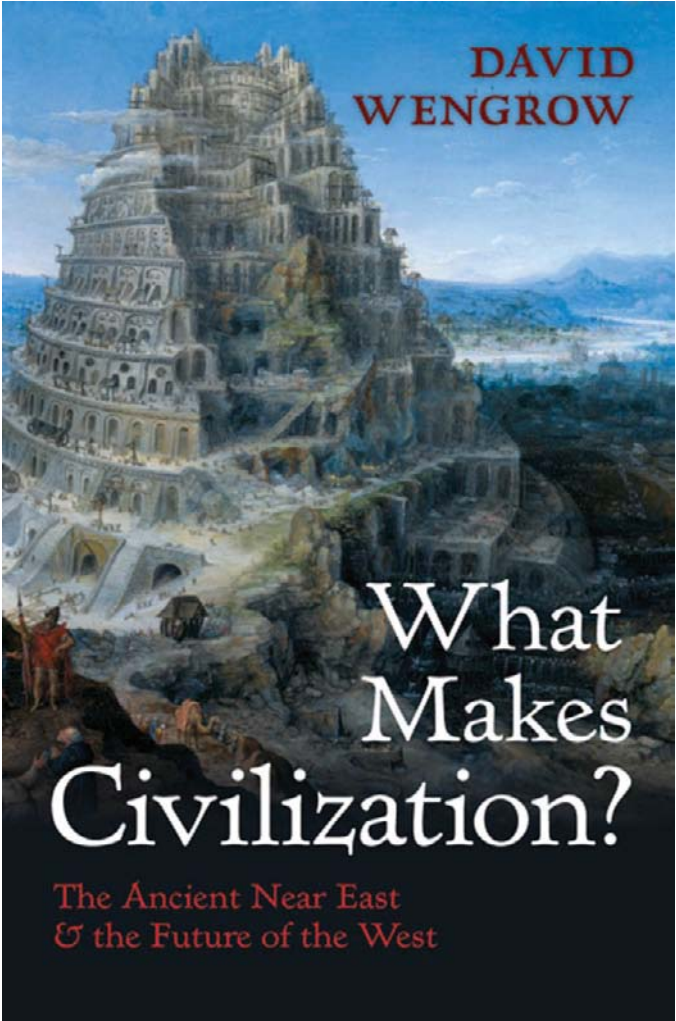




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What Makes Civilization?

The Ancient Near East
& the Future of the West

INTRODUCTION: A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

Our subject is the birth of civilization in the Near East. We shall not, therefore, consider the question how civilization in the abstract became possible. I do not think there is an answer to that question; in any case it is a philosophical rather than a historical one. But it may be said that the material we are going to discuss has a unique bearing on it all the same.

Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (1951)

We are now in the middle of a full-blown Jihad, that is to say we have against us the fiercest prejudices of a people in a primeval state of civilization ... We've practically come to the collapse of society here and there's little on which you can depend for its reconstruction.

From the diaries of Gertrude Bell, Britain's Oriental Secretary in Baghdad (1920)

The historian Lucien Febvre once warned that to seek the origins of 'civilization' is to embark upon a series of dangerous excavations (*sondages hasardeux*).

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Map 1. The ancient Near East

He was referring to the murky etymology of a word that first entered European languages during the late eighteenth century, in an age of empire and revolution. Its genesis in the philosophical writings of the Enlightenment is elusive. Among the earliest attestations comes in the third volume of Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger's *l'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* ('Antiquity Revealed by Its Customs'), a 'critical examination of the main attitudes, ceremonies, and religious and political institutions

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of the different peoples of the earth'. Posthumously published in 1766, this was one of a number of highly theoretical works in which Boulanger sought to bring order to the complex history of human political relations. An earlier volume, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (1761) had laid foundations, asserting the existence in Asian societies—both ancient and modern—of a type of political subject alien to Europe: a subject passionately wedded to his own oppression, 'kissing the chains' that bind him, and heroically sacrificing his life at a tyrant's whim. In *l'Antiquité* Boulanger advised the administrators of his day: 'When a savage people has become civilized, we must not put an end to the act of civilization by giving it rigid and irrevocable laws; we must make it look upon the legislation given to it as a form of *continuous civilization*.'

Febvre's choice of archaeological metaphor is apposite. The idea of civilization has always been linked to the desire for universal history; a history that transcends written records, extending back in time to the origins of our species, outwards in space to encompass the full range of contemporary human diversity, and—at least in its early formulations—onwards into some improved future condition. Today we might again be inclined towards the anti-utopian interpretations of civilization that proliferated around the middle of the twentieth century—Sigmund Freud's juxtaposition of culture and sexual fulfilment, or Franz Steiner's dark vision of the West as a society that, through technology, has finally tamed the primeval spirits of the corn and wilderness,

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only to succeed in driving its demons deep into the heart of society itself. In origin, however, civilization was a profoundly optimistic concept, whose adherents believed fervently in the natural tendency of human history towards a synthesis of scientific reason and moral progress. By 1798, when Napoleon Bonaparte set out to conquer Egypt, it had also become a powerful source of political rhetoric, and a cause worth dying for.

John Headley (2000) has cogently argued that the European notion of human history as a ‘civilizing process’ of universal dimensions long predates the use of the word civilization itself. He finds it, for example, in Late Renaissance interpretations of the Greco-Roman ‘cosmopolis’—a civic community forever coming into being and expanding through its transformation of a barbarian periphery. In adapting the ancient ideas of *polis* and *civitas* Jesuit scholars and administrators of the sixteenth century, such as Giovanni Botero and José de Acosta, found a cultural compass around which to orientate the newly ‘discovered’ peoples of the non-Christian world. On the basis of technological traits—such as the possession of writing, planned and permanent settlements, monumental masonry, and sophisticated equipment for eating, clothing, and waste disposal—certain pagans were deemed further along the road to full humanity, and hence more prepared for evangelization, than others:

In the *De procuranda Indorum salute* José de Acosta had made the two features of literacy and settlement, but chiefly literacy,

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the prime determinants for distinguishing different degrees of civilization within the broad category of barbarism. Thus the Chinese as most obviously literate as well as settled recommended themselves in the first category, the Mexicans and Peruvians as settled but only most primitively literate belonged to an intermediate category, whereas such nomadic pre-literate peoples as the Brazilians and Chichimeca revealed a pre-social condition of utter savagery. By defining a measure of civilization religiously neutral according to the determinants of literacy and settlement, Acosta had in effect provided a fragile, slender ledge upon which could be extended the broadly recognized and even admired architectural and social features of the Mexican and Incan peoples.

At the height of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperialism, the idea of civilization as a quantity that can be identified to a greater or lesser extent in all human societies achieved the status of scientifically verifiable fact. Racial type—measured and classified on the basis of phenotypical features such as skin colour and skull form—came to be regarded as an accurate indicator of a population or individual's place within the spectrum of 'civilized' and 'non-civilized' peoples. The status of the ancient Near East as a 'cradle' or 'birthplace' of civilization was paradoxical in this regard. It reserved an exalted role for this region in the making of the modern world. But it also implied that civilization had since moved on, from ancient Near East to modern West. In the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire, many European visitors to the Near East wrote of its neglect; of the loss of civilization and a subsequent reversion to some

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more primeval state. The idea of a 'cradle of civilization' also suggested the need for external custodianship of a threatened legacy, imposed by force if necessary (cradles, after all, are occupied by helpless infants, not responsible adults). This was partly a matter of explaining why vast quantities of antiquities needed to be brought to Europe and America for study and safekeeping, but it also resonated with contemporary political affairs (the collapse of Ottoman authority and the growth of European military power in the region), and with the wider intellectual concerns of Victorian scholarship, particularly in matters of race and imperial conquest.

'Civilization', wrote James Henry Breasted (1865–1935)—the founder of Chicago's illustrious Oriental Institute, 'arose in the Orient, and Europe obtained it there.' The history of the Near East could, he argued, be understood as a series of titanic struggles between the Indo-European and Semitic peoples, who converged repeatedly upon the 'Fertile Crescent' of western Asia from their respective homelands on the steppes of central Asia and the deserts of Arabia. The struggle, wrote Breasted in 1916, 'is still going on'. As historian Thomas Scheffler (2003) points out:

Breasted's geo-strategic view of ancient history betrayed some striking parallels to the imperialist zeitgeist of his own times. By and large, the area he designated as the 'Fertile Crescent' was geographically coextensive with those parts of the Ottoman Empire that the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 had reserved for Great Britain and France [i.e. the Levantine

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coast, eastern Anatolia, and Mesopotamia]. By 1916, when *Ancient Times* was published, the USA had not yet entered the First World War, and the King–Crane Commission had not yet submitted its famous report of 28 August 1919, recommending an American mandate for Asia Minor and Syria. Nevertheless, the language Breasted used for describing the Fertile Crescent indicated how much he was aware of the region's pivotal geo-strategic importance, especially for the control of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Contemporaries of Breasted wrote with conviction about the lack of a warrior caste in the indigenous literary traditions of the ancient Near East, drawing contrasts with the elite fighting bands of Indo-European mythology. It was widely argued that technological prowess in the arts of combat (exemplified by their use of the horse-drawn chariot) allowed these 'proto-European' warrior groups to intervene—periodically and decisively—in the geopolitics of ancient Near Eastern states. Ideas of this kind, laced with *Boy's Own* bravado, were offered to explain the collapse of palatial civilization throughout the Near East at the end of the Bronze Age. In his monumental *Struggle of the Nations*, Director General of Egyptian Antiquities Gaston Maspéro (1846–1916) drew particular attention to a scene carved on the walls of a New Kingdom temple at Abydos, in southern Egypt. It shows Ramesses the Great flanked by running bodyguards whose horned helmets and short swords identified them as *Shardana* (Sardinians) and, by the racial criteria of the day, as 'European' or 'Indo-Aryan'. The inability of a monarch to raise a native army, and his reliance upon foreign mercenaries,

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had been taken by European intellectuals since the Enlightenment as a defining characteristic and weakness of 'despotic' political systems. (The Ottoman Sultanate, which then controlled much of the Near East, was regarded as the prime exemplar by virtue of its dependence upon elite units of Mameluke and Janissary fighters.) Moreover, in Egyptian iconography the job of protecting the king's body usually falls to gods, not men, implying an almost superhuman status for these immigrant warriors. The monuments appeared to offer ancient foundations for what many Europeans felt was their pre-ordained role in the Near East: protectors and preservers of a civilized tradition, under threat from modern populations whose links to that tradition had long been severed, or had never existed at all.

Today the concept of civilization, reinvigorated after a brief post-colonial slumber, is undergoing a further transformation. 'Civilizations are dynamic; they rise and fall; they divide and merge. And, as any student of history knows, civilizations disappear and are buried in the sands of time.' The writer was Samuel Huntington, late Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University. In 1993 he published an article entitled 'The Clash of Civilizations', which took issue with arguments presented by his former student, Francis Fukuyama. In a 1989 piece which later developed (as would Huntington's response) into a full-length book, Fukuyama had proposed that world history was entering a new phase, characterized by:

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the end of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This is not to say that there will no longer be events to fill the pages of *Foreign Affairs's* yearly summaries of international relations, for the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world. But there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material world *in the long run*.

Huntington disagreed. His response, which duly appeared in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, argued that human societies—far from converging upon any common form of organization—are in fact experiencing a return to tribalism, and on a scale unprecedented in history, a 'civilizational' scale. What Huntington meant by civilization was made admirably clear in the opening paragraphs of his essay:

A civilization is a cultural entity. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. The culture of a village in southern Italy may be different from that of a village in northern Italy, but both will share in a common Italian culture that distinguishes them from German villages. European communities, in turn, will share cultural features that distinguish them from Arab or Chinese communities. Arabs, Chinese and Westerners, however, are not part of any broader cultural entity. They constitute civilizations. A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language,

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history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people. People have levels of identity: a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a Christian, a European, a Westerner. The civilization to which he belongs is the broadest level of identification with which he intensely identifies. People can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilizations change.

As Huntington developed his interpretation of current world affairs—the genocidal breakdown of former Yugoslavia, the proliferation of sophisticated weapons in non-Western states, and the formation of new economic blocs in East Asia—the concept of civilization began, for the umpteenth time in its turbulent history, to mutate, blending into the new political scenery, taking on new energy. Civilization, for Huntington, was rapidly becoming both cause and explanation for the uglier side of global politics, as well as the means to its resolution. The West, misguided in its old-fashioned and monolithic notion of civilization as a universal value, would now have to face up to the existence of ‘civilizations’, plural. In a vision that owes more than a little to the archaeological imagination, Huntington explains how the Cold War cast an ideological veil over deep and enduring fissures in the fabric of humanity, which—with the removal of the Iron Curtain—are now showing again on the surface of the globe. Humanity, he prophesies, will be pulled apart along the bloodstained lines of old civilizations. Each of them is transnational in

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scope, is universal in outlook and ambition, and draws sustenance from firmly rooted—and mutually incompatible—beliefs about how people should live their lives, bury their dead, produce and consume goods, experience sexuality, and pursue spiritual fulfilment.

These arguments have provoked an outpouring of responses. Embraced by some political philosophers as revelatory wisdom, they are condemned by other commentators as monstrous abstractions: fuel to the flames of those very fundamentalisms they purport to oppose. In a scathing review for *The Nation* (October 2001) Edward Said, the late Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, launched a frontal assault:

In fact, Huntington is an ideologist, someone who wants to make ‘civilizations’ and ‘identities’ into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that ‘the clash of civilizations’ argues is the reality.

Remarkably, Huntington’s thesis has as yet been little commented on by the rearguard of civilization studies—the archaeologists and anthropologists whose disciplines were first called into being as a means of establishing what civilizations are, how they first developed, and the

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manner in which they evolve. Huntington himself invited such commentary. In his expanded work on the clash of civilizations (subtitle: 'the remaking of world order'), he acknowledges and seeks to incorporate their contributions to the debate. The early history of civilizations that he sketches out is a history of isolates:

For more than three thousand years after civilizations first emerged, the contacts among them were, with some exceptions, either nonexistent or limited or intermittent and intense. The nature of these contacts is well expressed in the word historians use to describe them: 'encounters'. Civilizations were separated by time and space... Until 1500 the Andean and Mesoamerican civilizations had no contact with other civilizations or with each other. The early civilizations in the valleys of the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus and Yellow rivers also did not interact.

To illustrate the putative isolation of early civilizations, of no small importance for his larger arguments, Huntington borrows an image from Carroll Quigley's (1961) *The Evolution of Civilizations*. Resembling an inverted shrub, it portrays ancient civilizations as branching out from a common set of 'Neolithic Garden Cultures', carefully avoiding one another as they evolve, split, and mutate.

Part I of this book is a reply, by an archaeologist, to Huntington's claims about the lack of interaction between early civilizations. Its focus is the ancient Near East, which I take here to include both Egypt and Mesopotamia. But the points I make about the

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interconnectedness of prehistoric and ancient societies could be extended to all of the other regions mentioned by Huntington, and a considerable (if rather specialized) literature already exists to that effect. Some readers will by now be suspecting the presence in our midst of a straw man. Is it not obvious that Huntington, who never pretended to be an expert on the ancient world, has grossly overstated his case? Have not the connections between ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and their neighbours been recognized for well over a century?

My answer to this is that some straw men have a habit of resurrecting themselves, even after numerous attempts at incineration. Burning them is not a one-off exercise, but a 'moveable feast' that must be periodically repeated in order to remind us of what we already know, or have a tendency to forget. Most studies of 'early civilization' continue to focus upon a single region, or on a series of artificially isolated regions, with little attention to the relationships between them. By and large, we are still bound to a view of the ancient world as populated by 'Greeks', 'Egyptians', 'Mesopotamians', and so on, who are supposed to think and behave in distinctly 'Greek', 'Egyptian', 'Mesopotamian', etc., ways. The first part of this book questions the validity of such distinctions, arguing that cultural identities in the ancient Near East were the product of interaction and exchange, rather than isolation. But it also goes beyond these issues, to address the singular qualities that differentiate Egypt from Mesopotamia, and the

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persistence of those differences over thousands of years, despite the flow of influences and materials between them.

A Little Background

The study of Egypt and Mesopotamia does not begin on an equal footing. As one ancient historian observes, there has ‘never been a “Babylonia-mania” in Western art, literature, architecture, or design to rival Egypt’s hold on pre-modern Europe’ (Lundquist 1995: 67). Certain features and memories of ancient Egyptian culture were known, celebrated, and imitated in the West long before the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script in the early nineteenth century, notably through the medium of biblical and Greco-Roman texts, as well as travellers’ reports of the impressive stone monuments still visible on the Giza plateau and elsewhere in the valley of the Nile. The same sources also preserved a memory of the great empires of Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The kingdoms of Assyria and Babylonia were recalled, if only through the eyes of those they subjugated. But by contrast, the earliest literate culture of the region—that of ancient Sumer, occupying today’s southern Iraq—was completely unknown to European scholarship just a century ago. Its cities, temples, and scribal archives lay buried deep within the artificial mounds known as *tells*, formed by the accumulation of mud-brick architecture over millennia of human habitation.

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Today we are aware that during the third millennium BC, which forms the chronological focus of this book, Egypt and Mesopotamia witnessed—more or less simultaneously—the emergence of dynastic polities on a scale then unprecedented in human history. Like their associated systems of writing, the earliest in the world, these polities took on strikingly different forms. The heartland of urban societies in Mesopotamia lay between the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, on the alluvial plains extending south of modern Baghdad to the marshy head of the Persian Gulf. By the end of the third millennium BC, written sources routinely refer to the southern part of this area as Sumer, a region made up of politically independent city-states in which a variety of languages (including Sumerian and Akkadian) were spoken, but whose inhabitants nevertheless recognized a common religious and cultural identity. By contrast, the ‘Two Lands’ of Upper and Lower Egypt—as hieroglyphic sources refer to the valley and delta of the Nile—constituted a single unified kingdom, held together by a sacred monarch whose territorial control extended from the First Cataract of the Nile at Elephantine (near modern Aswan) to the Mediterranean Sea.

Since Henri Frankfort wrote his *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (1951) (the last major comparative study of early Egypt and Mesopotamia) our understanding of these societies has increased exponentially. So too has the loss and destruction of ancient sites and artefacts through industrial dam construction, conflict, and looting. Dramatic increases in knowledge have

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nevertheless taken place, notably in the field of prehistoric archaeology, providing a much fuller account of the background to the emergence of the first dynastic states in each region. And the spaces between and adjacent to them have been gradually filled in by evidence for societies of comparable scale and organizational complexity, such as the remarkable kingdom of Ebla in western Syria (whose capital, at Tell Mardikh, was discovered by Italian scholars in the 1960s), and the previously unsuspected Oxus (or 'Bactria-Margiana') civilization of central Asia (uncovered by Russian archaeologists in the 1970s). These new revelations, and the dense web of connections which they reveal between the societies of the ancient Near East, serve only to reinforce the interpretive challenge posed by 'the birth of civilization':

For a comparison between Egypt and Mesopotamia discloses, not only that writing, representational art, monumental architecture, and a new kind of political coherence were introduced in the two countries; it also reveals the striking fact that the purpose of their writing, the contents of their representations, the functions of their monumental buildings, and the structure of their new societies differed completely. What we observe is not merely the establishment of civilized life, but the emergence, concretely, of the distinctive 'forms' of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilization.

(Frankfort 1951: 49)