CHAPTER 1 - THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter One explores the origins of civilization in the four major river valleys of the world from prehistory to the establishment and utilization of written records. From perhaps 600,000 to 10,000 B.C.E., people were hunters, fishers and gatherers, but not producers of food. The chapter develops the social relationships within prehistoric society and contrasts them with the changes dictated by the development of agriculture - the Neolithic Revolution. By about 3000 B.C.E. writing began to develop in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys in Mesopotamia, which was then followed in the Nile valley. Somewhat later, urban life developed in the Indus Valley of India and the Yellow River basin in China. This development did not negate the nomadic lifestyle of many groups, and the constant tension between nomadic and settled lifestyles was an important aspect of the historical development.

The Sumerian culture developed in southern Mesopotamia, near the Persian Gulf. The Sumerians established the social, economic and intellectual foundations of Mesopotamian culture and were followed by the Akkadians and Babylonians who united the region. There were important advancements in writing (cuneiform), law, education and religious thought. For example, Hammurabi's code (ca. 1750 B.C.E.) is the fullest and best preserved ancient legal code and reveals a society strictly divided by class, yet bound together by harsh precepts that demanded discipline and order. The civilization, however, was generally pessimistic in outlook, an observation based mainly on the evidence of religious sources that depict a gloomy picture of the afterworld as a "land of no return".

Egyptian civilization developed in a different manner and remained, for the most part, optimistic in its long history. Geographically, the Nile River unified the region and the desert afforded the protection from nomadic invaders necessary for the evolution of centralized political authority. Pharaonic authority was reflected in the pyramids of the Old Kingdom and the imperialism of New Kingdom dynasts, Thutmosis III and Ramses II.

After an account of the monotheistic religion of Akhenaton, the chapter continues with an account of the contributions of the Hittites (smelting of iron) and especially the Assyrians who established an empire which by 665 B.C.E. included Palestine, Syria, and much of the area extending to the Persian Gulf. This empire kept out nomadic barbarians on the frontier to permit the civilized Middle East to at least maintain its advancements in the various areas. The Assyrian Empire fell because of internal revolutions and a defeat by the Neo-Babylonians in 612 B.C.E.
Indian civilization developed in a unique fashion as the early urban literate culture was superseded by the Aryan culture after a few hundred years. The chapter examines the development of the early Indian and Aryan cultures separately. The Indus or Harappan civilization developed in the region of modern Pakistan, and excavated sites dating from 2500-1500 B.C.E. show an unusual conformity in the culture based upon similar city layouts, building construction and flood walls. Reasons for the decline of this civilization are open to speculation, but could involve abnormal flooding and/or the appearance of warlike nomads around 1800 B.C.E.

The Aryan culture that "refounded" Indian civilization about 1500 B.C.E. did not develop an urban culture, but depended on stock breeding and agriculture. Our understanding of these people is partially based upon the Vedic ritual texts, which offer general inferences about religion, society, values and thought in early Aryan India. The chapter characterizes the civilization in each of these specific areas.

Early Chinese civilization developed about 4000 B.C.E. in the Yellow River valley. The political institution was the city-state and the largest of these areas was the capital of the Shang Dynasty (1766-1050 B.C.E.). This capital moved a great deal, therefore the great monumental architecture of Mesopotamia or Egypt did not develop in China. The Shang civilization developed a system of writing, which has been preserved primarily on oracle bones. Bronze appeared in China about 2000-1800 B.C.E., much later than in Mesopotamia or India. This later Bronze period developed into the Chou (1050-771 B.C.E.), which continued the basic structure created by the Shang Dynasty. The Western Chou dynasty was overrun by barbarians in 771 B.C.E. and fled two hundred miles to the east. The Eastern Chou dynasty was never able to recover its lost authority and smaller states within the boundaries of its realm entered into defensive alliances against the power of encroaching territorial states. From 401-256 B.C.E., interstate stability disappeared as power was contested by eight or nine great territorial contenders. The rise of these territorial states at the expense of dynastic rule was due to the expansion of population and agricultural lands, the development of commerce and the rise of a new army composed of conscripted foot soldiers and professional commanders.

The chapter concludes with a section on the Prehistoric era in the Americas. Four areas of relatively dense settlement emerged in the Americas: Puget Sound (depended on fish, rather than agriculture); Mississippi valley (based on maize agriculture), Mesoamerica and the Andean region of South America. The latter two saw the emergence of strong and long-lasting states. The achievements of these civilizations are especially remarkable in light of the technologies that they lacked. They did not use the wheel for transportation, had not invented the plow, did not make extensive use of metallurgy, did not know about gunpowder, and did not have oceangoing ships. Their remarkable skills in pottery,
weaving, sculpture and architecture are most impressive. Chapter 15 examines the Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations in detail.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **Important Definitions:** The text emphasizes the differences between culture and civilization:
   A) **Culture:** "the ways of living built up by a group and passed on from one generation to another."
   B) **Civilization:** "a human form of culture in which many people live in urban centers, have mastered the art of smelting metals and have developed a method of writing."

2. **Development of Government:** As more people began living in the same area, various forms of government developed ranging from strong centralized monarchy (Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Chou and Indo-Aryans), to the Sumerian, Harappan and Shang city-states, to a theocracy in Egypt.

3. **Geography and History:** Geographic determinism is an important factor in the unique development of all four civilizations discussed in this chapter. The agricultural advantages of the Indus and Yellow River valleys proved essential to the progress of human civilization. In the ancient Near East, geographical influence on the development of particular civilizations is even more pronounced. Egypt was protected by deserts and the sea and nourished by the Nile which flooded regularly; it was less prone to invasion and hence more secure politically. Mesopotamia was invaded regularly, having no natural barriers; the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were difficult to navigate and control and flooded regularly. The first use of writing may have been to record the arrangements for river control. The Mesopotamian civilizations are described as more pessimistic than the Egyptian which was more secure geographically.

4. **The Neolithic Revolution:** One of the most important transitions in human history occurred in only a few Paleolithic societies. The development of agriculture and the domestication of animals for food and material and the invention of pottery dramatically changed the way people lived and worked. Reasons for the shift to the age of agriculture remain unclear, but gradually population increased and societies became more organized and stable, often resulting in urban
communities and the attendant development of writing (about 3000 B.C.E. in the Near East and somewhat later in India and China). Because of the extinction of mammoths and other forms of game that had become extinct during the Ice Age, American peoples had to rely on protein from vegetable sources. One result was that their production of foodstuffs providing protein far outpaced that of European agriculture. Approximate dates for the earliest Neolithic societies follow:

A) Near East (ca. 8000 B.C.E.) Based on wheat
B) China (ca. 4000 B.C.E.) Based on millet and rice
C) India (ca. 3600 B.C.E.) Based on wheat
D) Mesopotamia (several millennia later) Based on corn
E) Mesoamerica (ca. 4000 B.C.E.) Based on maize

5. **Contributions:** Religious development and the evolution of writing are of major importance to all early civilizations. The development of monotheism by Akhenaton in Egypt had limited impact on early evolution of religious thought. However, the Vedas and reference to divine will in both India and China were of primary importance in the evolution of their respective societies. Monumental architecture (pyramids, obelisks, temples, etc.) and the organization of empires (Egyptian, Assyrians, Shang, Aryan and others) were important factors in the evolution of world history.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Prehistoric Man in Europe.* International Film Bureau. 22 min.

*The Story of Prehistoric Man.* Coronet. 11 min.


*From Ur to Nineveh.* Radim Films. 18 min.

*The Alphabet - March of Man.* McGraw-Hill. 20 min.
Digging for the History of Man. Roland Films. 55 min.

Ascent of Man I: Lower than the Angels. Time-Life. 52 min.

Ancient Egypt. Coronet. 11 min.

Ancient Egypt. Time-Life. 51 min.

The Ancient Egyptian. International Film Foundation. 27 min.

Egypt: Cradle of Civilization. Encyclopedia Britannica. 12 min.

Egypt - The Gift of the Nile. Centron. 29 min.

In Search of the Mummy’s Curse. Pyramid Films. 29 min.


Mysteries of the Great Pyramid. Wolper Productions. 50 min.

Ancient Egyptian Images. Macmillan. 13 min.

Nubian 64 (Saving the Temples of Ancient Egypt). Roland Films. 40 min.

Tut, the Boy King. NBC. 52 min.

Bring Forth My People - Moses and the Exodus 3200 Years Later. Cameras International Productions. 52 min.

Jerusalem - Center of Many Worlds. Atlantis Productions, Inc. 29 min.

Ancient East. U. of Utah Ed. Media. 16 min.

Ancient Phoenicia and Her Contributions. Atlantic Productions, Inc. 14 min.

River Nile. NBC. 34 min.

Chinese History No. 1 China in the Beginnings. Teaching Films Custodians. 19 min.

Chinese History No. 2 The Making of a Civilization. Teaching Films Custodians. 18 min.

Chinese History No. 3: China: Hundred Schools to One. Teaching Films Custodians. 19 min.

Glory that Remains No. 1: The Sudden Persian Empire. Time-Life Films. 30 min.

Glory that Remains No. 4: Imminent Deities (India). Time-Life Films. 30 min.

Glory that Remains No. 5: Sermons in Stone (India). Time-Life Films. 30 min.

Iran: Landmarks in the Desert. Centrol Ed. Films. 28 min.