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ARTICLE: CIVILIZATION: ITS ORIGINS AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT ([HTTPS://WWW.TIMEMAPS.COM/ENCYCLOPEDIA/ORIGINS-OF-CIVILIZATION/](https://www.timemaps.com/encyclopedia/origins-of-civilization/))

# Civilization: its origins and early development

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## States and cities

The coming of farming (/farming) had allowed the growth of settled populations to take place, but it did not make the coming of civilization inevitable. With the rise of civilization, small-scale, village-based societies became large-scale ones with cities, advanced technologies, and the capability to mobilize the labour of thousands of workers to achieve specified ends. How did this happen?

The key to the emergence of civilization is the rise of two social institutions, the State and the City. Both are dependent upon one another: cities cannot exist without states, and states without cities (in the broadest definition of that term “cities”, that is including settlements the size of what today would be considered very small towns).

States and cities must therefore have emerged in tandem.

## The Neolithic context

For millennia farmers had grown enough food for their own needs, but little else.

In terms of material wealth, there was little differentiation between families or individuals within village society. All members of the community worked in the fields (which were probably communally-owned by clan or village) and tended the herds. The village crafts – weaving, spinning and pottery – were carried out by groups of farmers and their families in the time they could spare from food production and preparation. When fighting was needed, all village males were involved. And all participated in the village ceremonial and religious life.

The early farmers lived in small, self-contained communities of perhaps three hundred people, usually less. Each village was an independent community. Local cult centres commanded the reverence of people from all the villages in an area, and their priests will have been called upon to hear disputes or make decisions affecting more than one village. They had no power to control or coerce the people to submit to their decisions, however, apart from religious sanction (though these would have been very powerful).

These were far from being centres of “states”. There was no political authority exerting consistent control over an area on a day-to-day basis, no army, no bureaucracy, no taxes. The villagers were not subjects of a king, nor were they citizens of a republic. Their communal loyalties lay with their own villages; inhabitants of other villages were aliens, and assumed to be hostile. The moral authority of the cult centres could only go so far, and inter-village tensions often became more intense than could be resolved peaceably. Clashes between villages were frequent and violent.

How then did states covering comparatively large territories emerge?

## In the river valleys

A small number of major river valleys in different parts of the Eastern Hemisphere played a critical role as cradles of civilization: it was here that all the “original” or “foundational” civilizations – those which did not owe their development to other, older civilizations – emerged. The great civilizations of Mesopotamia (<http://timemaps.silk.digital/civilizations/ancient-mesopotamia>), Egypt ([/civilizations/Ancient-Egypt](http://timemaps.silk.digital/civilizations/Ancient-Egypt)), the Indus Valley (<http://timemaps.silk.digital/civilizations/Indus-Valley-civilization>) and China ([/civilizations/Ancient-China](http://timemaps.silk.digital/civilizations/Ancient-China)) all belonged to this category (whilst those of Greece, Rome, Japan and Korea are examples of secondary civilizations, as they owed their existence to earlier ones).

River valleys offer areas of well-watered, fertile soil which, because of their very high agricultural productivity, can give rise to large human populations concentrated in a comparatively small area. But why did this situation lead to a completely new kind of society, qualitatively quite different from what had gone before? Why didn't the rise of large populations in river valleys simply result in a multiplication of small-scale farming villages, closely scattered across the plains?

The answer to this question is to some extent reliant on intelligent guesswork, as no records have survived from these millennia – writing comes at a late stage in the emergence of civilization. However, modern scholars have developed explanations for how civilization emerged which are consistent with the wealth of archeological evidence available to them.



Wheat in the Hula Valley, Israel.

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## Spring floods in dry climates

In the fertile river valleys, large rivers provide plentiful water (vital for growing crops) plus huge amounts of fresh, fertile mud brought down from the mountains where the rivers start. In the spring, the rain and snow melt from the mountains causes the rivers to flood large areas of land, where the water and mud creates some of the most productive farmland in the world.

The flood waters only cover the plains for a few weeks, however, before flowing on to the sea. In places such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and the north-west Indian subcontinent, the rest of the year is hot and dry, meaning that crops soon wilt and die. Early farmers therefore found these areas difficult to settle. It was only when they started digging pools and constructing dams to keep some of the floodwater from flowing away, and irrigation channels to carry the stored water to their fields, that agriculture could begin to flourish here.

Once irrigation agriculture had become established in these river valleys, crop yields were abundant. This led to population growth on a scale never before seen. The valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris in Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt and the Indus in the north-west Indian subcontinent became home to large, dense concentrations of people.

At this point, several new factors kicked in.

## Conflict and co-operation

The first factor was that the increasing density of the population multiplied opportunities for conflict between villages. This factor will have been intensified as several communities drew water from the same rivers, leading to disagreements over access to valuable water resources.

The second factor was that, while conflict increased, so did the need for different communities to cooperate with each other. The spring floods brought not only life-giving water and mud, they also brought life-threatening deluges which from time to time swept whole villages away. Dams and dykes had to be constructed to control the flow of the rivers and keep the floodwaters within their proper bounds: the more people able to work on these dams, the better.

A third factor was that the much more productive agriculture that these water-control measures brought about enabled farmers to grow more food than they themselves could consume. These surpluses allowed a growing section of the population to concentrate their efforts on non-agricultural pursuits such as government, administration, warfare, art and craft work.

## Kings, officials and overseers

These factors led to the rise of supra-village centres of power. In Mesopotamia, and probably in other places as well, these originated as cult centres which had commanded the religious allegiance of people for many centuries. These found themselves increasingly called upon to ensure fair access to water resources, settle disputes between villages and co-ordinate water control measures.

From here it would have been a small step for the cult centres to pro-actively manage the water resources over a wide area by directing the construction and maintenance of new dams, ponds and irrigation channels. In this process they gained control of the labour of the villagers, and increasingly also the food surpluses produced by the villagers.

These trends promoted the growth of a hierarchy of officials and overseers who came to have great power over the rest of the population. At their head stood a divinely-sanctioned monarch. What had originally been a small cult-centre had grown into a temple-palace complex, surrounded by a large, walled settlement which can be recognised as a city; and a loose conglomeration of villages had become a “city state”.

This origin of royal power in the need to manage water resources over a wide area is reflected in the titles of the early chiefs and kings of ancient Egypt, who were known as “water chiefs”. In Mesopotamia archaeologists can trace the evolution of cult centres over thousands of years (c. 5000 BC to c. 2500 BC) from single-roomed buildings to multi-building temple and palace complexes. Around these, villages of a hundred or so families grew into settlements of thousands of families; and simple societies composed only of farmers had grown into complex, class-based societies of craft workers, soldiers, officials, priests and rulers.



Map of Ancient Mesopotamia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamia> (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamia>)

## The role of war

Another factor was at play in the rise of urban societies: warfare. This served to turbo-charge all the processes described above.

In the great river valleys of Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile, the Indus and later the Yellow river, several centres of power emerged simultaneously. Inevitably, tensions arose between these centres, which resulted in warfare on a scale which overwhelmed the ability of individual villages to protect

themselves. In Mesopotamia at least, many villages physically disappeared as their populations relocated to the safety of the new walled cities.

Professional armies soon made their appearance. The increasing scale of warfare can be seen in the construction of city walls in all the major river valley civilisations; in the rich hordes of weapons and armour found in tombs; and in early sculptural reliefs showing organized military formations marching to battle. These forces needed feeding and equipping, and the farming populations, knowing that their security depended upon them, would have had little choice but to pay the taxes to do so. Furthermore, the appearance of specialist soldiers in the pay of the city elites greatly increased the latter's coercive power over the rest of the population (as well as introducing a new and destabilising element within the elites' power-structures).

## Controlled societies

Early records from Mesopotamia – and, judging by the great public works that the elites of early Egypt and the Indus Valley were able to throw up, the same was true here as well – show that the rulers and their officials exercised an extraordinary level of supervision over the economic life of these states.

The farmers' labour was used to construct irrigation canals, dykes, store houses and city walls, as well as larger and larger temples, royal mausoleums and palaces. The surplus food they grew was extracted from them and distributed as deemed necessary by the ruler and his officials.

The task of receiving, storing and distributing the surplus, was complex and onerous, and soon required officials to develop means of recording the flow of produce. A new administrative tool came into use: writing.

## Early writing

Archaeology can trace the evolution of a script in Mesopotamia from about 4000 BCE until 3000 BCE, by which time it had become a full writing system. This was the cuneiform script which was written by impressing wedge-shaped writing implements into wet clay tablets, which were then dried.

In Egypt, hieroglyphic writing gives the impression of arriving fully formed some time before 3000 BCE. This form of writing would be used on public stone monuments. The Egyptians developed other forms of writing for more common usage: the cursive script, derived from hieroglyphic system, which was used in formal government and religious documents, and much later, the demotic script, which was used for informal and everyday use.

In the Indus Valley civilization very little remains of what might be writing has been found, and it has not been deciphered.

In the case of Mesopotamia and Egypt, masses of written texts have survived, and show that in both cases their writing systems, developed originally for purely administrative purposes, soon became the vehicles for such great literature. Works such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2000 BCE, Mesopotamia) and the *Book of the Dead* (c. 1550 BCE, Egypt) would not have been conceived of by the early officials who were struggling to administer taxes and record transactions.

## Chinese particulars

In north-central China is a river valley as great as any of the others mentioned above, that of the Huang He, or [Yellow River \(/history-ancient-east-asia#yellow\)](#). Unlike the others, however, its climate is not bone dry but provides enough rain for growing crops; irrigation was not therefore an immediate cause of the rise of Chinese civilization. However, the loess soil found in northern China is one of the most fertile of anywhere in the world, allowing a large, concentrated population to grow up here. Also, flooding is a major problem, well reflected in the Chinese origin myths, and would have acted as a powerful motivator for the rise of area-wide centres of authorities.

Many of the pressures which made for the emergence of urban, literate civilization elsewhere were therefore present here, but not all. This, and fact that agriculture came somewhat later to northern China than to the Middle East, may help explain why cities, states and literacy emerged in China somewhat later than in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley.

This may also explain why early civilization in China presents a somewhat different aspect to those elsewhere. There were no great public works like the Pyramids of Egypt, the Ziggurats of Mesopotamia or the great walls and well-laid out streets of Harappa and Mohenjo daro. This suggests there was not the same degree of control over the labour force. Indeed, the records indicate a looser political structure, resembling more a feudal state than the centralized, bureaucratic states of Mesopotamia, Egypt and (judging by the uniformity of their town planning) the Indus Valley cities. Such control would only come to China later. When it did come, however, it would produce major irrigation projects and massive public works such as the Grand Canal and the Great Wall of China.

## Further study

For the world before civilization, see [The World of Hunter Gatherers \(/hunter-gatherer\)](#).

For the advancement of agriculture, see [The Coming of Farming. \(/farming\)](#).