

Characteristics of a Civilization...

Neolithic Revolution → Civilizations? How?



Neolithic megaliths (Greek for “big stones”) like Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain in England were created ca. 2800-1500 BCE. Similar structures are found in other parts of Europe as well. Their exact purpose is unknown. Were they used as astronomical observatories or religious rituals?

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CIVILIZATION

Between 4500 and 1000 BCE, civilizations developed independently in many parts of the world, ranging from Mesopotamia and Egypt in the Near East, to China in the Far East, and the Maya in Meso-America. The emergence of civilization in all cases was the result of subsequent revolutions; an Urban Revolution followed the Neolithic Revolution. The Urban Revolution was characterized by the development of large, densely populated settlements that were socially and economically diverse. In Neolithic societies, there was little to differentiate members of society. Everyone farmed and common ownership of land was important to the survival of the group at large. The development of urban societies saw much

The process and pace at which various civilizations developed differed in each case, but there are several characteristics commonly accepted as indications that a society is “civilized.” These include: the emergence of a centralized government, agricultural intensification, specialization of occupations, a stratified class structure, merchants and trade, the development of science and a form of writing, and the development of a state religion.

Let us take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

Centralized Government

One of the cornerstones of any civilization is a central body that passes laws and regulates society. In pre-civilized societies, individuals took it upon themselves to correct a wrong that they or a member of their family or clan had suffered. Warfare was on a small scale, consisting of informal raids carried out by small groups. Over several thousand years, power became concentrated in a small, powerful group of people that was recognized as having the right to insist that others obey the laws and regulations it created. Initially, political authority rested with a citizen assembly guided by a group of elders. In these early governments, decisions were made on a consensual basis, since the idea of a majority vote was unknown. In times of crisis, societies tended to place themselves under the authority of a dictator, or single ruler. Over time, different types of leadership emerged, including monarchies (rule by divine

right), kingship (rule appointed or inherited), and democracies (leaders chosen by vote). In a civilization, the government takes on the role of adjudicator of disputes and rectifier of wrongs. Warfare becomes an organized response of the state to external threat. Internal conflicts between citizens are settled by the government.

Agricultural Intensification

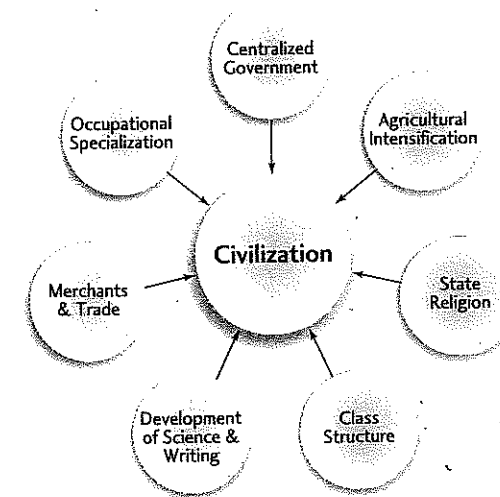
One of the most important areas of concern that early governments supervised was the planning and coordination of irrigation projects, building of dikes to reclaim land, and development of a calendar system to plan the planting and harvesting of crops. Through these efforts, there was a dramatic increase in agricultural productivity, a more secure year-round food supply, and the creation of leisure time.

Specialization in Occupations

With a dramatic increase in food production, societies were able to use their surplus food and time to support those engaged in other pursuits. As civilizations developed, so too did the need for specialization. The increasingly complex society would need specialists: tax collectors to gather the resources the government needed to function; record keepers to maintain inventories of food and other goods; judges to ensure that people obeyed the law. New, specialized trades could now develop: weavers, carpenters, coppersmiths, goldsmiths, tanners, bakers, brewers, and teachers. Increased food production also allowed time for people to create and enjoy works of art and architecture, to compose poetry and legends, and to explore music.

Class Structure

As centralized governments developed and specialized trades emerged, equality among the people of Neolithic and Paleolithic societies was lost. No longer did individuals have equal access to land. Over time, the concept of private ownership of land developed. This was accompanied by a desire to accumulate more land, hire others to work the land, and, eventually, the enslavement of some to carry out much of the manual labour. Once the concept of private land ownership became ingrained, an unequal distribution of wealth followed, leading to the formation of classes. In early civilizations, a very sharp division between nobles and commoners developed, usually with no real middle class. As distinct classes emerged, the wealthy nobility began to monopolize governments.



Characteristics of Civilization

Merchants and Trade

Trade itself was not new to early civilizations. What was new was the nature of trade. Prior to the development of early civilizations, trade was generally between bands and consisted of raw materials such as obsidian, amber, and shells. As new specialized trades developed, trade shifted to manufactured goods, including luxury items prized by the wealthy elite as important status symbols — rare dyes, ivory carvings, and precious stones. There was a change not only in what was traded, but also how trade took place. Along with the specialized trades, was the development of a merchant class that produced nothing, but earned wealth by helping to facilitate the exchange of goods. With the rise of a merchant class, shops and markets arose; bartering became more complex, which led to the development of currency. Long-distance trade developed, and with it, the movement of more people from place to place, civilization to civilization.

Development of Science and Writing

For practical reasons, and at times out of pure curiosity, people in early civilizations began to invest time in exploring the natural world. Important advancements were made in metallurgy and the invention of the wheel, baked bricks, mortar, simple machines, and specialized tools.

Most of the earliest examples of writing we have are concerned with the accounting for and ownership of goods. With surpluses of food and other commodities came the need to keep track of such things as: how much grain was available in the government storehouses; who owned the cattle on a given area of land and how many head did they

have; how many cattle would be traded for how many chickens or sheep? The need to measure the amounts of food and other goods being stored and traded led to the development of systems of weights and measures. Writing was now important for the recording of laws and religious texts.

State Religion

What was the relationship between the emergence of civilizations and the development of religions? Today, we may argue that religion is not essential for a society to be civilized. When the first civilizations were developing, however, there was a very strong link between religion and the authority of the central government. In most cases, religion legitimized the authority of the government. The government, in turn, protected and promoted the religion. Without the gods to sanctify a social order that gave some members of society authority over others, it would have been very difficult to convince people to surrender their place in a more equal society. This is not to suggest that the religions of early civilizations were concocted purely to support the power of the elite. The religions of these civilizations were legitimate expressions of their beliefs and spiritual needs.

Several elements that some may consider essential for a civilization could more appropriately be labelled by-products of civilization. They are the marks of a highly organized and specialized society. A complex and highly organized religion, for example, is not essential to a civilization, nor is a rigid class structure. Similarly, refined art and music, advanced architecture, and even systems of education are not essential for a society to be considered civilized. They are, however, characteristic of some great civilizations.

Review... Recall... Reflect

1. How did the roles of men and women differ in Paleolithic societies?
2. Why is the Neolithic Revolution considered one of the most significant turning points in human history?
3. Seven essential elements of any civilization are described here. List these seven elements in order of importance from the most important to the least important and defend your ranking.