

The First Civilizations Emerge on the World Stage

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An Egyptian fresco, circa 1306–1290 BCE. BELOW: A map of Mesopotamia. Bojan Breclj/CORBIS, Big History Project

During the same sliver of cosmic time, cities, states, and civilizations emerged independently in several places around the world.

The first agrarian civilizations developed at about 3200 BCE in Mesopotamia, in Egypt and Nubia (now northern Sudan), and in the Indus Valley. More appeared in China a bit later and in Central America and along the Andes Mountains of South America at about 2000–1000 BCE. Why and how did this occur?

For a meaningful discussion, definitions of the key words city, state, and civilization must be clear. A “city,” with tens of thousands of people, is larger than a town (thousands) or a village (hundreds). But it is also different in nature, with people specializing in some particular aspect of work instead of being farmers and being supported by surplus food grown by farmers nearby.

A “state” is a city, or several cities, plus the surrounding villages and farms. A state would include tens to hundreds of thousands of people, even millions. It would have political, social, and economic hierarchies, meaning that a few elite people at the top, maybe about 10

percent, had more wealth and power than the remaining 90 percent. A state was ruled by elites who exercised the right to use force to ensure order and who maintained the right to collect taxes/tribute, by force if necessary.

Out of states arose imperial states, or empires, in which a single ruler controlled large territories of cities and farmland. These large states are often called “civilizations.” This word has previously been used to imply superiority or advancement; historians now try to use it simply to mean that civilizations have certain characteristics, primarily density of population and control by elites. This does not mean they are better than other kinds of societies, but they are, by definition, more complex. Since these early civilizations always depended on the farming around them, we call them “agrarian civilizations.”

Places of early civilizations

Four of the earliest agrarian civilizations occurred in fertile river valleys, utilizing plants and animals that had been domesticated earlier as their foundations.

The first of these formed in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. The valleys of these rivers had no large trees, no big stones, and no metals, but with irrigation people could grow large crops of wheat and barley, grasses that had been domesticated earlier in the mountains nearby. They also grew lentils and chickpeas and herded sheep and goats.



The next three places where agrarian civilizations emerged were in the Nile River Valley in Egypt and Nubia, the Indus River Valley in India, and the Huang He (Yellow) River Valley in China. Each river valley had its own distinctive plants and animals, which had been domesticated from the neighboring ecosystem. The Egyptians and Nubians had wheat, barley, cattle, fish, and birds. The Indus Valley people raised humped cattle and cotton, as

well as wheat, barley, lentils, sheep, goats, and chickens. In China, millet and wheat were grown in the north, with rice cultivated later in the south. Pigs, chickens, and soybeans also formed the staple foods in China.

Large states emerged a couple of thousand years later in the Americas, where the food base proved quite different. Wild grasses were not present to be domesticated, and there were only a few large animals. People in Central America domesticated maize (corn), peppers, tomatoes, squash, beans, peanuts, and cotton. They had only dogs and turkeys as domestic animals. Along the Andes Mountains in South America, people used llamas and alpacas for wool and transport; for food they depended mostly on potatoes and quinoa, a grain rich in protein. They had guinea pigs, and fish brought up from the coast, where seafood had supported earlier dense coastal populations.

Why and how did states emerge?

After people learned to domesticate plants and animals, they gradually learned to utilize animals for a variety of things. They used milk, wool, manure, and muscle power from animals instead of eating them right away. The increased cultivation and development of available resources caused the world's population to grow dramatically, from perhaps 6 million in 8000 BCE to maybe 50 million in 3000 BCE.

At the same time, the climate was changing dramatically. Stable warmth had been reached by about 8000 BCE after the height of the last Ice Age, about 20,000 BCE. After 8000 BCE, the climate in the northern hemisphere generally became drier, as the monsoon belt shifted southward (possibly due to slight changes in the Earth's orbit). This dryness drove people from upland areas down into river valleys, where access to water was more certain. The fertility of these valleys, from rich soil deposited during floods, produced abundant food.

As density and food surpluses increased, the social structure changed. A small part of the population became much wealthier and more powerful than the rest. Why did the majority of people allow this to happen? We can only guess that people needed leadership to manage projects like large-scale irrigation or distribution of surplus food. They also needed armed protection against neighboring groups. At the same time, ambitious priests and rulers could take opportunities to control the food surpluses to increase their own power. Gradually they were able to institutionalize their power, forming political or religious groups that held significant control over the land and people in their jurisdiction.

Areas without early civilizations

Even though some areas of the world did not produce full-blown cities and states, the trend toward agriculture seems to have been present everywhere.

In sub-Saharan Africa (below the Sahara Desert) people were separated from the northern coast by a harsh desert. Malarial rain forests covered much of the land, with lots of tropical diseases. The Bantu people, in the eastern part of modern Nigeria, cultivated yams, oil palm

trees, millet, and sorghum and herded cattle. Eventually camels replaced horses and donkeys for travel across the Sahara, and Muslim merchants could make their way to the west coast. Small regional states and kingdoms emerged, but never a major agrarian civilization.

Small islands in the Pacific did not have the resources to create full-scale agrarian civilizations, but their smaller states and chiefdoms had features similar to those around the world. On the larger island of Australia it seems that agriculture never materialized. Soils were poor, and the island was isolated. New evidence suggests that trends toward the development of agriculture might have continued if not broken by the arrival of European colonists.

Archaeologists have long thought that resources could not support dense human societies in the basin of the Amazon River. But recent evidence suggests that people there found ways to fertilize the soil by adding charcoal and that the present rain forests may have been earlier orchards supporting large populations.

Comparing early agrarian civilizations

All of the earliest agrarian civilizations developed many similar characteristics beyond the defining ones of hierarchical force and coerced taxation/tribute. It seems that only centralized state control can effectively integrate and support large populations of people.

Other common characteristics of civilizations include the following:

- Storage of surplus food
- Development of a priestly caste; a state religion based on supernatural gods/goddesses
- Central authority (such as a king, pharaoh, or emperor)
- Occupational specialization and division of labor
- Social stratification (social divisions based on wealth, ancestry, and occupation)
- Increased trade
- Systems of writing or recording information; increased collective learning
- Standing armies; increased warfare
- Monumental public architecture
- Increased gender inequality; patriarchy

Despite all these similarities, some important differences occurred among early civilizations. Perhaps most significant, the civilizations in northern Africa and Eurasia were connected with each other soon after they began, forming an Afro-Eurasian zone that included the trading of goods and the exchange of ideas and technology. Connecting roads went east-west through similar latitudes and there were sea routes between numerous ports. In contrast, early civilizations in the Americas were hardly connected at all. They had fewer kinds of transport animals and fewer routes over difficult terrain that separated the north-south changes in

latitude. This difference would prove important when sailors from Europe arrived on the shores of the Americas with horses, guns, steel swords, and germs they had picked up from their domestic animals but had themselves become immune to or tolerant of. The Europeans' animals and technologies were the result of collective exchanges among several early Afro-Eurasian civilizations.

If we change our lens to get close-ups of early civilizations, we can see many fascinating details that differ. All the early civilizations developed some form of writing, except the Inca in the Andes, who instead used a system of tying knots in different colored string, called *quipu*, to record their transactions and possibly even their stories. All early civilizations engaged in warfare except, perhaps, in the Indus Valley, where some arrowheads and spears have been found but no swords, helmets, shields, or chariots. Every civilization with writing started by using pictographs but switched to some form of alphabet, except the Chinese, who still use pictographs in their writing. Every civilization practiced human sacrifice, but the Aztecs used it on a much larger scale than others; they believed that the world would end if the chief god did not receive his daily offering of human blood to keep the Sun shining. While early civilizations shared many common features, the differing details form a mosaic of human culture.