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—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 of the world? In each region the process repeated itself: small hunting and gathering bands grew and settled into agricultural villages, then larger towns, and finally, large and complex civilizations. What was the nature of this process? Why did it occur again and again in many locations? Why did the hunters and gatherers gradually abandon their way of life for a more restricted lives in societies that were 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 itself? Do ancient civilizations evolve in repeated cycles of rise, expansion, and 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 from the evidence discovered at archaeological digs on the alluvial plains of the Near East, Pakistan and India, and in the jungles of Central America and the valley of Mexico. We will address these issues as scientific empirical questions, rather than merely philosophical puzzles, and explore them through an introductory survey of four early civilizations in the prehistoric world.

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 among the Maya, Aztec, Mesopotamia and Indus civilizations. Through this comparative survey and theoretical discussion we will
seek insights into general processes of their development and patterns of historical change.

The Americas
We will start with the study of the archaeological and historical evidence and interpretations on the transformation of societies from the first settled villages to the earliest urban states of the Maya and the Aztec--with their abandoned cities, monuments and art works. Particular emphasis will be given to the most recent discoveries, current controversies, and ongoing research by archaeologists. Each of these cultures, however, evolved with fundamental differences from the 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 and the Aztec imperial alliance based upon mass human sacrifice and cannibalism.

Mesopotamia and the Indus
In the second half of the course we will turn to the Old World and a different universe where completely separate developments occurred. We will look for the similarities and differences between these two contemporary states and those in The Americas. Again, our study of them will begin with the earliest sedentary villages and the eventual development of urbanism and state rule. Did the same processes of cultural development occur? Were the politically and economically advanced urban states in this region structured by different premises about death, religion, leadership, and power, or were there parallels.

How do traditional western social theories fare when tested against the archaeological evidence for the Aztec, Maya, Mesopotamia and the Indus? What do these parallels and inversions of the patterns of the rise of full civilization tell us about human society and about human nature itself? Can we explain the factors that led to the disappearance of some of these civilizations and not others?

The course is divided into six topical sections:

*Classical and modern theories on the nature and origins of urbanism, states, civilizations: foundations of the Western tradition. Selected readings available on Blackboard. All are required.


Requirements:

Readings: Specific page assignments will be given for each week’s lectures and must be read before class. Lectures, exams, and class discussions will rely heavily upon prior reading of all assigned materials. A week-by-week schedule will be developed before the beginning of the course.

Lectures: Class attendance and participation are required and is really in your best interest as exams rely heavily on lecture materials and class discussions. Class sessions will discuss the evidence for the development of early cities and states and the theoretical interpretations of the processes involved. (10% of final grade).

Course Dialog. Two 250 word essays will be assigned on the Discussion Board in which you will discuss on the first essay: the Maya civilization in the context of the classical theories discussed in the first section of the course and on the second essay, Mesopotamia or the Indus. This essay will draw on the course reading and lectures and are intended to stimulate interpretive thinking on broad issues on the nature of complex societies and the causes for its development. (20% of final grade).

Two Exams: The first mid-term exam will cover social theories and the evidence for the origins of the Maya and the Aztec (25%). A second mid-term will cover the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus (25). Both exams will include two essay questions and eight short answer (3 sentences) essays.

Final Paper: This paper will be structured around a set of questions in which you will be asked to compare the civilizations discussed in the course (20%).