fertile central valleys in search of game and settlements to pillage. The Aztecs were simply the last, and perhaps the most fierce, of a long line of Chichimec peoples who entered the valleys and conquered 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 defeated peoples.

The word civilization is derived from the Latin word civilis, meaning "of the citizens." The term was coined by the Romans. They used it to distinguish between themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan, urban-based civilization and the "inferior" peoples who lived in the forests and deserts on 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 heart lands sounded like senseless babble to the Greeks, they lumped all the outsiders together as barbarians, which meant "those who cannot speak Greek." As in the case of the Chinese and Aztecs, the boundaries between civilized and barbarian for the Greeks and Romans were cultural, not biological. Regardless of the color of one's skin or the shape of one's nose, it was possible for free people to become members of a Greek polis—city-state—or to become Roman citizens by adopting Greek or Roman customs and swearing allegiance to the polis or the emperor.

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, two major changes occurred among thinkers in western Europe. First, 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, candidates 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. Peoples such as the Chinese and the Arabs, who had created great cities, monumental architecture, writing, advanced technology, and large empires, usually won a place along with the Europeans near the top of these ladders of human achievement. 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, with white people 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 European thinking and social interaction on racial or 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 argued 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, where 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 development and the hardening of the boundaries 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 peoples across the globe. In the last half of the 19th century virtually all non-Western peoples came to be dominated by the Europeans, who were confident that they, as representatives 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 embedded hierarchies of civilized and savage peoples has been discarded. Racist thinking has been discredited 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 addition, these ideas have failed because racial supremacists cannot provide 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 understanding 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 increasingly given credit for their civilized attainments, much ethnocentrism 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 attempting 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 surplus 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 civilizations, but many have lacked the resource base, historical circumstances, or desire to do so.

Questions:
Identify a society you consider to be civilized. What criteria did you use to determine that it was civilized? Can you apply those criteria to other societies? Can you think of societies that might not fit your criteria and yet be civilizations? Do the standards that you and others use reflect your own society's norms and achievements rather than neutral, more universal criteria?