

FEATURES OF CIVILIZATION

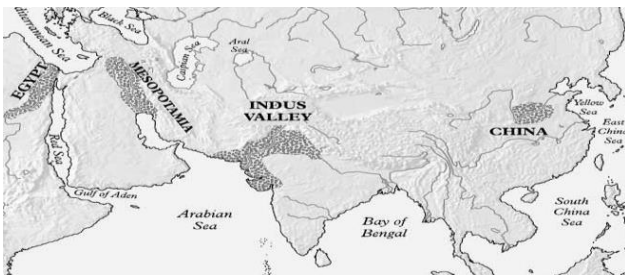


The earliest civilizations to develop were all situated near major rivers. These rivers provided a regular water supply and a means of transportation. The animals that flocked to the rivers to drink were a source of food. Perhaps most important, conditions in the river valleys favored farming. Floodwaters spread silt—tiny bits of rock and dirt from the river bottom—across the valleys, renewing the soil and keeping it fertile. In such rich conditions, farmers were able to produce surpluses of food, or more than was necessary. These surpluses allowed them to feed growing populations and to store food for the future. Thus they were able to produce enough food to support increasingly large populations. As populations expanded, some villages swelled into the world's first cities. In these cities, some of the people were able to work at jobs other than farming. This was a radical departure from the traditional economies of the Stone Age. A traditional economy relies on habit, custom, or ritual and tends not to change over time. As you will read, in cities, many aspects of life were dramatically different than they had been before.

Basic Features that Define Civilization

What did the early civilizations that arose in different parts of the world have in common? While cities are the main feature of civilization, historians distinguish several other basic features of most early civilizations. Seven of the major features are (1) cities, (2) organized governments, (3) complex religions, (4) job specialization, (5) social classes, (6) arts and architecture, (7) public works, and (8) writing.

Cities



The rise of cities was the main feature of civilization. Cities are the central feature of a civilization. Cities are centers of trade. They generally have large and diverse populations. The first cities emerged shortly after farmers began cultivating fertile lands along river valleys and producing surplus foods. These surpluses allowed the population to expand. As population grew, some villages expanded into cities. These cities rose independently in

the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. A civilization is a complex, highly organized social order. The world's first civilizations arose independently in a number of river valleys. These River Valley Civilizations include Sumer, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East; Egypt, along the Nile River; the Indus civilization, along the Indus River in India; and the Shang civilization, along the Huang (hwhang) River, or Yellow River, in China.

Organized Governments



Councils of elders or chiefs ruled many of the world's farming villages. However, in cities, more powerful organized governments arose to oversee large-scale efforts that benefited the people. For example, as cities grew, their residents required a steady supply of food. A central government could coordinate the production of large amounts of food. In addition, farmers near rivers needed to control flooding and channel waters to the fields. A well-

organized government could bring people together for projects such as building dikes, digging canals, and carving out irrigation ditches. Many rulers also relied on royal officials to help them govern by issuing laws, collecting taxes, and organizing systems of defense. Over time, governments became more complex, and separate departments often evolved to oversee different functions of government. In many early cases, priests probably had the greatest power in government. In others, warrior kings emerged as the main political leaders. Often, they claimed that their right to rule came from the gods, and they passed their power on from father to son. Thus, many political rulers gained religious power as well.

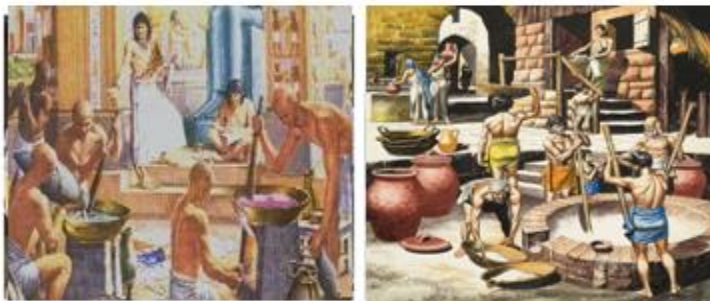
Complex Religions



Most ancient people were polytheistic, which means they believed in many gods. People appealed to sun gods, river goddesses, and other gods that they believed controlled natural forces or human activities such as birth or war. In early religions, priests and worshipers sought to gain the favor of the gods through complex rituals such as ceremonies, dances, prayers, and hymns. 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



The lives of city dwellers differed from those of nomads. Urban people developed so many new crafts that a single individual could not master all the skills needed to make tools, weapons, or other goods. For the first time, individuals began to specialize in certain jobs. Some became artisans, or skilled craftspeople, and made pottery or finely carved or woven goods. Among the crafts developed in cities, metalworking was

particularly important. People learned to make tools and weapons, first out of copper and later out of bronze, a more durable mixture of copper and tin. Cities had other specialists, too. Bricklayers built city walls. Soldiers defended these walls. 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.

Social Classes



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 artisans. Below them came the vast majority of people—peasant farmers who lived in the surrounding villages and produced food for the city. In many civilizations, slaves occupied the lowest social level. Slaves sometimes came from poor families who sold family members into slavery to pay their debts. Others became slaves as punishment for crimes or were prisoners captured in war. Because male captives were often killed, women and children made up the largest number of slaves in some societies.

Arts and Architecture



The arts and architecture of ancient civilizations expressed the talents, beliefs, and values of the people who created them. Temples and palaces often dominated the city landscape. Many rulers may have ordered such buildings to be constructed in order to remind people of the strength and power of their government and religion. The skilled workers who built these massive buildings decorated them with wall paintings, statues of gods,

goddesses, or rulers, and other stunning pieces of design work.

Public Works



Strong rulers also ordered vast public works to be built. Such projects included irrigation systems, roads, bridges, and defensive walls. These public works projects were meant to benefit the city by protecting it from attack, ensuring its food supply, or enhancing the reputation of its ruler. The projects were often quite costly, requiring a great deal of human

labor and sometimes resulting in the loss of lives during construction.

Writing



Of the earliest civilizations, some but not all developed a critical skill—writing. The first writing systems were established in different places and at different times, in many cases with no contact among the different groups who created them. Thus the earliest writing systems varied in appearance, structure, and purpose. Some were first used in temples, where priests needed to record amounts of grain collected, accurate information about the seasons, and precise rituals and prayers. Other writing systems were first used on public monuments, where rulers spelled out their greatest achievements as a means of advertising their power to the people. Archaeologists have found masses of ancient writings, some on clay tablets or vases, others on stone statues, and yet others on the walls of buildings. The first step people made toward developing writing was to use pictographs (also called pictograms), or simple drawings that look like the objects they represent. Later, they developed complex writing systems including symbols that represent words, syllables, or letters. As writing grew more complex, only specially trained people called scribes could read and write. Scribes kept records for priests, rulers, and merchants. Only a few societies permitted women to become scribes, an occupation that could lead to political power.