

Encyclopedic Entry

civilization

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Civilization is a **complex** way of life that came about as people began to develop urban settlements.

The earliest civilizations developed after 3000 **BCE**, when the rise of **agriculture** allowed people to have **surplus** food and **economic** stability. Agricultural populations advanced beyond **village** life, and many people no longer had to practice **farming** at all.

Civilizations first appeared in **Mesopotamia**, in what is now Iraq, then in Egypt. Civilizations thrived in the Indus Valley by 2500 BCE, in China by 1500 BCE and in Central America, what is now Mexico, by 1200 BCE. Civilizations developed on every continent except Antarctica.

Characteristics of Civilization

All civilizations have certain characteristics. These include: (1) large **population centers**; (2) **monumental architecture** and **unique** art styles; (3) written language; (4) systems for **administering** territories; (5) a complex division of **labor**; and (6) the division of people into social classes.

Large population centers, or urban areas (1), allow civilizations to develop. People, like farmers, who live outside urban centers but sell their goods and services there, are still part of that region's civilization. The huge urban center of **Teotihuacan**, in modern-day Mexico, for example, had more than 100,000 residents between 300 and 500 CE. The development of the Teotihuacan civilization was made possible in part by the rich agricultural land surrounding the city. As the land was cultivated, fewer farmers could supply more food, such as corn and beans, to more people.

All civilizations work to preserve their **legacy** by building large monuments and structures (2). This is as true today as it was thousands of years ago. **Western civilization**, another name for civilizations of European origin (which include Australia and much of North America), has monuments like **Mount Rushmore**, in the U.S. state of South Dakota, or the **Eiffel Tower**, in Paris, France. These monuments **represent** the civilization that made them.

Similarly, pyramids and other monumental structures have represented Egypt for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptian civilization is also represented by a distinct art style. Characteristics of this art style include **hieroglyphics** and stiff human figures.

Written **communication** (3) is another element that all civilizations share. Writing allows systems for **trade**, **government**, and thought to develop. Written language also allows civilizations to record their own **history**. The world's oldest known written language is Sumerian, which developed in Mesopotamia. Sumerian civilization began keeping records about 3100 BCE. Sumerian writing was called **cuneiform**, meaning it was made up of different collections of **wedge** (triangle) shapes. Just like written records of modern civilizations, Sumerian cuneiform kept

track of taxes, grocery bills, and laws for things like stealing.

Civilization comes from the [Latin](#) word "civis," meaning "citizen." Latin was the language of ancient Roman civilization, which stretched from the land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Scotland in the north and the Black Sea to the east. To rule an area that large, the Romans, based in what is now central Italy, needed an [effective](#) system for administering territories (4).

Romans used a variety of methods in this system. They built a [network](#) of roads so communication between far-away territories was quick and easy. Roads also made travel by the Roman [military](#) much easier. Romans built structures of their civilization everywhere they went: aqueducts to supply fresh water to towns and baths for improved [hygiene](#), for example. They also spread the Latin language. The so-called "[Romance languages](#)" (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, and Italian) are called that because they all developed from the Roman language: Latin. Having a [similar](#) language made communication and leadership easier for Rome in its [far-flung](#) territories.

Romans used local leaders, as well as Romans, to administer the law in their territories. Residents were more familiar with their own leaders, and more likely to follow their instructions. [Jewish](#) leaders worked with Roman authorities in what is now Israel, while British leaders often worked with Romans on the island of [Great Britain](#), for example. Some people born in Roman territories eventually became Roman emperors: The [emperor](#) Constantine, for instance, was born in what is now Serbia. This interaction reduced [conflict](#) between Rome and its territories.

It didn't reduce all conflict, of course. People who live in territories or colonies are rarely happy with the administration, or leadership, of a foreign civilization. Ancient Rome endured many revolts, from North Africa to Great Britain. Western Civilization has endured its own revolts, many of them successful. The South American independence movement led by [Simon Bolivar](#) against Spain in the early 19th century led to the independence of the countries of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Panama. [Mahatma Gandhi](#) led a successful, nonviolent revolt against British rule in the 20th century, which resulted in independence for the nation of India.

Civilizations are also marked by complex divisions of labor (5). This means that different people perform specialized tasks. In a purely agricultural civilization, most members of the community know how to farm, cook, and hunt. In complex civilizations, farmers may [cultivate](#) one type of [crop](#) and depend on other people for clothing, shelter, and information.

Civilizations that depend on trade are especially marked by divisions of labor. The city of Timbuktu, in the modern country of Mali, was an important trading center for several African civilizations. Residents of Timbuktu specialized in trading such goods as [gold](#), [ivory](#), or slaves. Other residents provided food or shelter for caravans traveling on camels from the [Sahara Desert](#). The urban center of Timbuktu was also a center of learning. Its division of labor included not only merchants, but doctors, religious leaders, and artists.

The last element that is key to the development of civilizations is the division of people into social classes (6). This is a complex idea that can be broken down into two parts: [income](#) and type of work performed. Changing classes has traditionally been difficult and happens over generations.

Social classes can mean groups of people divided by their income. Western civilization usually divides economic class into [wealthy](#), middle-class, and [poor](#). This is not always the case, however. In [medieval](#) civilizations of Europe, there were few social classes based on income. Kings and queens had [enormous](#) amounts of money and land. [Serfs](#), or people who worked the land, had almost nothing. Eventually, a [merchant](#) economic class developed.

Social class can also refer to the type of work people perform. There are many divisions of social class. In the ancient civilization of China, there were four classic types of social classes. Scholars and political leaders (known as shi) were the most powerful social class. Farmers and agricultural workers (known as [nong](#)) were the next

most-powerful group. Artists (known as [gong](#)), who made everything from horseshoes to silk robes, were the next order of social class. At the bottom of the social classes were the merchants and traders, who bought and sold goods and services. Known as [shang](#), these merchants often had more money than the other classes but had a lower social status.

Development of Civilization

Civilizations expand through trade, war, and [exploration](#). Usually, all three elements must be present for a civilization to grow and remain for a long period of time. Ancient Rome is a good example.

The ancient Romans traded goods, services, and ideas with the lands they had contact with. They traded in [silver](#) from the island of Great Britain, spices such as cloves from partners in what is now India, and [exotic](#) animals such as giraffes from civilizations in Africa. They also traded ideas with civilizations such as Greece, where Romans were exposed to the ideas of [democracy](#) and [citizenship](#).

Roman civilization also developed a powerful military. One of Rome's most important political figures was actually a [general](#): [Julius Caesar](#). Caesar conquered [Gaul](#), what is today France and Belgium, through years of war and armed conflict. Gaul remained a part of Roman civilization for hundreds of years.

Exploration was the foundation of Roman civilization. Early Romans explored the land around the Mediterranean, seeing what areas were good for agriculture (such as Gaul) and what areas had large trading centers (such as Egypt, which traded with almost all of Africa). These early explorations allowed Rome to grow from a [kingdom](#) in what is today central Italy to a [republic](#) expanding across the Mediterranean region to an [empire](#) that spread across three continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Fall of Civilizations

Many civilizations have flourished and then failed or fallen apart. There are many reasons for this. The reasons can be internal, such as conflict within the civilization. It can also be external, such as a natural disaster.

Internal conflict may have led to the fall of the [Anasazi](#) civilization, in what is today the southwestern part of the United States. The Anasazi civilization developed around 1200 BCE. The Anasazi seem to have [abandoned](#) their complex urban areas in the cliffs at Mesa Verde, Colorado, and other sites around 1300 CE. The disappearance of the Anasazi civilization remains a mystery, although many scientists say groups competed for land and resources. The Anasazi people never disappeared, of course: Groups developed their own, competing civilizations after the Anasazi civilization migrated or fell apart. These groups include the Pueblo and Hopi civilizations.

Some anthropologists, people who study cultures and civilizations, believe that [misuse](#) of the environment may have helped cause the [collapse](#) of some civilizations. The [Rapa Nui](#) civilization of Easter Island collapsed because of [deforestation](#). Residents cut down almost all the island's palm trees before new ones could grow. Trees were used for building homes and community structures, and were burned for [firewood](#). Trees were also used to construct tools, such as large sleds, to transport huge [ceremonial](#) stone structures known as [moai](#). Easter Island is isolated from other islands in the South Pacific, as well as South America. The Rapa Nui civilization had no trading partners, so they could not trade for trees or finished goods, such as chopped firewood or wooden sleds. People first arrived on Easter Island around 300 or 400 CE. By the time Europeans arrived on the island in 1722, the palm forests of Easter Island were gone.

Some anthropologists believe that modern societies' use of natural resources will affect future civilizations. [Oil](#), [coal](#), and [natural gas](#) are natural resources that, like the palm trees on Easter Island, may be used more quickly than they can be replenished.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
abandon	<i>verb</i>	to desert or leave entirely.
administer	<i>verb</i>	to oversee, manage, or be in charge of.
agriculture	<i>noun</i>	the art and science of cultivating the land for growing crops (farming) or raising livestock (ranching).
Anasazi	<i>noun</i>	(1200 BCE-1300 CE) people and culture native to what is now the southwestern United States. Also called Ancestral Puebloans.
anthropologist	<i>noun</i>	person who studies cultures and characteristics of communities and civilizations.
aqueduct	<i>noun</i>	a pipe or passage used for carrying water from a distance.
architecture	<i>noun</i>	style and design of buildings or open spaces.
BCE	<i>adjective</i>	(Before the Common Era) designation for the years before the year 1, or 1 CE.
bigoted	<i>adjective</i>	prejudiced or intolerant of a person or group not like oneself.
camel	<i>noun</i>	type of large pack animal with one or two humps on its back.
caravan	<i>noun</i>	group of people who travel together for safety and companionship through difficult territory.
ceremonial	<i>adjective</i>	used for a ritual or formal occasion.
characteristic	<i>noun</i>	physical, cultural, or psychological feature of an organism, place, or object.
citizenship	<i>noun</i>	behavior of a person in terms of their community.
civilization	<i>noun</i>	complex way of life that developed as humans began to develop urban settlements.
class	<i>noun</i>	division in society based on income and type of employment.
coal	<i>noun</i>	dark, solid fossil fuel mined from the earth.
collapse	<i>verb</i>	to fall apart completely.
communication	<i>noun</i>	sharing of information and ideas.
compete	<i>verb</i>	to work against someone or something else for an award or acknowledgment.
complex	<i>adjective</i>	complicated.
conflict	<i>noun</i>	a disagreement or fight, usually over ideas or procedures.
cradle of civilization	<i>noun</i>	vague area credited with the earliest development of cities and civilizations, usually located around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
crop	<i>noun</i>	agricultural produce.
cultivate	<i>verb</i>	to prepare and nurture the land for crops.
culture	<i>noun</i>	learned behavior of people, including their languages, belief systems, social structures, institutions, and material goods.
cuneiform	<i>noun</i>	written language made up of different collections of wedge or triangle shapes.
deforestation	<i>noun</i>	destruction or removal of forests and their undergrowth.
democracy	<i>noun</i>	system of organization or government where the people decide policies or elect representatives to do so.

developed country	<i>noun</i>	a nation that has high levels of economic activity, health care, and education.
doctor	<i>noun</i>	person who provides medical care to people or animals.
documentary	<i>noun</i>	non-fiction film.
economic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with money.
effective	<i>adjective</i>	useful or able to perform a task.
Eiffel Tower	<i>noun</i>	(1889) monument in Paris, France.
emperor	<i>noun</i>	ruler of an empire.
empire	<i>noun</i>	group of nations, territories or other groups of people controlled by a single, more powerful authority.
endure	<i>verb</i>	to survive.
enormous	<i>adjective</i>	very large.
exotic	<i>adjective</i>	foreign or strange.
exploration	<i>noun</i>	study and investigation of unknown places, concepts, or issues.
far-flung	<i>adjective</i>	spread over a great distance.
farming	<i>noun</i>	the art, science, and business of cultivating the land for growing crops.
firewood	<i>noun</i>	wood that is burned for warmth, cooking, or cleaning.
flourish	<i>verb</i>	to thrive or be successful.
Gaul	<i>noun</i>	Western European civilization that became a major part of ancient Rome.
general	<i>noun</i>	highest rank of leadership in armies and air forces.
generation	<i>noun</i>	time between an organism's birth and the time it reproduces.
giraffe	<i>noun</i>	large mammal with a long neck, native to Africa.
gold	<i>noun</i>	valuable chemical element with the symbol Au.
gong	<i>noun</i>	social class in ancient China made up of artists and craftsmen.
government	<i>noun</i>	system or order of a nation, state, or other political unit.
Great Britain	<i>noun</i>	large island in Western Europe consisting of the countries of England, Scotland, and Wales.
Group of 8 (G8)	<i>noun</i>	eight wealthiest nations in the world: the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Russia, and Canada. The European Union is also included in the G8.
hieroglyphics	<i>plural noun</i>	written language using pictures to represent words or ideas.
history	<i>noun</i>	study of the past.
horseshoe	<i>noun</i>	C-shaped thick metal sheet nailed to a horse's foot to protect it from damaging surfaces.
hygiene	<i>noun</i>	science and methods of keeping clean and healthy.
income	<i>noun</i>	wages, salary, or amount of money earned.

inferior	<i>adjective</i>	of lower quality.
isolate	<i>verb</i>	to set one thing or organism apart from others.
ivory	<i>noun</i>	hard, white substance that forms the teeth or tusks of some animals.
Jewish	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the religion or culture of people tracing their ancestry to the ancient Middle East and the spiritual leaders Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Julius Caesar	<i>noun</i>	(100 BCE-44 BCE) leader of ancient Rome.
kingdom	<i>noun</i>	type of government with a king or queen as its leader, or the land ruled by that king or queen.
labor	<i>noun</i>	work or employment.
Latin	<i>noun</i>	language of ancient Rome and the Roman Empire.
legacy	<i>noun</i>	material, ideas, or history passed down or communicated by a person or community from the past.
Mahatma Gandhi	<i>noun</i>	(Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1869-1948) leader of Indian independence movement.
medieval	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the Middle Ages (500-1400) in Europe.
merchant	<i>noun</i>	person who sells goods and services.
Mesopotamia	<i>noun</i>	area between the Tigris and Euphrates River in Iraq.
method	<i>noun</i>	way of doing something.
middle class	<i>noun</i>	people and culture characterized by incomes between the working class and the wealthy.
migrate	<i>verb</i>	to move from one place or activity to another.
military	<i>noun</i>	armed forces.
misuse	<i>noun</i>	incorrect or ignorant use of resources.
moai	<i>noun</i>	very large stone figures carved and displayed on Easter Island.
monument	<i>noun</i>	large structure representing an event, idea, or person.
monumental	<i>adjective</i>	very large, serious, and important.
Mount Rushmore	<i>noun</i>	(1941) mountain in the U.S. state of South Dakota carved by Gutzon Borglum with the faces of U.S. presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt.
natural gas	<i>noun</i>	type of fossil fuel made up mostly of the gas methane.
natural resource	<i>noun</i>	a material that humans take from the natural environment to survive, to satisfy their needs, or to trade with others.
network	<i>noun</i>	series of links along which movement or communication can take place.
nong	<i>noun</i>	social class in ancient China made up of farmers and agricultural workers.
oil	<i>noun</i>	fossil fuel formed from the remains of marine plants and animals. Also known as petroleum or crude oil.
Penelope Spheeris	<i>noun</i>	(1945-present) American filmmaker.

political system	<i>noun</i>	method of leadership and government.
poor	<i>noun</i>	people and culture characterized by very low income.
population center	<i>noun</i>	settlement with many residents, often an urban area.
punk	<i>noun</i>	style of loud, energetic music.
pyramid	<i>noun</i>	three-dimensional shape with a square base and triangular sides that meet in a point.
racist	<i>adjective</i>	community or government policy of denying certain rights to people based on their ancestry, usually signified by skin color.
Rapa Nui	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to Easter Island. Also another name for Easter Island.
religious system	<i>noun</i>	method of spiritual practice and worship.
represent	<i>verb</i>	to stand for a person, community, or idea.
republic	<i>noun</i>	system of government where power rests in citizens who vote and representatives who stand for those citizens. The United States is a republic.
research station	<i>noun</i>	structure or structures built for scientific study of the surrounding region, possibly including residential and lab facilities.
road	<i>noun</i>	path, usually paved, for vehicles to travel.
Romance languages	<i>noun</i>	spoken and written forms of communication that share a root in the Latin language: Spanish, French, Italian, Catalan, Portuguese, and Romanian.
Sahara Desert	<i>noun</i>	world's largest desert, in north Africa.
scholar	<i>noun</i>	educated person.
serf	<i>noun</i>	type of slave forced to work on land owned by others in return for protection.
shang	<i>noun</i>	social class in ancient China made up of merchants.
silver	<i>noun</i>	chemical element with the symbol Ag.
similar	<i>adjective</i>	alike or resembling.
Simon Bolivar	<i>noun</i>	(1783-1830) Venezuelan revolutionary.
specialize	<i>verb</i>	to study, work, or take an interest in one area of a larger field of ideas.
spice	<i>noun</i>	tasty and aromatic plant substances used in cooking.
Sumer	<i>noun</i>	(5000 BCE-2000 BCE) ancient civilization in what is now southern Iraq.
surplus	<i>noun</i>	more than what is needed or wanted.
tax	<i>noun</i>	money or goods citizens provide to government in return for public services such as military protection.
Teotihuacan	<i>noun</i>	(200-750) ancient civilization in what is now central Mexico.
territory	<i>noun</i>	land an animal, human, or government protects from intruders.
trade	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling, or exchanging of goods and services.

trading partner	<i>noun</i>	country or community that exchanges goods and services with another country or community.
unique	<i>adjective</i>	one of a kind.
urban area	<i>noun</i>	developed, densely populated area where most inhabitants have nonagricultural jobs.
village	<i>noun</i>	small human settlement usually found in a rural setting.
wealthy	<i>adjective</i>	very rich.
wedge	<i>noun</i>	triangle shape.
Western Civilization	<i>noun</i>	civilizations of European origin.

For Further Exploration

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