What Is Civilization?

The first few units of this course are concerned with the emergence of human civilization. When we talk of “civilization,” sometimes the exact meaning of the word can be ambiguous. Thus, it is worth exploring what exactly we mean by civilization.

Civilization is easier to describe than it is to define. Scholars have often described civilization as a set of attributes certain societies have: agriculture, sailing, metalworking, mathematics, monumental construction, writing, cities, government, currency, taxation, and complex religion have all been cited by scholars attempting to define what signifies civilization. For the most part, “civilization” is used to describe societies that are urbanized and hierarchical. The word civilization comes from the Latin word civilis, meaning “citizen,” and implies membership in a state with a government or some other sort of ruling authority. In the next few units, when we discuss civilization, we will be discussing settled human societies based on agriculture with some degree of urbanization and hierarchy, and a number of the other attributes listed above.

Civilization is a useful historical concept, but we must be cognizant that it has often been used to exclude people. Urbanized people have tended to see those living outside of cities as barbarians. Although the word barbarian originated in Greek to refer to non-Greek speakers (and was originally used to refer mostly to the Persians, who for a long time were arguably more advanced than the Greeks), over time it came to mean anyone who was deemed less civilized. By the nineteenth century, Europeans began to classify civilization according to race. They believed that white Europeans were inherently more civilized than other races, and that other races needed to be taught how to become civilized. With all this in mind, we must deal with the concept of civilization carefully in order to avoid falling into the intellectual mistakes of the past.

Since in the following units we will define civilization generally as “settled, hierarchical urban life supported by agriculture,” we will be exploring the evolution of human societies from nomadic to sedentary. Societies that exhibit our definition of civilization were not possible before the domestication of plants and animals in the Neolithic Period. At the same time, it is important to note that not all societies became sedentary and agriculture-based after the domestication of plants and animals. Some remained hunter-gatherers, but many others adopted pastoralism, perhaps the most tenacious competitor to sedentary-agriculture society. Pastoralism involves a nomadic lifestyle, supported by large herds of animals. A pastoral community moves with its herds in search of pasture and water, and derives its food, clothing, and other necessities from those herds. This way of life proves particularly successful in marginal, semiarid lands that do not easily support agriculture, like savannahs and wide grasslands, places such as the vast Eurasian steppes that extend from the Danube in Europe all the way to Siberia.

Pastoralists have often been called “barbarians” or “uncivilized” by sedentary peoples. However, while pastoralists tend to have less use for certain key features of “civilization,” such as writing and complex government, they have never been strangers to the production of material goods, art, and technology. Proof of this is that sedentary societies have long found it useful to trade with pastoral peoples. In addition,
throughout history, the nomadic, herding lifestyle of pastoralists made them fiercely independent, and they were always on the cutting edge of technological developments for horses and other herd animals. This put pastoralists in the perfect position to become mounted warriors, and many pastoralist peoples have brought low sedentary kingdoms and empires. The people known as the Huns terrorized “civilized” people from China to Rome, while the Mongols wiped out whole civilizations and built the largest contiguous empire in human history. Only recently, with more advanced agricultural techniques that have brought farming to the steppe lands, along with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, has the “march of civilization” overtaken most pastoralist societies.

We must also remember that although civilization is often defined by urbanized society and forms of knowledge such as writing, mathematics, and astronomy, for most of history most people in “civilized societies” were excluded from all these things. Civilization is marked by social stratification and hierarchy, and throughout history, especially in pre-modern times, most of the population have been uneducated farmers whose agricultural labor fed the tiny portion of the population that produced the art, writing, science, and governments of those civilizations.

All these concerns aside, when we explore the birth of civilization, in general we explore the emergence of human society from the small nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic Period (Old Stone Age) to the advanced cultures that soon spread across the globe. And perhaps most importantly in a course on history, by studying the emergence of civilization we study the phase when humans began to write down memories of the past and observations of the present, preserving for us a record of human existence, marking the beginning of the historical era. In many ways the study of history is the study of civilization, and thus this course will chart the rise and fall of the great civilizations of the ancient world.