

How Civilization Develops – 5 Key Traits of a Civilization

Directions: Read and annotate (with comments/connections/examples of each trait from what we've studied in Africa).

Most historians believe that one of the first civilizations arose in Sumer. Sumer was located in Mesopotamia, a region that is part of modern Iraq. A **civilization** is often defined as a complex culture with five characteristics: (1) advanced cities, (2) specialized workers, (3) complex institutions, (4) record keeping, and (5) advanced technology.

Advanced Cities Cities were the birthplaces of the first civilizations. A city is more than a large group of people living together. The size of the population alone does not distinguish a village from a city. One of the key differences is that a city is a center of trade for a larger area. Like their modern-day counterparts, ancient city dwellers depended on trade. Farmers, merchants, and traders brought goods to market in the cities. The city dwellers themselves produced a variety of goods for exchange.

Specialized Workers As cities grew, so did the need for more specialized workers, such as traders, government officials, and priests. Food surpluses provided the opportunity for **specialization**—the development of skills in a specific kind of work. An abundant food supply allowed some people to become expert at jobs besides farming. Some city dwellers became **artisans**—skilled workers who make goods by hand. Specialization helped artisans develop their skill at designing jewelry, fashioning metal tools and weapons, or making clothing and pottery. The wide range of crafts artisans produced helped cities become centers of trade.

Complex Institutions The soaring populations of early cities made government, or a system of ruling, necessary. In civilizations, leaders emerged to maintain order among people and to establish laws. Government is an example of an **institution**—a long-lasting pattern of organization in a community. This could include the creation of a bureaucracy and distinct social classes. Complex institutions, such as government, religion, and the economy, are another characteristic of civilization. With the growth of cities, religion became a formal institution – with leadership, buildings/monuments, and formal rituals.

Record Keeping As government, religion, and the economy became more complex, people recognized the need to keep records. In early civilizations, government officials had to document tax collections, the passage of laws, and the storage of grain. Priests needed a way to keep track of the calendar and important rituals. Merchants had to record accounts of debts and payments. Most civilizations developed a system of writing, though some devised other methods of record keeping. People soon began to use writing for other purposes besides record keeping. They also wrote about their cities' dramatic events—wars, natural disasters, the reign of kings.

Improved Technology New tools and techniques are always needed to solve problems that emerge when large groups of people live together. In early civilizations, some farmers harnessed the powers of animals and nature. For example, they used ox-drawn plows to turn the soil. They also created irrigation systems to expand planting areas. Artisans relied on new technology to make their tasks easier. This might include new ways of producing metal goods, textiles, pottery, architecture, etc.