

World History
Ms. Lukas
What Makes A Civilization?

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The “*Age of Civilization*” was significantly different than the Neolithic era and the Paleolithic period. Historians typically say that the five earliest civilizations in the world were the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Indians, and the Minoans on the island of Crete. What is a “*civilization*” and how is it different than life in the earlier time periods?

The first key trait for a civilization is cities. Large, permanent settlements, all a function of a huge food and time surpluses, is a major characteristic of civilization. “*city*” is more than a large group of people living close together. Population size alone does not make a village into a city. There were permanent villages during the Neolithic Period but there weren’t cities. One of the most important differences between a city and a village is cities tended to be constructed of stone and mud bricks. Cities were characterized by monumental structures such as canals, reservoirs, palaces, temples and markets. Unlike Neolithic villages, cities were a center of trade for a larger area. Like modern descendants, ancient city dwellers depended on trade. Farmers, merchants, and traders brought goods to market in the cities. The city dwellers themselves produced a variety of goods for exchange, including pots, tools, and jewelry. Each person specialized, or did one kind of work, and exchanged goods with other people who were also specialists. The importance of trade thus led to another key trait of civilization, the division and specialization of labor. The development of cities in Egypt, and all ancient places, was gradual. Egyptians lived in farming villages along the Nile as far back as 6000 B.C. In the Neolithic era during the time of “*villages*,” the people cleared and cultivated the land near the Nile with stone tools. They domesticated cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys. They worshiped the wild creatures that swam in the Nile such as the hippopotamus and the crocodile. They tried to preserve bodies of the dead by heaping up mounds of sand around them in the desert. Eventually, the villages united into agricultural districts called “*nomes*” (pronounced “*nōōme*”). Each nome had its own rituals, gods, and chieftain. Often people of rival nomes raided one another’s territory and the Neolithic era was a violent era as humans learned to live near to each other and population density increased. By 3200, the nomes of Egypt were united into two kingdoms, the Upper Kingdom and the Lower Kingdom. In 3100 BC, a strong-willed king of Upper Egypt named Menes (pronounced “*men-āze*”) united all of Egypt. As a symbol of his united kingdom, Menes created a double crown from the red crown of Lower Egypt and the white crown of Upper Egypt. He also built a new city exactly at the spot where Upper and Lower Egypt met, about 100 miles from the Mediterranean Sea – the new capital was called Memphis. Historians estimate that Memphis had a population in excess of 60,000 people.

The second key trait of civilization is the division of labor. People in the Paleolithic Era were hunter/gatherers while during the Neolithic were farmers or herdsmen.

In Egypt, farmers produced a “*food surplus*,” or more food than was needed, so raising food was no longer the full time job for everyone in society. The ability to raise a food surplus produced a time surplus. This was the key that freed up some people to pursue a wide variety of jobs in Egypt.

The third essential trait of civilization is writing. Writing was an invention of necessity; that is people invented writing to fill a need in their lives. Priests needed some way to keep track of the grain and other merchandise that moved in and out of the temple storehouses. Merchants needed accounts of debts and payments. The first written symbols, therefore, stood for commonly traded objects – a donkey, an ox, a sack of grain. These signs were called pictographs because they pictured the things they stood for. Eventually, ideas became associated with certain pictures and writing progressed and became very complicated with letters representing sounds. The writing system of the Egyptians is called “*hieroglyphs*,” meaning “*the words of the gods*.”

The fourth characteristic of a civilization is complex institutions, such as government, organized religion, and social classes. For Paleolithic hunters/ gatherers, the whole government was simply the tribal leader of the clan. By the Age of Civilization in Egypt in 3100 B.C. there was one Pharaoh ruling a huge land area with the help of a large government system of officials, tax-collectors, and laws – thus it was indeed a “complex” institution. Organized religion is another example of a complex institution in Egypt with its established beliefs for the afterlife and its monumental constructions of temples and pyramids. The religion of the hunters and gathers had been very local and simple and even the Neolithic worship of the “*Earth Mother*” was not a complex institution like the many gods, rituals, holidays, and priests of the Egyptian religious system.