As agricultural surpluses allowed societies to develop into large urban centers, the foundations for the first civilizations were set. Civilization is not easy to define precisely and can be controversial. Indeed, declaring a group of people "uncivilized" has often been the pretext for conquering them in order to bring them to an alleged higher level of sophistication. Thus the definition of what it means to be "civilized" could be strategically crafted by opportunists and conquerors. Nevertheless, some basic characteristics of civilization can be generalized. First and foremost, civilization implies cities; the word itself is based on the Latin word for *civil* or *city*. In addition to cities, civilizations have highly **stratified** and **hierarchical** social structures; social and gender equality is not natural to early civilizations. Civilizations also develop states, or governments, organized by bureaucracies and legitimized often by religious belief. Rituals and ceremonies presided over by priests are protected by the state, which in turn gains supernatural support for its laws and decrees. All of these complex institutions, of course, are supported by large agricultural surpluses. Civilizations grew so large and their influence felt so far beyond their borders that it was inevitable that they would have contact with other civilizations and nomadic people. Trade between these people spread ideas, technologies and even diseases. And as the needs of urban centers grew, the struggle for limited resources often led them to military conflict.

**I. Core and foundational civilizations developed in a variety of geographical and environmental settings where agriculture flourished.**

The following are known as **Core and Foundational** civilizations. The first four were located in the valleys of important rivers:

* Mesopotamia
* Egypt
* Indus River Civilizations
* Shang
* Olmecs

**II. The first states emerged within core civilizations.**

A. The states that emerged in core civilizations welded great power over people's lives and came to reinforce the inequalities that first developed with the advent of agriculture. A **state** is single political system or government presiding over a group of people or societies. It can be a single city under one leader, or a cluster of cities and communities under a king. It can be a modern democratic nation or a totalitarian regime. States sometimes included people who did not willingly chose to live under their government, as in conquered people living in an empire. What the best form of a state should be and its role in the lives of its people has been debated throughout the history of civilization. Only in recent history have

[](http://apworldipedia.com/index.php?title=File:Pyramid.jpg)

The pyramids of Egypt are themselves representative of hierarchical and stratified societies.

some people come to believe the state's function is to protect their freedoms, guard their property, and create the conditions for the individual to freely flourish as he or she wishes. The individualism inherent in this modern view did not exist in the pre-modern world. Indeed, many of our most cherished beliefs--equality, personal liberty, and tolerance--were not as valued by our ancestors.

Most creation myths held that the world sprung out of some primordial state of chaos, and to hold this chaos at bay early civilizations stressed the importance of order above freedom. They tolerated hierarchies and inequality to a degree most of us today would find highly distasteful. A hierarchical society, with the leader at the top, the intermediate elites and bureaucrats, and finally the masses of agricultural labors at the base, was thought to be essential to an orderly and secure civilization. This has its literal embodiment in the pyramids of Egypt rising, as it were, from the harsh chaos of the North African desert.

These hierarchies as well as the power of the leader were most often sanctioned by religion in the ancient world. A close relationship existed between the power of the state and religious belief. Ancient kings adorned themselves with images of divine approval and performed their duties with a mixture of ceremonial and religious rites. Their decrees, military victories and laws were portrayed as being somehow connected with a higher, spiritual cause. Not until the European Enlightenment would politics be shorn from religion, and both given separate domains in public life.

B. The earth's natural resources are not distributed equally. Thus it was only natural that some states were better situated geographically to compete with others and become successful. We have seen that the discovery of bronze was a great boost to the production of better tools and weapons; it led to larger agricultural yields and more advanced tools. The problem with bronze, however, was that it was brittle and would sometimes break upon contact with armor, bones or rocks. Soon, man learned to make a superior metal: iron.

The production of this metal was more complex than that of bronze. Whereas bronze could be produced on an open fire, such fires were not hot enough to produce iron. Man learned to dramatically increase the temperature of fires by blasting air into the coals. This fed the fire more oxygen than it would get from a normal burn. With such fires, iron could be smelted.

Iron weapons stayed sharp and easily shattered bronze weapons. Armies brandishing these weapons had a significant advantage over armies using stone or other metals. Because its production required additional technological skills, iron-making skills were kept secret by those who first learned how to make it. But it was iron that allowed for the first major wars of territorial expansion.

It was the [Hittites](http://apworldipedia.com/index.php?title=Hittites&action=edit&redlink=1) who first learned to manufacture iron. The methods of iron production were guarded so carefully the Hittites cut out the tongues of those who knew how to make it in order to prevent this technology from falling into the hands of their enemies. Armed with iron weapons, the Hittites were able to expand their civilization and project their power on surrounding people. Imperial conquest had begun.

C. When powerful cities began to conquer and impose their rule over other communities a new type of political system was born, the **empire**. Empires grow primarily through military conquest, absorbing land and people into their domain against the will of those conquered. Consequently, empires are likely to be composed of regions with different religious, ethnic, and linguistic traditions. Conquered groups of people rarely accept their foreign domination peacefully. Centrifugal forces threatened empires, creating fault lines between cultural and ethic zones. Thus the diversity inherent in empires presented new challenges in maintaining political and social order in the ancient world. Such states had to devise techniques for holding their vast domains together

D. The interaction civilizations had with pastoral nomads often provided the links for the diffusion of new technologies. New weapons and modes of transportation spread from one area to another. As hard as the Hittites tried to conceal their method of iron production, this skill spread to others. When the Assyrians learned iron metallurgy they applied its use more effectively than the Hittites and their army became very feared in the ancient world. In Africa, the Bantu people used iron to facilitate their migration across the continent, spreading this new technology as they moved.

**III. Culture played a significant role in unifying states through laws, language, literature, religion, myths, and monumental building.**

A. The vast amount of resources civilizations garnered enabled them to fund public and civic projects such as temples, defensive walls, roads, irrigation and sewage systems. Sewage disposal networks have been unearthed at some of the oldest cities. In the city of Lothal in the Indus River valley, a complex sewage system had a main line running through the city with smaller lines connecting to it. Projects of this nature require planning and organization to a degree that can only be carried out by a government. Road construction is another example of the state marshaling resources for projects that advance the good of city. Note that the formation of a large gathering of settled people in one area (a city) necessitated a complex government to organize needed services such as irrigation, sewage systems, and roads.

Not all public work projects were undertaken for practical urban purposes. The close relationship between the state and religion meant that governments supported the construction of temples and religious monuments. The city-states and empires of Mesopotamia constructed large temples called **ziggurats**. Religious practice centered around these large buildings, to which people brought offerings of animals, vegetables, fruits and butter. Here priests would offer sacrifices, both human and animal, which were thought to secure the good will of the gods.

[](http://apworldipedia.com/index.php?title=File:Ziggurat.jpg)

A reconstruction of the ziggurat of Ur in modern Iraq.

The ziggurat could perform social and military functions as well. In the temple schools children learned religion, mathematics, geometry and other subjects. Being accessible only by three long sets of stairs, the top of the ziggurat provided safety during times of flooding and invasion.

The man hours required to construct a monumental building of this size had to be organized by a central government. To expend so much human labor for this project also testifies to the tremendous surplus of agriculture this civilization could produce. Thus monumental building served to showcase the wealth and power of the state.

B. These same surpluses allowed civilizations to promote the arts. Human nature seems to have an innate propensity for artistic expression, and we embellish the things we make far beyond what their function or utility alone require. Forms of art give a sense of identity to individuals and groups, just as music and clothing styles still do today. In the earliest civilizations, jewelry making, painting, sculpting and other forms of art were promoted and funded by elites, those possessing the wealth to support labor not inherently necessary for human survival.