

# Defining Civilization

Based on your reading for class, and the following documents, define the term *civilization* and write a rationale for the definition you give.

Background:

All social organizations created by people have a coherent set of values, institutions and practices. As one form of human organization, historians agree that civilizations have economic surpluses, greater social stratification and greater labor specialization than foraging and other nomadic groups. Some historians add the following to the characteristics of civilizations.

- Formal states, formal government structures
- Large regional cities in which the urban populations is a minority of overall population
- Technologies that supported vast record-keeping

Massive irrigation projects and monumental architecture are examples of what a formal state was able to accomplish with its economic, political and cultural leadership. The early complex societies that formed in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and East Asia are considered by many historians as the best examples of civilizations in World History before 600 B.C.E.

## Document 1

Source: *World History: Connections to Today*, by E.G. Ellis and A. Esler, 1999.

Historians distinguish eight basic features found in early civilizations. These eight features are (1) cities, (2) well-organized governments, (3) complex religions, (4) job specialization, (5) social classes, (6) arts and architecture, (7) public works, and (8) writing.

## Document 2

Source: *World History: Patterns of Interaction*, by R.B. Beck et al, 2005.

A civilization is defined as a complex culture with five characteristics: (1) advanced cities, (2) specialized workers, (3) complex institutions, (4) record keeping, and (5) advanced technology.

## Document 3

Source: *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, AP edition, by P.N. Stearns et al., 2005.

Civilizations, unlike other societies, generate surpluses beyond basic survival needs. This in turn promotes a variety of specialized occupations and heightened social differentiation, as well as regional and long-distance trading networks. Surplus production also spurs the growth of cities and the development of formal states, some with bureaucracy, in contrast to more informal methods of governing. Most civilizations have also developed systems of writing.... Rather than stressing particular attainments such as the capacity to build pyramids or wheeled vehicles, a genuinely global definition of what it means to be civilized should focus on underlying patterns of social development that are common to complex societies throughout history.

Document 4

Source: "Hemispheric Interregional History as an Approach to World History," by M.G.S. Hodgson, 1954

Events may be dealt with in their relation to the total constellation of historical forces of which they are a part.... This means that we are to consider how events reflect interdependent interregional developments. Then we are to trace these developments as they affect one another and their common geographical, cultural, and economic setting in the world as a whole. An interregional development of this sort, relatively simple in form, is the rise, spread, and disruption of the Mongol power in the thirteenth century – in connection with the political and even economic life of remote parts of the Hemisphere were made to interact quite directly.

Document 5

Source: *Main Trends in History*, by G. Barraclough, 1991, page 163.

The subject-matter of world history is not the sequence of civilizations... but rather the study of the differences between different countries, areas and civilizations, and of their interactions.... World history in its contemporary connotation is not a synthesis of known fact or juxtaposition of the histories of different continents or cultures, arranged in some sort of order of relative importance; rather it is a search for links and connexions across political and cultural frontiers. It is concerned not so much with the development in time or with the goal and meaning of history – western preoccupations which non-western cultures for the most part do not share – as with the perennial problems which have assailed mankind everywhere and with the different responses to them. This, for an increasing number of historians today, is the stuff of world history, and it has turned their attention... away from linear development, from the thread allegedly running through history from its earliest beginnings to the present day, to the comparative study of institutions, habits, ideas and assumptions of men in all times and places.

Document 5

Source: "The Changing Shapes of World History," by W.H. McNeill, 1995.

Robert Redfield... constructed a typology of human societies, setting up two ideal types: folk society at one extreme, civilized society at the other. Folk society was one in which well-established customs met all ordinary circumstances of life, and fitted smoothly together to create an almost complete and unquestioned guide to life.... Civilized society... was at the opposite pole [and was one in which] continual contacts among strangers meant that customary rules binding everyone to a consistent body of behavior could not arise. Instead conflicting moral claims provoked variable, unpredictable conduct. Social conflict and change was obvious and pervasive, feared by some [in the society] and welcomed by others.