THE RISE OF AGRICULTURE AND AGRICULTURAL CIVILIZATION

Because of improvements in technology, our world is becoming smaller, and it is relatively easy for us to travel and communicate all over the world. In some ways, this increased contact makes us more homogeneous than ever before. On the other hand, sometimes various societies struggle to cling to their uniqueness. The tension caused by these two contrary trends makes interaction among societies complex. This same tension informs our study of how the world became what it is today. While there are major, long-standing diversities among people, there are also many respects in which humankind has been united and shared certain features. Developments that ultimately shaped much of the world's population can be understood by dividing the past into coherent periods of world history. We will explore patterns of development in the world's seven regions—East Asia, India and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe and North America, and Latin America. Each civilization has had to deal with some common issues, and has approached these issues in distinctive ways. In comparing these major civilizations, we will strive to understand these different approaches to common social issues as well as the extent and impact of interactions among the civilizations.

From Human Prehistory to the Early Civilizations

Human Prehistory. Archeological studies and other scientific methods have provided us with a view of human development that begins millions of years ago. Most of the 2 million-plus years of our existence as species has been described as the Paleolithic, or Old Stone, Age. This lengthy time phase, during which both Homo erectus and then Homo sapiens sapiens made their appearances, ran until about 14,000 years ago. Homo erectus appeared as early as 750,000-500,000 years ago. They stood upright and learned simple tool use, mainly through employing suitably shaped rocks and sticks for hunting and gathering. Several species of Homo erectus developed and spread in Africa and to Asia and Europe, reaching a population size of perhaps 1.5 million 100,000 years ago. Homo erectus disappeared about 40,000 years ago. Our immediate ancestors were Homo sapiens sapiens. All current races are descended from this subspecies. Early varieties of Homo sapiens sapiens lived as small bands of hunter-gatherers. These groups developed language, rituals, and more sophisticated tools.

Neolithic Revolution. The Neolithic Revolution is the term that has been given to the development of agricultural societies. This revolution in economic, political, and social organization began in the Middle East as early as 10,000 B.C.E. and gradually spread to other centers, including parts of India, North Africa, and Europe. With the rise of agricultural forms of economic production, humans were able to remain settled more permanently in one spot and increase their levels of specialization regarding particular economic, political, and religious functions. Additionally, the emergence of agriculturally based societies caused a massive increase in the sheer number of people in the world. However, agriculture as an economic system was not embraced by every society. Most evidence suggests that gathering and hunting peoples resisted agriculture as long as
they could. It is not that hard to imagine that many would have found the new life too complicated, too difficult, or too exciting.

**Ice Age.** The end of the ice age saw both the retreat of some big game animals and increases in human populations, stemming from improved climate. For these two reasons people were prompted to look for new and more reliable 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 probably accidental discovery of the deliberate planting of seeds and the improvement of key grains through selection of seeds from the best plants.

**Metalworking: Agricultural Technology.** By about 3000 B.C.E., metalworking had become common in the Middle East. Like agriculture, knowledge of metals gradually fanned out to other parts of Asia and to Africa and Europe. Metalworking was extremely useful to agricultural and herding societies. It allowed for the crafting of more efficient farming tools and better weaponry. However, the production of metal instruments was not a popular undertaking. Agricultural peoples had the resources to free up only a small number of metal toolmakers who would specialize in this activity and exchange their product with farmers for food. Specialization of this sort did not guarantee rapid rates of invention; indeed, many specialized artisans seemed very conservative, eager to preserve methods that they had inherited.

**Civilization.** The word civilization itself comes from the Latin term for city. Formal states, writing, cities, and monuments all characterize civilizations. Civilizations also exhibit elaborate trading patterns and extensive political territories. While many of the ingredients of civilization had existed by 6000 or 5000 B.C.E., the origins of civilization, strictly speaking, date to only about 3500 B.C.E.

**River-Valley Civilizations.** The first civilizations were labeled the river-valley civilizations. This was because they all developed alongside of major rivers in order to secure an adequate water supply to aid agricultural production. The earliest river-valley civilizations began in the Middle East and flourished for many centuries. They 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. Most of the river-valley civilizations were in decline by 1000 B.C.E.

**Tigris-Euphrates Civilization.** This civilization originated in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in a part of the Middle East long called Mesopotamia. It was one of the few cases of a civilization that started absolutely from scratch-with no examples from any place available for imitation. This civilization progressed mostly due to the accomplishments of the Sumerians.

**Sumerians.** The Sumerians were the most influential people in the Tigris-Euphrates region. By about 3500 B.C.E., the Sumerians had developed the first known case of human writing. They also were characterized by the development of astronomical
sciences, intense religious beliefs, and tightly organized city-states. The Sumerians also improved the region's agricultural prosperity by learning about fertilizers and adopting silver in order to conduct an early form of commercial exchange. They eventually succumbed to people called the Akkadians, who continued much of the Sumerian culture in the Tigris-Euphrates region.

**Sumerian Alphabet: River-Valley Intellectual Development.** By about 3500 B.C.E., the Sumerians had 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 2,000 such symbols, but this was later stripped down to about 300.

**Polytheism: River-Valley Religion.** 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 were common among early agricultural peoples; a religion of this sort, which sees gods in many aspects of nature, is known as polytheism.

**City-States: Sumerian Political Structure.** 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 was a key early example how a civilization and more political structures combined. The government helped regulate religion and enforce its duties; it also provided a system of courts for justice. Kings were originally war leaders, and the function of defense and war, including leadership of a trained army, remained vital in Sumerian politics.

**Hammurabi's Code: River-Valley Legal Culture.** Hammurabi's code laid down the procedure for law courts and regulated property rights and duties of family members, setting harsh punishments for crimes. This focus on standardizing a legal system was one of the features of early river-valley civilizations.

**Egyptian Civilization.** Egyptian civilization emerged in northern Africa along the Nile River by about 3000 B.C.E. It benefited from trade and influences from Mesopotamia, but it also produced its own distinct social structures and cultural expressions. Unlike Mesopotamia, Egyptian civilization featured very durable and centralized institutions. Mathematical achievements and impressive architectural structures also characterized Egyptian civilization.

**The Pyramids.** From 2700 B.C.E. onward, the Egyptian Pharaohs directed the building of the pyramids, which were to function as their tombs. However, the building of these massive architectural monuments could only be accomplished with the use of an abundance of slave labor.
Indian River-Valley Civilization. A prosperous urban civilization emerged along the Indus River by 2500 B.C.E., supporting several large cities, such as Harappa, whose houses had running water. Indus River peoples had trading contacts with Mesopotamia, but they developed a distinctive alphabet and artistic forms. Invasions by IndoEuropeans, however, resulted in such complete destruction of this culture that little is known about its subsequent influence on India.

Chinese River-Valley Civilization. Civilization along the Hwang River in China developed in considerable isolation, though some overland trading contact developed with India and the Middle East. In addition to the existence of an organized state that carefully regulated irrigation in the floodprone river valley, the Chinese had produced advanced technology and elaborate intellectual life by about 2000 B.C.E. There was also less of a break between Chinese river-valley society and the later civilizations in China than in any other region.

The Shang Dynasty. The Shang ruled over the Chines, or Hwang-Ho, river valley by about 1500 RC.E. These rulers are noted for managing the construction of impressive tombs and palaces.

Jews. The Jews were the most influential of the smaller Middle Eastern groups. They gave the world the first clearly developed monotheistic religion. While settling near the Mediterranean around 1200 RC.E., the Jews were never able to form a strong political or military tradition. However, 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.

KEYTERMS
Paleolithic, or Old Stone, Age: Most of the 2 million-plus years during which our species has existed are described by the term. Throughout this long time span, which runs about 14,000 years ago, human beings learned only simple tool use, mainly through employing suitably shaped rocks and sticks for hunting and warfare. During this time span, the human species developed into Homo erectus, and later Homo sapien sapien. Furthermore, the greatest achievement of the Paleolithic people was the sheer spread of the human species over much of the earth's surface.

Mesolithic Age, or Middle Stone, Age: This term designates a span of several thousand years, from about 12,000 to 8000 RC.E., during which human ability to fashion some tools and other implements improved greatly. The Mesolithic people’s ability to domesticate more animals led to an increase in food supply and a subsequent increase in population growth.

Neolithic Revolution: The Neolithic Revolution is the term for the invention of agriculture. This revolution in economic production began in the Middle East as early as 10,000 B.C.E. and gradually spread to other centers, including parts of India, North Africa, and Europe. With agriculture, human beings were able to settle more permanently in one spot and specialize in particular economic, political, and religious
functions. Agriculture also created a great increase in the sheer number of people in the world.

**Prehistoric:** Prehistoric is a term used for human patterns before the invention of writing allowed for the creation of the kinds of records with which historians prefer to study the past. This huge span of time includes the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods.

**Metalworking:** By about 3000 B.C.E, metalworking had become common in the Middle East. Like agriculture, knowledge of metals gradually fanned out to other parts of Asia and to Africa and Europe. Metalworking was extremely useful to agricultural and herding societies. It allowed for the creation of more efficient farming tools and better weaponry.

**Civilization:** The word civilization itself comes from the Latin term for city. Formal states, writing, cities, and monuments characterize civilizations. They also develop elaborate trading patterns and extensive political territories. While many of the ingredients of civilization had existed by 6000 or 5000 B.C.E., the origins of civilization, strictly speaking, date to only about 3500 B.C.E. The first civilization arose in the Middle East, along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Many of the accomplishments of the river-valley civilizations had lasting impact and are still fundamental to world history today.

**Catal Huyuk:** Catal Huyuk was a Neolithic village located in southern Turkey. It has been elaborately studied by archeologists and has produced substantial historical data on the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the Neolithic period.

**River-Valley Civilizations:** The first civilizations all sprang up alongside the banks of major rivers in order to irrigate river water to their agricultural fields. The first river valley civilizations began in the Middle East and flourished for many centuries. They 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. Additionally, most of the river-valley civilizations were in decline by 1000 B.C.E.

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**The Shang Dynasty:** The Shang ruled over the Chinese, or Hwang-Ho, river valley by about 1500 B.C.E. These rulers are noted for constructing substantial tombs and palaces. The Zhou took over the river valley from the Shang around 1000 B.C.E., ruling a loose coalition of regional lords.

**Jews:** They were the most influential of the smaller Middle Eastern groups that gave the world the first clearly developed monotheistic religion. They settled near the Mediterranean around 1200 B.C.E. but were never able to form a strong political or military tradition. However, 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.