

Date:

THE NEED FOR WATER

IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES

(3100 B.C.E.-100 C.E.)

How did the need of water create civilization?

The title of the course for which you are using this book is most likely some variation on "World Civilization." The meaning of world is self-evident, but why civilization? What distinguishes human cultures that are termed civilizations from those that are not? Though there are great differences among civilizations, all civilizations have a few features in common. The most important of these is the presence of cities; indeed, the word civilization comes from the Latin word civis, meaning "resident of a city, or citizen." Historians and archaeologists generally define a city as a place where more than five thousand people live. Remains of the earliest communities of this size have been discovered in ancient Mesopotamia, or present-day Iraq.

Why should the presence of cities be the distinguishing mark of cultural

development? It is not the cities themselves but what they imply about a culture that makes them so important. Any society in which thousands of people live in proximity to one another must agree in general to certain laws or rules governing human behavior. These may be either part of an oral tradition or, as they were in ancient Mesopotamia, written down. A city must also make provision to assure its residents of a constant supply of food, which involves not only transporting food into the city from the surrounding farmland but also storing food throughout the year and preserving stockpiles for years when harvests are poor. In addition to demonstrating that people could transport and store food effectively, the presence of cities also indicates that people were producing enough surplus food to allow for a specialization of labor. If the whole work force had been devoted to farming, no one would

have been available to build roads, produce storage bins, or enforce the laws on which the city depended. This specialization of labor eventually allowed some members of society the opportunity and time to build structures and produce goods that were not directly essential to daily survival. Urban residents in Mesopotamia began to erect large buildings and to decorate them with sculptures, paintings, and mosaics, to write poetry and history, and to develop religious and philosophical ideas, all of which we consider essential to a civilization. As the cities themselves grew, they needed greater and greater amounts of food, which led to further technological development.

The civilization of ancient Mesopotamia flourished in the valley of two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and other early civilizations were located in river valleys as well—the Nile in Egypt, the Indus in India, and the Yellow in China. In all of these areas, except perhaps the Indus Valley, the amount of natural rainfall is not enough to sustain the level of agricultural production required for urban populations; irrigation using river water is necessary. Rather than proving a block to further development, how-

ever, the need for irrigation in these river valleys may have been the very catalyst that prompted the growth of cities. We may never be able to know this for sure, because irrigation systems were already in place before written records appeared, and because cities and irrigation expanded together. We do know that neither could have existed without the other in Mesopotamia; cities could survive only where there was a food surplus created by irrigation, and irrigation could be implemented only where there were enough people to construct and maintain ditches and other components of the system.

Supplying cities with water was not simply a technological problem, but one with economic, legal, social, and political implications as well. We can see this significance even in words themselves: The word *rius* originally meant those who shared, and quarreled over, the water in a *rius*, or "irrigation channel."

What is your opinion of this?

Think about these ideas

HW 7:

Answer questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1) According to this reading, the idea of "city" implies certain information about

- A) Rules
- B) Food Supply
- C) Specialized labor

For A, B, C answer: what does a city imply about each one? Why does it imply this?

2) Why was irrigation necessary for the early civilizations? Why might irrigation be a catalyst (prompt) for the growth of cities?

write down your responses

Think about your answers

also: review pages 17-19 in old book  
4) write down the 5 traits or characteristics that define a CIVILIZATION.