**Defining ‘Civilization’[[1]](#footnote-1)**

‘Civilization’ may have many meanings. The present exercise is an attempt to detect its first appearance and early growth; and for this end certain characteristics of civilized society distinguish it from the “cultures” of earlier eras. Among these characteristics are the following: **(1) the presence of firmly organized states** which had definite boundaries **and systematic political institutions, under political and religious leaders who directed and also maintained society; (2) the distinction of social classes; (3) the economic specialization of men as farmer, trader, or artisan, each dependent on his fellows; and (4) the conscious development of arts and intellectual attitudes.** In the last point are included the rise of monumental architecture and sculpture, the use of writing to keep accounts or to commemorate deeds, and the elaboration of religious views about the nature of the gods, their relations to men, and the origin of the world. Usually civilization is connected with cities, but there have been large agglomerations at Neolithic Jericho; and Egypt became civilized without developing true urban centers. Still, the cities of Mesopotamia were vital to the appearance of civilization there.

Once mankind had developed the practice of agriculture, it might be assumed that the step to a civilized level would be simple and automatic. Actually, however, many peoples of the world remained in the purely food-raising stage down to modern times; most areas that became civilized did so in imitation of peoples already more advanced. Only in three corners of the globe does it appear that men independently created civilization.

One of these was Northern China, which we shall examine later; a second was Central America-Peru where the Mayans and Peruvians developed civilizations in the first millennium after Christ. Whether they were affected by forces moving across the Pacific from Asia remains hotly debated, but as far as we can now see they were of native origin. In any case the American forms of civilization were seriously limited by their failure to make practical use of the wheel, but the limited use of copper, and by the absence of good draft animals; in Peru even writing was lacking. The historian must doubt if these civilizations had any promise of a brilliant future. The Mayans declined by themselves shortly before AD 1000. The Peruvian and Mexican cultures, while still alive and thriving at the time of Spanish explorations, were not able to withstand attack from Europe.

The ultimate source of civilized strengths which carried western Europe overseas in the modern period lay far back in the other great civilization center where man had independently created the patterns of civilization. This was the Near East. More specifically, the original habitat of civilization in this district was those valleys of Mesopotamia and Egypt in which rivers cut across almost desert wastes and gave never-ceasing sources of water. Thence the impetus to develop civilized structures radiated out to India and the Mediterranean basin.

Questions to consider from this excerpt and the text…

How is ‘culture’ related to ‘civilization’?

Where do “civilizations” first emerge?

What does the author conclude about “civilizations” that emerged in Central America-Peru?

When we use the term “primitive” to describe a culture, in contrast with a complex “civilization,”

are we making a value judgment? Do you believe this distinction is acceptable?

1. Adapted from Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)