FIRST CITIES AND STATES

COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The Questions

For nearly two million years human societies consisted of small nomadic hunting and gathering bands with very simple technologies, minimal social inequality, and no agriculture or settled village life. These bands of 15 to 50 individuals were scattered across the globe living off of local environments through hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild plants. Beginning at about 10,000 B.C. human culture and economic adaptations began a series of radical transformations that within only a few thousand years led to the types of societies we have today—with vast settled populations living on agriculture and animal herding in densely occupied cities with advanced technologies, extreme differences in wealth and power between groups, monumental architecture, international trade, interstate warfare, complex religions, and all of the other features (good and bad) which we associate with civilization.

What happened? Why did this same process occur in many different regions across the globe? In each region the process repeated itself: small hunting and gathering bands grew and settled into agricultural villages, then larger towns, and finally became large and complex civilizations. What was the nature of this process? Why did it occur again and again all across the world? Why did the hunters and gatherers gradually and unconsciously surrender their freedom and form complex societies ruled by a few individuals? What do the similarities and the differences in the development of the first cities and states tell us about the nature of civilization and the state and of human society collapse? Such questions have often been asked by philosophers and interpreters of history.

This course will move beyond these philosophical explanations to find the actual answers in archaeological digs on the alluvial plains of the Near East, Egypt, Pakistan and India, the jungles of Central America, and the mountains and deserts of South America and the inland floodplains of the Middle Niger. This course will address these issues as scientific empirical questions, rather than merely philosophical puzzles. We will explore them through an introductory survey of the earliest high civilizations of the prehistoric world.

The Old World

First, we will examine the archaeological and historical evidence and interpretations on the transformation of societies from the first settled villages to the earliest urban states of
Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Greater Indus Valley—with their pyramids, hieroglyphic writing systems, abandoned cities and monuments, and their exotic state religions. Particular emphasis will be given to the most recent discoveries, current controversies, and ongoing research by archaeologists. Classical and modern theories on the nature, origin, and development of civilization will be tested by our studies of the earliest archaeological sites and their development into the first complex societies of the Near East and Egypt. Through this comparative survey and theoretical discussion we will seek insights into the general processes of rise and fall of civilizations and their repeated patterns of historical change.

The Americas

In the second half of the course we will turn to the other separate universe of humankind, the high civilizations of the New World. In the Americas there was a completely separate independent evolution of the great Native American civilizations such as those of the Olmec, the Maya, the Aztec, the Moche, Chimú, and Inca. There we see a repetition of the same process of rapid cultural development from tiny hunting and gathering bands to sedentary villages and finally to great urban civilizations. Each of these cultures, however, evolved with fundamental differences from our own Indo-European tradition—differences based upon alternative definitions of life and death itself. The resulting Native American civilizations seem exotic from our point of view: the Maya jungle kingdoms with their state cults of royal genital bloodletting and holy visions, the Aztec imperial alliance based upon mass human sacrifice and cannibalism, and the Inca empire of South America literally ruled by the mummies of dead kings.

How can it be that the same processes of cultural development led in each case to politically and economically advanced urban states structured by such totally different premises about death, religion, leadership, and power? How do traditional western social theories fare when tested against the Aztec, Inca, and Maya? What do these parallels and inversions of the patterns of the rise of full civilization tell us about cultural evolution, about human society, and about human nature itself?

READINGS:

All readings are available for purchase:

- **The Archaeology of City States: Cross-cultural approaches** by Deborah Nichols and Thomas Charlton. Smithsonian Institution Press. The bookstore was unable to order new copies, but there are used copies available on amazon.com. If you have any problems obtaining this book, let me know right away, as it will be a major source. In the meantime, excerpts will be on blackboard.
- **Religion and Empire**, by Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest. A controversial study of the nature of Aztec and Inca civilization and the role of their respective cults of mass human sacrifice and mummy worship in the nature and expansion of those greatest militaristic empires of the New World. They then use the study of these great, but bizarre (from the Western perspective), Native American empires to test traditional Western theories on the causes of the rise and fall of civilizations and the nature of civilization itself.
Other readings available through the course Blackboard account. They are noted with an asterisk on the reading schedule.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:
Readings: Specific page assignments will be given for each week’s lectures and must be read before class. Lectures, quizzes, and class discussions will rely heavily upon prior reading of all assigned materials. See forthcoming schedule of readings.

Lectures: Class attendance and participation are required and is really in your best interest as exams rely heavily on lecture materials. Class sessions will discuss the evidence for the development of early cities and states and the theoretical interpretations of the processes involved. (5% of final grade).

Take-home Essay Assignment: An essay assignment will explore theories in the context of the first cities and state in Mesopotamia (6-7 pages). This essay will draw on the course reading and lectures in the first half of the course. It is intended to stimulate interpretive thinking on broad issues on the nature of complex society and the causes for its development. (20% of final grade). You will each design your own theory on the causes of the rise of Mesopotamian civilizations based on available evidence.

Exams: A first mid-term exam will cover social theories and the detailed evidence on the origins of Near Eastern civilizations (25%). A second mid-term will cover the high civilizations of Egypt and the Indus, the beginnings of New World civilization, and the enigmatic Olmec and Maya cultures (25%). The final exam (25%) will cover the nature of the great New World empires and the implications of this evidence for theories on the nature and the political dynamics of complex societies. Objective questions on each exam, including the final, will be non-cumulative (i.e., will not cover material on the previous exams). Essay questions will require you to take a broader view, more inclusive of materials discussed throughout the semester.

TOPICS - COURSE SCHEDULE

Topics covered between – January 24 – February 23
  Orientation and Introduction
  Classical and modern theories on the nature and origins of urbanism, states, civilizations.
  The end of the ice age and the rise of the first settled farming villages
  The premature towns: the enigma of Jericho and Catal Huyuk
  The first large polities in Mesopotamia
  The world’s first civilization in southern Mesopotamia
  The nature and legacy of Sumerian civilization: foundations of the Western tradition

Topics covered between – February 28 – April 2
  Egypt: the reluctant rise of complex society
The formation of the Egyptian dynastic state and the riddle of the pyramids
The search for the lost civilization of the Indus valley
The other universe, humans settle into the New World
The Olmec controversy: shamanistic chiefdoms or precocious states
The origins of the ancient Maya civilization
The jungle kingdoms of the Classic Maya
The mystery of the collapse of Classic Maya civilization

Topics covered between –April 5 – May 3
The Central Mexican civilizations: urbanism, conquest, and human sacrifice
The rise and expansion of the Aztec Alliance: the cannibal empire
The third universe: The lost civilizations of the Andean world
The empire of the dead: world view, imperialism, death, and colonialism fall of the Inca Empire.
Theoretical perspectives on first cities and states.

EXAMS AND ASSIGNMENTS SCHEDULE

Feb. 23  Essay assignment passed out - due on or before March 8.
March 1 First mid-term exam
March 8 Essay assignment due.
April 3 Second mid-term exam
            Final Exam – To be announced