


River Valley Civilizations The rise of cities was the main feature of civilization. A **civilization** is a **complex**, highly organized social order. The world's first civilizations arose independently in a number of river valleys. These River Valley Civilizations include Sumer, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East; Egypt, along the Nile River; the Indus civilization, along the Indus River in India; and the Shang civilization, along the Huang (hwahng) River or Yellow River, in China. You will read in depth about each of these River Valley Civilizations in later chapters.

First Civilizations in the Americas Unlike the first civilizations in Asia and Africa, the first civilizations in the Americas arose away from river valleys. Major civilizations emerged in the highlands of Peru, Mexico, and Central America, where people learned to farm on the sides of mountains or to fill in swamps with land for farming. You will read about the achievements of civilizations such as the Inca, the Olmec, and the Maya in a later chapter.

Life Away From Cities Away from the first cities, many people continued to hunt, gather food, or live in farming villages. On some less fertile lands or on sparse, dry grasslands called **steppes**, nomadic herders tended cattle, sheep, goats, or other animals. Because the lands did not have abundant water or grass, these nomads had to keep moving to find new pasture.

 **Checkpoint** In what ways were river valleys ideal locations for civilizations to develop?

Basic Features That Define Civilization

What did the early civilizations that arose in different parts of the world have in common? While cities are the main feature of civilization, historians distinguish several other basic features of most early civilizations. Seven of the major features are (1) organized governments, (2) complex religions, (3) job specialization, (4) social classes, (5) arts and architecture, (6) public works, and (7) writing.

Organized Governments Councils of elders or chiefs ruled many of the world's farming villages. However, in cities, more powerful organized governments arose to oversee large-scale efforts that benefited the people. For example, as cities grew, their residents required a steady supply of food. A central government could coordinate the production of large amounts of food. In addition, farmers near rivers needed to control flooding and channel waters to the fields. A well-organized government could bring people together for projects such as building dikes, digging canals, and carving out irrigation ditches.

Many rulers also relied on royal officials to help them govern by issuing laws, collecting taxes, and organizing systems of defense. Over time, governments became more complex, and separate departments often evolved to oversee different functions of government. In many early cases, priests probably had the greatest power in government. In others, warrior kings emerged as the main political leaders. Often, they claimed that their right to rule came from the gods, and they passed their power on from father to son. Thus, many political rulers gained religious power as well.

Complex Religions Most ancient people were **polytheistic**, which means they believed in many gods. People appealed to sun gods, river goddesses, and other gods that they believed controlled natural forces or human activities such as birth or war.

In early religions, priests and worshipers sought to gain the favor of the gods through complex rituals such as ceremonies, dances, prayers, and hymns. To ensure divine help, people built temples and sacrificed animals, crops, or sometimes other humans to the gods. Sacrifices and other ceremonies required the full-time attention of priests, who had special training and knowledge.

Job Specialization The lives of city dwellers differed from those of nomads. Urban people developed so many new crafts that a single individual could not master all the skills needed to make tools, weapons, or other goods. For the first time, individuals began to specialize in certain jobs. Some became **artisans**, or skilled craftspeople, and made pottery or finely carved or woven goods. Among the crafts developed in cities, metalworking was particularly important. People learned to make tools and weapons, first out of copper and later out of bronze, a more durable mixture of copper and tin.

Cities had other specialists, too. Bricklayers built city walls. Soldiers defended these walls. Merchants sold goods in the marketplace. Singers, dancers, and storytellers entertained on public occasions. Such specialization made people dependent on others for their various needs.

Social Classes In cities, social organization became more complex. People were ranked according to their jobs. Such ranking led to the growth of social classes. Priests and nobles usually occupied the top level of an ancient society. Next came a small class of wealthy merchants, followed by artisans. Below them came the vast majority of people—peasant farmers who lived in the surrounding vil-

lages and produced food for the city.

In many civilizations, slaves occupied the lowest social level. Slaves sometimes came from poor families who sold family members into slavery to pay their debts. Others became slaves as punishment for crimes or were prisoners captured in war. Because male captives were often killed, women and children made up the largest number of slaves in some societies.

Arts and Architecture The arts and architecture of ancient civilizations expressed the talents, beliefs, and values of the people who created them. Temples and palaces often dominated the city landscape. Many rulers may have ordered such buildings to be constructed in order to remind people of the strength and power of their government and religion. The skilled workers who built these massive buildings decorated them with wall paintings, statues of gods, goddesses, or rulers, and other stunning pieces of design work.

Basic Features of Civilizations


Feature	Description
Cities	Population centers that are notably larger and more organized than towns or villages and that support the other features of civilizations
Organized Governments	Structured governments that coordinate large-scale projects such as food production or construction, establish laws, and organize defense systems
Complex Religions	Systems of religious beliefs that usually include rituals and worship of one or more gods and/or goddesses
Job Specialization	System in which there are different types of jobs and each worker focuses on one particular type
Social Classes	Ranked groups within society that are determined by job or economic standing
Arts and Architecture	Various types of artwork and buildings that express the talents, beliefs, and values of people in a society
Public Works	Large-scale and often costly projects that benefit the city and its people
Writing	Structured writing systems used initially by governments or religious leaders to record important information

Chart Skills The basic features of civilizations help show how early civilizations differed from smaller farming societies and nomadic lifestyles. Which features of civilizations do you think most affected the daily lives of average people?

● INFOGRAPHIC

Bridges: Then and Now

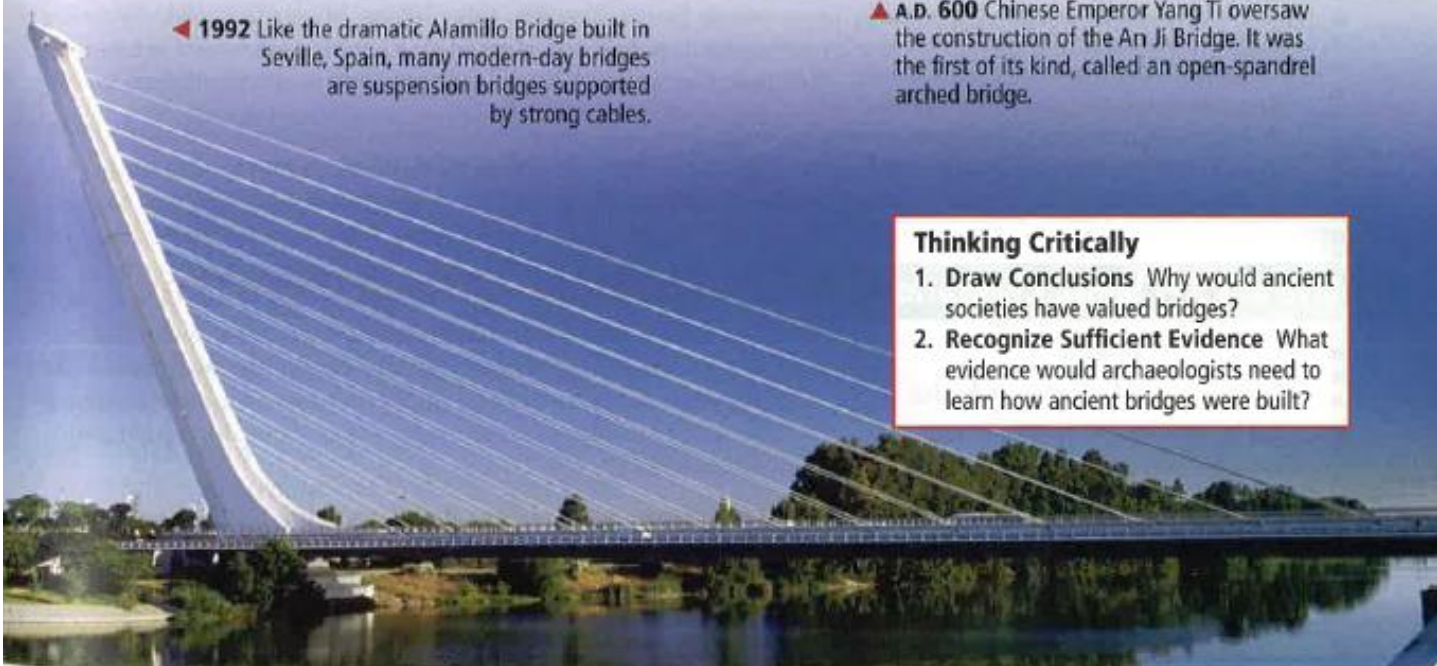
Today, bridges span countless waterways, ravines, highways, and other areas around the world that people need to pass over. Their construction requires solid leadership, thorough planning, and often immense resources. In ancient times, such public works projects could only be undertaken once civilizations had established organized governments and developed the mathematical and engineering knowledge needed to construct bridges that would remain standing over time.



▲ **600 B.C.** The oldest stone bridge still standing today was constructed under the rule of Assyrian King Sennacherib. It spans a small river in Jerwan, Iraq.



▲ **A.D. 600** Chinese Emperor Yang Ti oversaw the construction of the An Ji Bridge. It was the first of its kind, called an open-spandrel arched bridge.



◀ **1992** Like the dramatic Alamillo Bridge built in Seville, Spain, many modern-day bridges are suspension bridges supported by strong cables.

Thinking Critically

1. **Draw Conclusions** Why would ancient societies have valued bridges?
2. **Recognize Sufficient Evidence** What evidence would archaeologists need to learn how ancient bridges were built?

Public Works Strong rulers also ordered vast public works to be built. Such projects included irrigation systems, roads, bridges, and defensive walls. These public works projects were meant to benefit the city by protecting it from attack, ensuring its food supply, or enhancing the reputation of its ruler. The projects were often quite costly, requiring a great deal of human labor and sometimes resulting in the loss of lives during construction.

Writing Of the earliest civilizations, some but not all developed a critical skill—writing. The first writing systems were established in different places and at different times, in many cases with no contact among the different groups who created them. Thus the earliest writing systems varied in appearance, structure, and purpose. Some were first used in

temples, where priests needed to record amounts of grain collected, accurate information about the seasons, and precise rituals and prayers. Other writing systems were first used on public monuments, where rulers spelled out their greatest achievements as a means of advertising their power to the people. Archaeologists have found masses of ancient writings, some on clay tablets or vases, others on stone statues, and yet others on the walls of buildings.

The first step people made toward developing writing was to use **pictographs** (also called pictograms), or simple drawings that look like the objects they represent. Later, they developed complex writing systems including symbols that represent words, syllables, or letters. As writing grew more complex, only specially trained people called **scribes** could read and write. Scribes kept records for priests, rulers, and merchants. Only a few societies permitted women to become scribes, an occupation that could lead to political power.

Cause and Effect

Causes

- Neolithic people learn to farm. → Hunters and gatherers settle into farming communities. → Some farmers settle in river valleys, where the soil is very fertile. → New technologies improve farming. → Food surpluses support growing populations. → The first cities are built in fertile valleys.

Rise of River Valley Civilizations

Effects


- Complex forms of government develop.
- Arts become more elaborate.
- Job specialization leads to social classes.
- People invent writing.
- Early civilizations conquer neighboring lands.

Connections to Today

- Archaeologists continue to discover rich stores of information about Neolithic people and early civilizations.
- In the modern day, people continue to live along rivers, in both villages and large cities.

Analyze Cause and Effect A series of different factors caused the rise of River Valley Civilizations. Which cause do you think led most directly to job specialization? Why?

Comparing Nomadic Life and Civilizations Nomadic cultures differed from civilizations in their social organization—that is, they did not exhibit many of the characteristics of civilization. The people did not build cities, and their governments were simpler than those of civilizations. However, nomadic peoples often excelled in arts and sciences. For example, many groups developed sophisticated traditions in oral poetry, music, weaving, jewelry making, and animal raising.

 **Checkpoint** What roles did governments play in early civilizations?

Civilizations Change Over Time

Ancient civilizations changed in many ways over the centuries. Among the chief causes of change were shifts in the physical environment and interactions among people. Among the major results was the expansion of cities into larger political entities.

Environment Affects People's Lives Like their Stone Age ancestors, people living in early civilizations depended heavily on the physical environment. They needed ample rain and fertile soil to be able to produce crops. Resources such as stone, timber, or metals were also essential. Significant changes in the environment could have an immediate impact on people's lives.

At times, a sudden, drastic event would devastate a community. An earthquake or the eruption of a volcano could wipe out an entire civilization. Farming the same land too much could destroy soil fertility, and rivers could become too salty. Cities would then suffer famine, and survivors would be forced to move away.

If people used up nearby timber or ran out of other building resources, they would have to find ways to adapt to this scarcity. They might, for example, trade with people in areas where such resources were readily available. Or they might use alternate building materials such as reeds.