Chapter 1: The Earliest Human Societies: 1-4a Agrarian and Irrigation Civilizations
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1-4a Agrarian and Irrigation Civilizations

Wherever ancient gathering-and-hunting peoples discovered how to grow and breed their food, populations increased dramatically; surplus wealth supported more complex societies; craft production and trade appeared; new farming technologies evolved, such as the use of draft animals and irrigation; urban life developed; ruling elites emerged; and the need to maintain records necessitated the invention of writing. In short, the most ancient civilizations known to us arose. As we shall see, each of these civilizations acquired and elaborated its own unique characteristics and "style" of life. Yet, as distinctive as each of these earliest civilizations was, to varying extents they shared eight attributes. Together, these features comprise types of civilizations called **agrarian civilization** (Civilizations that are based primarily on peasant farming.) and **pastoral civilization** (A civilization that is based primarily on pastoralism and pastoral ways of living.) . As we study a few of the earliest world civilizations, see how many of these eight features you can find in each one:

- **They were primarily rural societies.** Most people lived in villages and had rural outlooks and ways of life, whether or not they grew crops or herded livestock. This does not mean that these civilizations had no cities, though fewer were found among people who lived as nomadic pastoralists. Because they were socially complex (stratified), cities were the locales where members of the ruling classes—as well as priests, craftspeople, merchants, and nobles—lived. Relationships between rural villages or tribes and cities were complex, but city dwellers frequently directed the productive activities of rural folk through their control of religious beliefs and rituals thought to be essential to fertility and through the enforcement of laws, customs, and traditions.

- **They were based primarily on peasant agriculture or livestock breeding.** The overwhelming majority in such civilizations relied on farming and herding to sustain themselves and their families, as well as to support non-food-producing members of society such as craftsmen, merchants, and ruling elites. They used relatively simple technologies to perform their labors. They crafted their tools out of materials at hand: mud, clay, grasses, leather, wood, wattle, and stone. Wind, water, human strength, or animals powered what simple machinery they fashioned, such as irrigation devices and ploughs. The rulers often skimmed off as taxes what surpluses they produced, keeping the people poor. The relationship of rulers with nomadic pastoralists, on the other hand, often was fraught and more tenuous.

- **Most people maintained life in balance with their natural environment.** In civilizations that relied on simple technology, people's survival and ability to produce

food hinged on their understanding of their natural world. It was this ability, acquired from many generations of observation and experiment, that enabled them to work with what these surroundings provided them.

- **Their religion was based heavily on gods and spirits that controlled their natural environment.** Because the earliest civilizations relied so much on food production, the ability of humans to control natural phenomena was crucial to life. One way this was achieved was through an intimate understanding of the natural environment. But because total understanding and predictability were impossible, people came to believe that capricious gods and spirits controlled natural forces. Frequently, people believed that these spirits could assume human and animal forms. Agrarian deities usually were associated with the earth and plant fertility, and pastoralist gods with the sky and natural formations.

- **Their religion emphasized ritual and sacrifice as ways to control the deities and trying to interpret their will.** Because the gods and spirits could control nature, people thought they could control nature by controlling the spirits. Communal religion centered on complex rituals and sacrifices to the gods to win their cooperation in controlling rainfall, river floods, soil and animal fertility, births, and even death.

- **They relied on religious specialists to communicate with the gods.** The rituals and sacrifices on which so many people relied were complicated and had to be carried out with great precision to be effective. Only trained specialists—priests, priestesses, and medicine men and women—could perform them flawlessly. Among pastoralists, shamans and spirit mediums predominated.

- **They believed time to be cyclic.** Farmers and animal pastoralists lived their lives according to the rhythms of nature. Consequently, they perceived the workings of time and the universe as occurring in endlessly repeating rounds of birth and death, death and renewal.

- **Their social values emphasized kinship and the clan.** Another strategy used as a hedge against natural disaster was to create wide social contacts among kin, fellow clanspeople, clients, and allies. These extensive groupings constituted networks of mutual rights and responsibilities as a form of “social insurance” that helped guarantee the survival of individual members. A corollary to this was a veneration of elders and the spirits of dead ancestors.

Several of the earliest civilizations in the world developed in the plains bordering on major rivers or in the valleys the rivers created. They depended on intensive, productive agriculture, and the development of agriculture depended in turn on the excellent soil and regular supply of water provided by the river. In ancient Mesopotamia, the dual drainage of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers made possible the first urban civilization. In Egypt, the Nile—

the world's longest river, at more than 4000 miles—was the life-giving source of everything the people needed and cherished. At a slightly later date, the Niger River nurtured the early development of agriculture and city life in West Africa.

The earliest available evidence of the beginnings of Indian civilization is found in the extensive fields on both sides of the Indus River, which flows more than 2000 miles from the slopes of the Himalayas to the ocean. In northern China, the valleys of the Yellow River (which is about 2700 miles long) and the Yangtze River were the cradles of the oldest continuous civilization in world history. Map 1.3 shows four of the aforementioned civilizations. Recent studies in the western valleys of the Andes in Peru also show that an advanced civilization, previously unsuspected, flourished in the third millennium B.C.E.

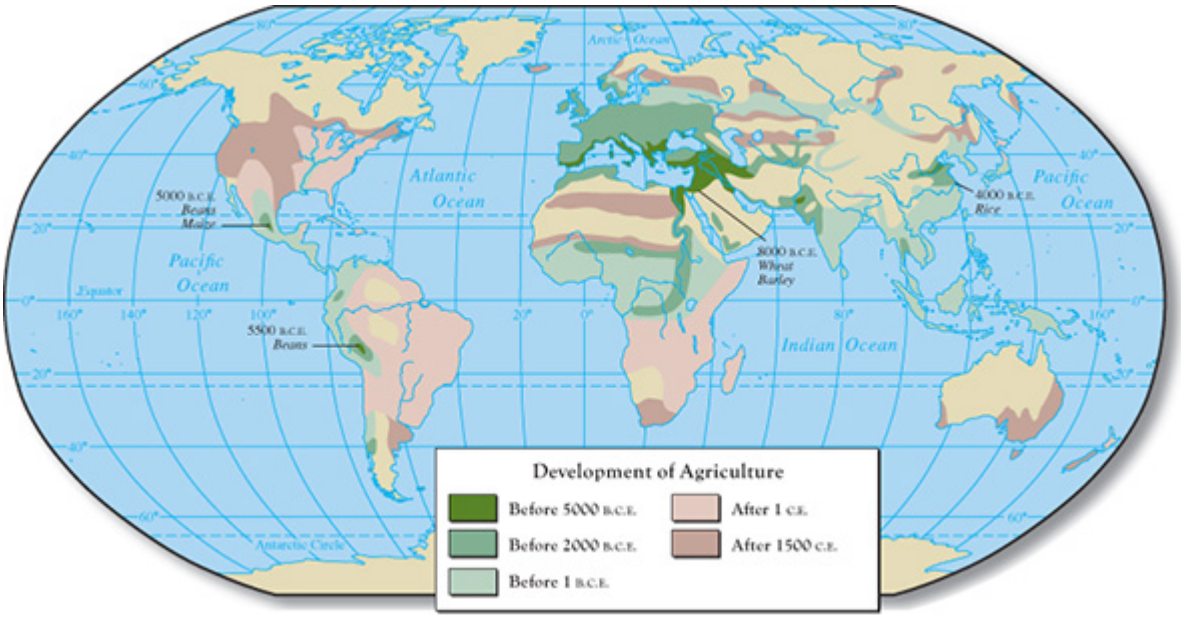
Map 1.3

Early Agriculture and Pastoralism

Several of the earliest civilizations were centered around rivers, which provided good soil and water for agriculture. Ancient Mesopotamia grew up around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Egyptian civilization flourished along the Nile. Indian civilization began in fields along the Indus. The Yellow River supported early Chinese agrarian civilization. In the steppe lands and semidesert regions that were too dry to support agriculture, nomadic pastoralism flourished. The regions where this occurred most extensively were Arabia, North Africa, and Central Asia.

Thinking About This Map

What do you suppose the new science of paleobotany might involve as its study, and how does it assist in dating early agriculture?



What else did the rivers provide besides good crops and essential water? They also offered a sure and generally easy form of transport and communication, allowing intervillage trade

and encouraging central—usually city-based—authorities to extend their powers over a much greater area than would have been possible if they had had only overland contacts. The interchange of goods and services between individuals or groups is a constant motivating force in human history, a strategy to avoid the catastrophic effects of crop failure through the creation of supplementary forms of wealth. (We shall look at this theme in differing contexts in later chapters.) Moreover, trade as well as migrations provided the usual means by which early societies established and maintained connections with each other. Trade and other forms of human contact, such as migration and conquest, are common themes throughout this text.

The rivers had very different natures. The Tigris and the Yellow were destructive in their unpredictable flooding, whereas the Nile, the Niger, and the Indus were peaceful and predictable. The Yellow River was so ruinous at times that its ancient name was the “sorrow of China.” But without its water, early farming in northern China would have been impossible.

Climate, too, created differences among the earliest civilizations. Egypt and most of the Indus Valley, for example, have temperate climates that change little over the course of the year and are suitable for crops all year long. It is not unusual for an Egyptian family farm to grow three crops annually. Northern China and Mesopotamia, on the other hand, experience much more severe changes in weather—not only from season to season, but also from day to day.

In deserts and steppe lands where soils or drier conditions made farming harder, people were forced to rely more (or exclusively) on stockbreeding for food and clothing. Conditions usually made settled life impossible, so groups continually had to be on the move in search of water and pasturelands for their livestock. Their homes in the deserts and grasslands usually bordered on terrain where farming was the principal mode of production and where farmers and their food stores were valuable as trading partners or, alternatively, as targets of raids.

As a rule, the pastoralists’ way of life made them hardier people, and their methods of mounted warfare made them formidable opponents whose movements and raiding could be held in check only by powerful, highly centralized states. As we shall see in the following chapters, the tension and frequent warfare between pastoralist tribesmen—such as Semitic-speaking nomads, Indo-European Iranians, and Turco-Mongolian peoples—and neighboring agrarian civilizations form one of the important constants in world history.

Finally, communities located near the world’s oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers adopted technologies to exploit marine resources to supplement farm-grown foods and to provide alternatives to slower, land-based ways of travel. Mariners lived off their waterways literally by living *in* them. The earliest methods of marine exploitation made use of handcrafted canoes, rafts, lines, hooks, and nets, but rarely left sight of land. Soon, however, greater daring and larger craft enabled seafarers to venture into the open sea. Sails, outriggers, and steering paddles made it possible to undertake longer and riskier voyages. Navigation was

done with the aid of simple “maps” that were based on intimate knowledge of heavenly bodies, waves, currents, and the behavior of birds.