

The History Guide

Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History

Lecture 1

What is Civilization?



The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that from our very prison we should draw, from our own selves, images powerful enough to deny our nothingness.

André Malraux, *Man's Fate* (1933)

Up to about the year 1860, man's history had been conveniently divided into three distinct epochs: ancient, medieval and modern. After 1860, however, a new expression came into general use to describe the cultures of the distant past. Pre-history was the name given to that period of man's history before written documents appeared. We can now study man's pre-history through the field of archeology. Archeological remains can illuminate how and where early cultures lived, stored food and produced tools. We can learn of their religious practices, political organization and what type of relationships may have existed between man and woman, husband and wife, parent and child. Human artifacts uncovered by archeologists also reveal the existence of kings, plagues, famine, good harvests, wars and class structure. Of course, the history we obtain from archeological digs is by no means complete, especially when compared with man's more recent history (the past 500 years or so). For example, in 1945, the U.S. First Army captured 485 tons of records of the German Foreign Office just as these records were about to be burned on orders from Berlin. 485 tons of written records! And these records pertained only to the German Foreign Office. The point is that since the 15th century (and the development of movable type) the sheer number of written records has drastically increased and so too has the work of the historian become more complicated as a result.

When we think of the ancient world, we may perhaps think of the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. The Hebrews gave us faith and morality; Greece gave us reason, philosophy and science; and Rome gave us law and government. This is, of course, a crude oversimplification, and the reason is obvious. Western civilization developed before Greece or Rome. For instance, 3000 years before the greatest era of Greek history, civilizations flourished in Mesopotamia (see [Lecture 2](#)) and in Egypt (see [Lecture 3](#)). These civilizations were urban, productive, religious and law abiding and in all meanings of the word, civilized. A solid working definition of civilization is difficult and depends upon your own judgment. Here are a few textbook definitions:

Civilization is a form of human culture in which many people live in urban centers, have mastered the art of smelting metals, and have developed a method of writing.

The first civilizations began in cities, which were larger, more populated, and more complex in their political, economic and social structure than Neolithic villages.

One definition of civilization requires that a civilized people have a sense of history -- meaning that the past counts in the present.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines civilization as "the action or process of civilizing or of being civilized; a developed or advanced state of human society." Such a definition is fraught with difficulties. For instance, how might we correctly identify a "developed or advanced state of human society"? Developed or advanced compared to what? The *OED* defines the verb "to civilize" in the following way: "to make civil; to bring out of a state of barbarism; to instruct in the arts of life; to enlighten; to refine and polish." Are we any closer to a working definition?

In 1936, the archeologist V. Gordon Childe published his book *Man Makes Himself*. Childe identified several elements which he believed were essential for a civilization to exist. He included: the plow, wheeled cart and draft animals, sailing ships, the smelting of copper and bronze, a solar calendar, writing, standards of measurement, irrigation ditches, specialized craftsmen, urban centers and a surplus of food necessary to support non-agricultural workers who lived within the walls of the city. Childe's list concerns human achievements and pays less attention to human organization.

Another historian agreed with Childe but added that a true definition of civilization should also include money collected through taxes, a privileged ruling class, a centralized government and a national religious or priestly class. Such a list, unlike Childe's, highlights human organization. In 1955, Clyde Kluckhohn argued that there were three essential criteria for civilization: towns containing more than 5000 people, writing, and monumental ceremonial centers. Finally, the archeologist and anthropologist Robert M. Adams argued for a definition of civilization as a society with functionally interrelated sets of social institutions: class stratification based on the ownership and control of production, political and religious hierarchies complementing each other in the central administration of territorially organized states and lastly, a complex division of labor, with skilled workers, soldiers and officials existing alongside the great mass of peasant producers.

As historians have often remarked, civilization is a word easier to describe than it is to define. As implied by the above discussion, the word itself comes from the Latin adjective *civilis*, a reference to a citizen. Citizens willingly bring themselves together in political, social, economic, and religious organizations -- they merge together, that is, in the interests of the larger community. Over time, the word civilization has come to imply something beyond organization -- it refers to a particular shared way of thinking about the world as well as a reflection on that world in art, literature, drama and a host of other cultural happenings. To understand this idea better it is necessary to investigate the origins of western civilization.

The historian's task is not an easy one and this is especially the case when dealing with ancient civilizations that rose and fell more than five thousand years ago. Since history is specifically the story of man's written records, the historian of ancient culture must piece together the past from fragments of human endeavor and human achievement. True enough, having 485 tons of written material at your disposal provides the historian with a daunting task. But trying to piece together the past of a culture whose written documents are scarce, makes the historian's task that much more difficult.

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