AGRARIAN CIVILIZATIONS
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INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
During the same narrow sliver of cosmic time, cities, states, and civilizations formed on their own in several places around the world.
Definitions

The first agrarian civilizations developed in about 3200 BCE. These early farming societies started in three areas: Mesopotamia; in Egypt and Nubia (now northern Sudan); and in the Indus Valley. More appeared in China a bit later and in Central America and along the Andes Mountains of South America at about 2000 — 1000 BCE. Why in these places?

First, we must be clear about the definitions of the words city, state, and civilization. A “city” contains tens of thousands of people. It’s larger than a town which contains only thousands of people. A village is made up of just hundreds. In cities, people had specific jobs. They weren’t all farmers. The food they ate was grown by farmers nearby.

A “state” is a city, or several cities, and the surrounding villages and farms. A state could include hundreds of thousands of people, even millions. Those people fell into different levels depending on their social rank or how much wealth and power they had. A few people called “elites” were on top. Elites typically made up no more than 10 percent of the population, yet had more wealth and power than the bottom 90 percent. States were ruled by these elites. They kept order and collected taxes or tribute through the use of force, if necessary.

Out of states arose empires. An empire was led by a single ruler who controlled large territories of cities and farmland. These large states are often called “civilizations.”

All civilizations share certain characteristics. They have dense populations and are controlled by elites. This does not mean they are better than other kinds of societies. However, they are more complex. Since these early civilizations always depended on the farming around them, we call them “agrarian civilizations.”

Places of early civilizations

Four of the earliest agrarian civilizations occurred in fertile river valleys. Plants and animals in those areas had been tamed earlier and helped civilizations get their start.

The first of these formed in Mesopotamia, now called Iraq. What made this area so fertile was the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Access to water helped people grow more in these valleys. Wheat and barley were the major crops. Mesopotamians also grew lentils and chickpeas and herded sheep and goats.

The next three places where agrarian civilizations emerged were in the Nile River Valley in Egypt and Nubia, the Indus River Valley in India, and the Huang He (Yellow) River Valley in China. Each river valley had its own type of plants and animals, which had been taken from the wild nearby. The Egyptians and Nubians had wheat, barley, cattle, fish, and birds. The Indus Valley people raised cattle and cotton, as well as wheat, barley, lentils, sheep, goats, and chickens. In China, wheat was grown in the north. Rice was cultivated later in the south. Pigs, chickens, and soybeans also formed the main crops in China.
Large states appeared a couple of thousand years later in the Americas. The food options there were quite different. People in Central America learned to grow maize (corn), peppers, tomatoes, squash, beans, peanuts, and cotton. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys. Along the Andes Mountains in South America, people used llamas and alpacas for wool and transport; for food they depended mostly on potatoes and quinoa, a grain rich in protein. They had guinea pigs, and fish brought up from the coast.

Why and how did states emerge?

After people learned to grow plants and tame animals, they gradually learned to utilize animals for a variety of things. Instead of eating animals right away, they used them for their milk, wool, manure, and muscle power. The world’s population was able to grow dramatically as humans were able to farm more. In 8000 BCE, it stood at perhaps 6 million. By 3000 BCE, it was maybe 50 million.

At the same time, the climate was changing dramatically. The Earth had reached a stable level of warmth by about 8000 BCE. It had been gradually warming since the height of the last ice age, which was about 20,000 BCE. After 8000 BCE, the climate in the northern hemisphere generally became drier, possibly due to slight changes in the Earth’s orbit. This dryness drove people from mountain areas down into river valleys to find water. During floods, rich soil was deposited into the valleys. It made the land fertile and good for farming.

As more food became available and people lived closer together, the social structure changed. A handful of people became much wealthier and more powerful than the rest. Why did the majority of people allow this to happen?

Areas without early civilizations

Some areas of the world did not produce full-blown cities and states early on. Even so, the trend toward agriculture seems to have been present everywhere.

In sub-Saharan Africa, people were separated from the northern coast by the harsh desert. Rain forests covered much of the land. The Bantu people, in the eastern part of modern Nigeria, cultivated yams, oil palm trees, millet, and sorghum and herded cattle. Eventually camels replaced horses and donkeys for travel across the Sahara. Muslim merchants could now make their way across the desert to the west coast. Small regional states and kingdoms emerged. But a major agrarian civilization never sprung up.

Small islands in the Pacific did not have the resources to create full-scale agrarian civilizations. But their smaller states and chiefdoms had features similar to those around the world. In Australia, agriculture never really materialized. The soil was poor, and the island was isolated.

Archaeologists have long thought that the basin of the Amazon River didn’t contain the resources to support dense human societies. But recent evidence suggests that people there found ways to fertilize the soil by adding charcoal.
Comparing early agrarian civilizations

In the earliest agrarian civilizations there were at least two things: a high-ranking group in control, and the forceful collection of taxes. It seems centralized state control was needed to bring together and support large populations of people. Yet, these civilizations developed many similar traits beyond those.

Civilizations commonly included the following:

| 01 | Storage of surplus food |
| 02 | Development of a priestly class; a state religion based on gods/goddesses |
| 03 | Central rule (such as a king, pharaoh, or emperor) |
| 04 | Specialized jobs |
| 05 | Social rank based on wealth, ancestry, and job |
| 06 | Increased trade |
| 07 | Systems of writing or recording information; increased collective learning |
| 08 | Armies and increased warfare |
| 09 | Monumental public architecture (temples, pyramids) |
| 10 | More inequality between men and women; male-dominated traditions |

Despite all these similarities, early civilizations differed in important ways. Perhaps most importantly, the civilizations in northern Africa and Eurasia were connected with each other soon after they began. Together they formed an Afro-Eurasian zone where people traded goods and exchanged ideas and technology. Roads running east-west connected them and sea routes ran from port to port.

In contrast, early civilizations in the Americas were hardly connected at all. They had fewer kinds of transport animals. The terrain separating the north from south was difficult to get through.

Early civilizations shared many traits that made them successful. But with a closer look we can see fascinating details that made them different. All the early civilizations developed writing — except the Inca in the Andes. They instead used a system of tying knots in different colored string, called *quipu*, to record their trade and possibly even their stories.

All early civilizations engaged in warfare — except, perhaps, in the Indus Valley. Some arrowheads and spears have been found there, but no swords, helmets, or shields. Every civilization with writing started by using pictographs but switched to some form of alphabet — except the Chinese. To this day they still use pictographs in their writing.

Every civilization sacrificed humans to the gods, but the Aztecs used it on a much larger scale than others. They believed that the world would end if the chief god did not receive his daily offering of human blood to keep the Sun shining. While early civilizations shared many common features, the differences form a collage of human culture.
## Civilizations comparison chart

Here are some ideas for comparing the different cultures you’ll read about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time span</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Main food sources</th>
<th>Domesticated animals</th>
<th>Currency</th>
<th>Legacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ausralian Aboriginal</td>
<td>East Asia: China</td>
<td>East Asia: Japan</td>
<td>East Asia: Korea</td>
<td>Greco-Roman</td>
<td>Jericho</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Image credits

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National Museum of Australia

“The Fall of Jericho” from Gates of Paradise, by Lorenzo Ghiberti
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