

# Early Civilizations

Ancient Egypt in Context

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# One

## The Unique and the General

... concerning Egypt I will now speak at length, because nowhere are there so many marvelous things, nor anywhere else on earth are there to be seen so many works of inexpressible greatness.

Herodotus, *History* II.35

Already in Herodotus' time Egypt was recognized as an ancient civilization. Its extraordinary accomplishments commanded the wonder and admiration of foreign visitors, while many of its customs astonished and even shocked them. Yet ancient Egypt was only one of many civilizations that developed independently of each other in different parts of the world beginning about five thousand years ago.

This book will consider ancient Egypt in the light of comparative research I am doing on it and six other early civilizations. It will try to delineate what features ancient Egypt had in common with other early civilizations and to what extent it was unique. The first chapter is a theoretical and methodological introduction and the following three chapters deal with the economies, political organization, and religious aspects of early civilizations. A final chapter considers briefly the relevance of these comparisons for understanding the factors which shaped the development of these societies.

### The Comparative Study of Early Civilizations

Except in relation to the study of the early development of the Egyptian state, where anthropological archaeologists such as Walter

Fairservis (1972), the late Michael Hoffman (1979), Robert Wenke (1989), and anthropologically informed Egyptologists such as Kathryn Bard (1987, 1992) play a major role, relations between Egyptology and anthropology have not been as close as they should be, or even as close as contacts between the two disciplines were in the more remote past. Egyptology began as, and has largely remained, a humanistic study of the past. It is characterized by a deep interest in philology, art history, and to a lesser degree political history. This has not ruled out a concern with everyday life, as was demonstrated long ago by the works of J. Gardner Wilkinson (1854) and Adolf Erman (1894). Yet, except in the archaeological researches of W.M. Flinders Petrie (Drower 1985), the study of everyday life in ancient Egypt has not been a central concern. Its understanding has been treated as something that emerges naturally out of familiarity with the data, rather than as a form of investigation that requires special training, as philology and art history do. Egyptologists tend to assume that no particular expertise is needed to understand the behavior of the ancient Egyptians. Yet they are also convinced that ancient Egyptian civilization was unique and should be studied for its own sake. According to Christopher Eyre (1987a:5), the belief that Egyptian civilization was different from that of any other society has discouraged Egyptologists from treating information about other early civilizations as a means to understand ancient Egypt better.

Anthropologists long shared a similar, strong commitment to historical particularism, although they combined it with a greater acceptance of cultural relativism. Early in the twentieth century the German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas convinced most of his colleagues that every culture was a unique product of its own largely fortuitous historical development and hence could be studied and appreciated only in terms of its own beliefs and values (Harris 1968:250–89).

Yet in the 1960s anthropological archaeology was inspired by cultural–ecological and neoevolutionary tendencies in social anthropology to abandon its traditional commitment to historical particularism and begin paying greater attention to the cross-cultural regularities in human behavior, which soon became privileged objects of study. Beginning in the 1930s, the cultural ecologist Julian Steward maintained that the comparative examination of regulari-

ties in human behavior should be the primary object of social science research, while stigmatizing as parochial the investigation of traits that were specific only to historically related cultures (Steward 1949). Steward's ecological approach stressed the importance of studying what was cross-culturally recurrent and ignoring what was unique. The processual archaeology of the 1960s, which embodied Steward's program, stressed the study of ecology, trade, and sociopolitical organization, while treating art, religion, and values as epiphenomenal and hence of little real interest. Contrary to the Boasian position, science and the evolutionary study of the general were privileged at the expense of history and the investigation of the particular (Caldwell 1959; Watson, LeBlanc, and Redman 1971; Binford 1972).

The supporters of this paradigm made important methodological contributions to the study of archaeological data and the understanding of early civilizations. Yet, despite Steward's formal commitment to multilineal evolution, the major works of this period, even when they did not have a processual orientation, tended to treat all early civilizations as developing along similar lines. This was true of Steward's "Cultural Causality and Law: A Trial Formulation of the Development of Early Civilizations" (1949), Robert McC. Adams' *The Evolution of Urban Society: Early Mesopotamia and Prehispanic Mexico* (1966), and Paul Wheatley's *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (1971), a comparative study of urbanism in preindustrial civilizations.

Only in the 1980s did anthropological archaeologists once again become concerned with the many aspects of human endeavors, and hence of the archaeological record, that were being ignored as a result of this nearly exclusive preoccupation with cross-cultural regularities. There also developed a renewed appreciation for the considerable variation in human behavior from one culture to another. Within the context of what has come to be called postprocessual archaeology, religion, art, values, and people's perceptions of themselves and the world around them came to be viewed as important elements in understanding human behavior and accounting for the archaeological record (Flannery and Marcus 1976; Hodder 1986, 1987a, 1987b; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Bintliff 1991; Preucel 1991). A widespread acceptance of ecological factors

as the principal determinants of human behavior was increasingly replaced by a neo-Boasian cultural determinism, which posited that beliefs transmitted in specific cultural traditions are the main factors influencing human behavior. This approach values the study of the beliefs of other peoples more than it does the search for general explanations of human behavior (Wylie 1985:90).

Such developments have been encouraged by a renewed emphasis in social anthropology on seeing cultural traditions as 'sense-making systems' that shape people's perceptions and values—hence fundamentally influencing their reactions to new experiences. Through the advocacy of scholars such as Victor Turner (1967, 1975), Marshall Sahlins (1976), and Clifford Geertz (1984), these ideas have acquired enormous influence among social anthropologists. This development in turn has convinced many archaeologists that the distinctions that processual archaeologists had drawn between science and history, evolution and history, and the social sciences and humanities are unproductive and misleading, and henceforth should be abandoned. Many archaeologists have also become convinced that it is as important to try to explain behavioral differences among peoples as it is to explain similarities. Those postprocessual archaeologists who do not deny the value of all comparative studies have restored to comparative research the goals it had when an earlier generation of scholars, including V. Gordon Childe (1934), Henri Frankfort (1948, 1956), and Karl Wittfogel (1957), exhibited an interest in the differences as well as the similarities among early civilizations.

My own work is premised on the assumption that, when it comes to accounting for human behavior, explaining differences is theoretically as important as explaining similarities. Even aspects of behavior that are unique to individual civilizations should be studied. For example, many peoples have conceptualized "high places" as points where human beings can gain privileged access to the supernatural. Only the ancient Egyptians, however, drawing upon the imagery of islands of high ground emerging from the annual Nile flood, formulated the specific concept of the mound of creation, upon which order emerged from the primeval sea at the time of creation and where it was recreated at the beginning of each day and every time a pharaoh sat upon his throne. This unique concept

resonated throughout ancient Egyptian religious thought. The mound of creation underlay the heart of every temple and inspired the pyramids and obelisks that to outsiders have become the symbols of Egyptian civilization. The full meaning of such symbols can be understood only through the detailed contextual study of ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices, not through the comparison of ancient Egypt with other early civilizations.

Yet Egyptian civilization also shared important features with many other early civilizations and in some instances with all of them. Kingship, taxes, and bureaucracy are only a few traits that are found in all early civilizations. The identification and explanation of such common features help scholars to understand every early civilization better. This is especially important since, because of a lack of information, there is much that we do not know about individual early civilizations. A comparative study of the traits common to all, or even some, of the early civilizations may assist us to understand ancient Egypt better. At the same time, the features unique to ancient Egypt are equally important for understanding all other early civilizations.

The concept of early civilization as a distinctive type of society implies an evolutionary view of human history. Social evolutionism has been sharply attacked in recent decades as a myth that was created by Western European scholars beginning in the eighteenth century to justify colonial exploitation in many parts of the world (Sioui 1992). I do not dispute that there is truth in this charge, but would question the further suggestion that evolutionism, as an approach to studying human history, is inherently and inescapably colonialist or racist. In recent decades archaeological research which has been inspired by an evolutionary perspective has demonstrated the creativity and progress achieved in prehistoric times by indigenous peoples around the world. Especially since the 1960s, knowledge of their achievements has played a significant role in undermining the justifications offered for colonialism and has helped to encourage independence movements in many countries (Robertshaw 1990).

It is also unrealistic to deny the fact of cultural evolution. All modern societies are descended from Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer societies. Along the way, those that have abandoned hunter-gatherer economies have also experienced major changes in social

organization and in the way their members perceive the universe and the place of human beings in it. Evolutionary beliefs cause harm when anthropologists become so preoccupied with evolutionary change that they forget the common humanity of all peoples and deny cultural relativism to the extent that they fail to remember, for example, that groups that have remained hunter-gatherers have as much right as anyone else to have their ways of life respected and that these peoples may, like all others, possess understanding and knowledge that are potentially valuable for all humanity.

To adapt cultural evolutionism to a modern scientific understanding of human behavior, it is necessary to stop viewing it as a unilinear process, with all societies evolving along a single path to a common future. When it came to the study of early civilizations, Julian Steward was a unilinear evolutionist to the same degree as were most evolutionists of the nineteenth century (Steward 1949). In the period following World War II, this was also true of Leslie White (1949, 1959), neoevolutionary anthropologists such as Elman Service (1971, 1975) and Morton Fried (1967), and most processual archaeologists. In each instance unilinear evolutionism was based on an unrealistic faith in the cross-cultural regularity of human behavior.

My own view of cultural evolution is more pragmatic and inductive. I acknowledge that new forms of societies have come into being during the course of human history and that it is important to understand the distinctive properties of each new type of society and how it has affected existing ones. Like the American anthropologist George P. Murdock (1959) and the British archaeologist V. Gordon Childe (1947), I see cultural evolution as being congruent with the sum total of human history and the task of anthropologists to explain both the similarities and the differences that have characterized that history. An evolutionism that seeks to account only for similarities destines itself to be incomplete.

### A Definition of Early Civilization

Early civilization, as anthropologists use this term, denotes the earliest form of class-based society that developed in the course of human history. Early civilizations constitute the first but not the only type of preindustrial civilization (Crone 1989). They are (or rather

were, since none currently exists) characterized by a high degree of social and economic inequality; power was based primarily on the creation and control of agricultural surpluses. While the technologies of these societies tended to remain simple, the organization and management of human labor could sometimes be quite complex. These societies were internally stratified in a hierarchy of largely endogamous classes. Each civilization was based upon exploitative relations, in which a king and a small ruling class extracted surplus production from the lower classes. These surpluses supported an elite style of life that was clearly distinguished from that of the lower classes by its luxuriousness and by the creation of monumental art, architecture, and other status symbols. Both slavery and coercive institutions, such as *corvée* labor and mandatory military service, existed, but they were less developed than in many subsequent preindustrial societies. Yet those in control possessed sufficient political power and social sanctions to conserve the stability of their regimes over long periods. The symbols that were used to conceptualize and discuss social relations in such societies were drawn mainly from the sphere of religion, which at its highest levels was subject to state control (Sahlins 1976:211–12). In these societies distinctions that are drawn today between the natural, the supernatural, and the social had little, if any, meaning.

In the past, civilization has often been equated with literacy (Morgan 1907:12; Childe 1950; Sjöberg 1960:32–34, 38; Goody 1986). Yet this association does not hold any more than do attempts to define early civilizations in terms of other specific traits of material culture. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and among the Mayas of Central America, fully developed writing systems, based on logographic, phonetic, and semantic—but not on purely syllabic or alphabetic—principles, were created at an early stage in the development of civilization. In highland Mexico, despite considerable emphasis on record keeping for economic and historical purposes, no means was developed for representing speech, as opposed to ideas, and in Peru and West Africa no indigenous system of writing was ever developed. Yet there is no obvious difference in the degree of social, economic, and political development of early civilizations according to whether or not they possessed writing. The Inkas developed an elaborate system of *quipus*, or knotted cords, as

mnemonics for keeping government accounts, and where it was not possible to record speech professional 'rememberers' kept track of the past and of other vital information for the upper classes. It is interesting that in each civilization where writing appears to have developed without any evident outside stimulus, it did so at an early phase in the history of that civilization. On the other hand, despite a long tradition of idea-writing in highland Mexico, the peoples of that region did not develop true literacy prior to the Spanish conquest.

Anthropologists distinguish early civilizations from less complex chiefdoms or tribal states and from still simpler tribal agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies. These smaller-scale societies tended to be integrated primarily by kinship networks, and social relations rather than religious concepts played a leading role in mediating all other forms of activities (Fried 1967; Service 1971). Early civilizations were also different from later, more complex preindustrial societies, such as those of classical Greece, Rome, and Han China, where wealth was calculated more abstractly in terms of money rather than land, money payments tended to replace corvées and payments in kind, armies became institutionalized to the point where their commanders might challenge the power of the state, and international religions developed in a context in which the natural, supernatural, and social realms became increasingly differentiated (Heichelheim 1958). Early civilizations are also distinguished from still later forms of preindustrial civilization, such as the feudal societies of medieval Europe and Japan. It is doubtful that any of these later forms of preindustrial civilizations could have evolved had early civilizations not previously arisen in the same or adjacent regions.

### City and Territorial States

All of the early civilizations that I have studied can be subdivided into two general types according to the nature of their political organization. I have labeled these city-state systems and territorial states (Trigger 1985a). Charles Maisels (1990) has called them city and village states.

City-state systems took the form of a network of adjacent city states whose elites tended to compete with one another, often militarily, to control territory, trade routes, and other resources,

while at the same time sharing common status symbols and making alliances with each other, often through intermarriage among their ruling families. Each city state had a relatively small territory (often covering only a few hundred square kilometers) and a capital city, which frequently was enclosed by a wall. In addition to its capital, a city state might have a number of smaller centers as well as numerous farming villages and hamlets. The four city-state systems that I consider in this study are those of ancient Sumer, located in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq), prior to the Old Babylonian period; the Aztecs and other peoples who inhabited the Basin of Mexico, in highland Mexico where Mexico City is now located, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D.; the Mayas of southeastern Mexico, Belize, and parts of Guatemala and Honduras during the Classic Period between A.D. 200 and 900; and the Yorubas and neighboring Edo-speaking people of Benin in southwestern Nigeria during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries A.D.

The urban centers of these states tended to be relatively large communities, with populations ranging from less than a thousand to over a hundred thousand individuals, depending on the ability of a particular city state to control and exact tribute from its neighbors. Considerable numbers of farmers frequently lived in such centers in order to secure greater protection for themselves and their possessions. It is estimated that in southern Mesopotamia in Early Dynastic times (ca. 2900–2350 B.C.) over 80 percent of the total population lived in urban centers (Adams 1981:90–94). Among the Yorubas, most extended families had their principal residences in towns and cities, although some members spent much of their lives in small villages or homesteads producing food for their relatives.

These cities also supported craft production, which sought to satisfy the demands not only of the urban elite but of society as a whole. The development of craft specialization and of commercial exchanges between town and countryside, as well as between neighboring urban centers, encouraged the growth of public markets. These were major features of urban life among the Aztecs and the Yorubas, and women in both cases played a prominent role in the retailing of goods. While the evidence for actual marketplaces is less clear for southern Mesopotamia, the remnants of shop-lined streets indicate vigorous commercial activity involving large numbers of

people. This activity in turn promoted competition among city states to obtain supplies of exotic raw materials. As a result of widespread access to goods produced by full-time specialists and the development of more intensive agriculture close to urban centers, city states were able to support a considerable number of non-food producers, possibly 10 to 20 percent of the total population.

Other early civilizations formed large territorial states at an early stage in their development. Ancient Egypt, which consisted of the Nile Valley north of Aswan and its adjacent hinterland, was one of these. In the centuries prior to its unification, small states developed in southern Egypt and various parts of the north. Yet Egypt was politically united prior to the development of the court-centered tradition that was to characterize its elite culture from Early Dynastic times to the Late Period (Hoffman 1979). Another example is the Inka state, which arose in the central highlands of Peru in the fifteenth century A.D. This state originated in the region around Cuzco, in the central highlands of Peru, but by the time of the Spanish conquest embraced all the territory located west of the Amazonian rain forest from Ecuador to central Chile. While civilizations had developed earlier in the coastal and southern highland regions of Peru, there is no evidence of a major state having existed previously in what was to become the heartland of the Inka Empire (Keatinge 1988). Inka art and architecture were also different from those of any previous civilization in the region. A third example of a territorial state was centered in the eastern and central parts of the Yellow River valley of northern China during the Shang (ca. 1750–1100 B.C.) and Western Chou (1100–771 B.C.) Dynasties and by the Western Chou period extended south to include parts of the Yangtze Valley. Although some scholars view northern China at this period as a network of city states, the evidence concerning the settlement patterns and administration of this region suggests two successive territorial states, although less powerful city and territorial states may have existed around their borders (Chang 1986b).

Territorial states developed a hierarchy of administrative centers at the local, provincial, and national levels, but these urban centers tended to have small populations. Even national capitals, with a maximum population of probably no more than fifty thousand people, were no larger than those of a substantial city state. This was

because these centers were inhabited almost exclusively by the ruling class and by the administrators, craft specialists, and retainers who served them. Because of the security provided by the state, farmers tended to live in dispersed homesteads and in villages. The internal layout of administrative centers also tended to be decentralized. For this reason, Egypt was once characterized as a civilization without cities (Wilson 1960).

In territorial states a clearly demarcated two-tiered economy developed, with distinct rural and urban sectors. Farmers manufactured their own tools and household possessions on a part-time basis during periods of each year when they were not fully occupied with agricultural labor. Usually they utilized only locally-available raw materials and exchanged goods at local markets. Elite craftsmen, on the other hand, were employed by the state, either in provincial centers or at the national capital, to manufacture luxury goods for the king and the upper classes, often from raw materials imported specifically for that purpose. Unlike the city state, the only significant economic link between rural and urban centers in territorial states tended to be the payment of rents and taxes and the performance of *corvées* by peasants. The transfer of food surpluses from the countryside to urban centers took place principally in terms of appropriative rather than commercial mechanisms. Insofar as markets existed, they were usually small and served the needs of the local rural population and the urban poor.

Because of their large size, territorial states required large bureaucracies to ensure the collection of taxes that could be used to support state activities. Peasant communities, while becoming internally more hierarchical within the context of the state, tended to preserve more of their prestate culture than survived in city states, where large numbers of farmers came to reside in or near urban centers. Production was less specialized than it was in city states, full-time specialists fewer, and the quality of goods available to farmers poorer. Farming also appears to have been less intensive in territorial states, since there were fewer urban dwellers to feed. The percentage of the population not engaged in farming was probably less than 10 percent.

This suggests that, if a city-state civilization had become involved in prolonged conflict with a territorial state, despite the latter's

political unity, the greater technological and economic development of the city states would have given them a competitive edge. This might help to explain why Egypt was relatively unsuccessful when it engaged in military competition with the city-based states of Southwest Asia, such as those of the Hittites and Assyrians. It might also explain why at a later period the economically more dynamic Greeks were able to resist and finally to conquer the Persian Empire.

On the other hand, the government of a territorial state was able to command the food surpluses and labor of a far greater number of people than could the government of the largest city state. Hence such governments were capable of undertaking projects on an immense scale and could sponsor the work of many more skilled craftsmen than could the elites of any city state. No buildings were erected in southern Mesopotamia that remotely equaled in size or engineering skill the pyramids at Giza, although during the Old and Middle Kingdoms local temples in Egypt seem to have been constructed on a more modest scale than were the temples in most Mesopotamian cities. In the city states of Mexico, and especially among the Mayas, elaborate stone architecture was common. It did not equal, however, either in the scale of individual projects or in the size of the stone blocks used, the monumental stone architecture that was erected over the very short life span of the Inka empire.

The distinction between the political organization of city and territorial states appears to be clear-cut rather than a matter of scale or degree of integration. When city states conquered their neighbors, they normally compelled them to pay tribute but left their political institutions and ruling families intact, preferring to rule indirectly. Territorial states sometimes also controlled conquered neighboring states in this manner, as New Kingdom Egypt did the city states of Palestine and Syria. Inside the borders of territorial states, however, local governments were dismantled and replaced by a bureaucracy controlled by the central government. While local people often continued to play a role in such administrations, especially at the village level, no semi-autonomous state was permitted to threaten the control of the central government. Under these circumstances, interstate tribute was replaced by intrastate

taxation as the basis for financing the activities of the central government. Just as the Egyptian kings molded the Nile Valley north of Aswan into a single state, the Inka rulers sought to convert the much larger Andean core, if not the whole, of their empire into a single state. The control that the central governments of these territorial states exerted was very different from the loose political hegemony and tribute payments that dominant Mesopotamian city states imposed on weaker ones, or that the Aztecs exerted over much of central Mexico.

The development of these two types of states might have been related to relative population densities at the time state formation occurred—territorial states perhaps emerging in areas of lower population density in relation to arable land. Lower population densities would have made it easier for defeated populations to seek refuge in more remote areas, which in turn would have inhibited the successful consolidation of any kind of state. In such areas power would have had to be based on control of larger regions. The Nile Valley north of Aswan was an area of overall low population density at the time of its first political unification (Butzer 1976). There is evidence that the pharaohs who established the First Dynasty not only ruled over the whole of the Nile Valley north of Aswan but also sought to enhance the natural borders of Egypt by depopulating adjacent areas of Nubia, the Sinai Peninsula, and probably Libya. This made it more difficult for Egyptians who objected to the authority of these pharaohs to avoid their rule (Hoffman 1979). However, too few data are available to test a general hypothesis concerning the relation between population density and the formation of different kinds of states. It is not encouraging that the Yorubas, who had a city-state system, also appear in recent times to have had a low absolute population density (Bascom 1955:452). Because of this, it is unrealistic to ignore the possibility that other important variables were involved.

It is significant that city and territorial states existed both in the Old World and the New World and that each type developed at various periods of human history. There is no evidence of historical relations between the different occurrences of the same kind of state; for example, territorial states such as Old Kingdom Egypt, Shang China, and Inka Peru or city-state networks such as ancient Mesopotamia, sixteenth-century Mexico, and eighteenth-century

Nigeria. Instead, these civilizations seem to provide evidence that two different types of political organization developed independently, at different periods, and in different parts of the world. Both types of civilization occurred along major rivers (Egypt, Shang China; Mesopotamia), in highland valleys (Peru; Mexico), and perhaps, if we include the Khmer state of Cambodia as an example of a territorial state (Higham 1989), in tropical forests as well (Maya, Yoruba; Khmer). Nor is literacy associated exclusively with one sort of state. Among territorial states Egypt and China developed literacy, the Inkas did not; among city states the Mesopotamians and the Mayas achieved literacy, while the Aztecs and other highland Mexicans remained semi-literate, and the Yorubas did not develop writing.

The development under these varied circumstances of only two basic types of political organization suggests that there may be only a limited number of viable ways in which societies at any particular level of complexity can be organized (Murdock 1959:134), a possibility further indicated by the recent collapse, after a relatively brief duration, of the Soviet variant of industrialized society (Harris 1992). I believe that these limitations at the political level are likely to be explained in terms of varying costs of decision-making and political control in different kinds of societies. (Flannery 1972; Johnson 1973; Adams 1988; Tainter 1988).

### Comparative Studies

During the past four decades anthropological archaeologists have spent much time studying how early civilizations developed (Adams 1966; R.E.W. Adams 1977; Redman 1978; Hoffman 1979; Jones and Kautz 1981). Since archaeology's chief strength is what it can reveal about changes over long periods of time, this seems to be a potentially highly productive approach. However, while these efforts have resulted in major discoveries relating to the development of specific early civilizations, the theoretical advances do not seem proportional to the amount of energy expended. There are at least two main reasons for this.

First, the origins of early civilizations everywhere predated the earliest appearance of substantial written records. Yet there is much we need to know about the early development of civilizations that

we cannot reasonably hope to learn from archaeological data alone. One needs only to think of the controversies concerning the nature of the social and political organization of the Indus Valley civilization that remain unresolved for lack of contemporary written records. Second, as a result of prolonged occupation, the earliest levels at many important sites have been buried under thick layers of debris from later periods. Because of this, archaeologists are limited in what they can learn about the formative stages of civilization at many key centers. It will take a long time to uncover crucial archaeological evidence concerning the initial development of many early civilizations.

For these reasons I thought it worthwhile to attempt a comparative study of periods of early civilizations that are well documented both archaeologically and textually. My ultimate goal was to learn more about the factors that constrain human behavior by examining the similarities and differences in the ways in which a significant number of civilizations that had evolved independently, or almost independently, in different parts of the world had been structured and how each of them had functioned.

Some archaeologists and anthropologists question the validity of any kind of comparative study. Especially among anthropologists who have adopted a structuralist viewpoint, there has been a revival of the Boasian position that every culture is unique and that, while each one can be studied and understood on its own terms, individual cultures cannot legitimately be compared with one another. This position has been adopted with respect to the Inkas by many Andeanists. They view Inka civilization as the expression of a unique set of beliefs that are of great antiquity in the Central Andes and which made, and continue to make, Inka culture fundamentally different from any other (D'Altroy 1987:5). More generally, Ian Hodder (1986, 1987b) has argued that, because each culture is the product of its own history, cross-cultural comparison is impossible. It is not clear how forcefully Hodder holds this view, since this claim has not prevented him from proposing various cross-cultural generalizations of his own (Hodder 1982:67).

These historical particularist views reflect the belief that what Marshall Sahlins (1976) calls "cultural reason," by which he means decision-making constrained by the idiosyncratic values of specific

cultural traditions, plays a greater role in determining human behavior than does "practical reason," the universally comprehensible calculation of the material interests of individuals and groups. My own view, when beginning this study, was that the extent of idiosyncrasies and of cross-cultural regularities was something that archaeologists and anthropologists had to determine empirically. Nevertheless, I also accepted that previous cross-cultural studies had indicated enough regularities among societies to suggest that such investigations were both possible and interesting.

Social anthropologists have long objected to the cross-cultural comparison of individual traits wrenched from their sociopolitical context (Harris 1968:612-33; Köbben 1952, 1973). While I accept that there is much validity in this criticism, I nevertheless continue to value this form of cross-cultural comparison as a useful tool for exploring general propositions about relations between different aspects of culture (Moore 1961; Ford 1967; Jorgensen 1974; Murdock 1981). The more serious problem is that most of the more robust correlations tend to be self-evident. It is no great surprise to learn that no hunter-gatherer culture has a divine kingship. On the other hand, most other correlations tend to be ambiguous 'tendencies' and 'tilts,' which suggests that multiple factors are involved whose interrelations can be understood only through more detailed study of individual cases (Coult and Habenstein 1965; Textor 1967). Only rarely do robust correlations emerge that are not self-evident (Betzig 1986).

To avoid the problems inherent in non-contextualized trait comparisons, I decided to conduct a detailed study of seven early civilizations located in different parts of the world. I hoped that this selection was large enough to constitute a reasonable sample of the basic similarities and differences found in all early civilizations and small enough so that I could understand each civilization in structural and functional terms before I attempted a cross-cultural comparison. In this way I sought to answer the social and structural anthropologists' objection that cross-cultural studies cannot produce useful results because they compare traits in isolation from the functional and historical contexts which endow them with behavioral significance. In presenting the results of a comparative study, data must necessarily be isolated from their social context. Prior to my eventual publication of summary descriptions of each civiliza-

tion, readers will have to accept on trust that I attempted a reasonable contextual analysis.

I am surprised by how little importance archaeologists ascribe to this more rigorous form of comparison. Despite Lewis Binford's (1972) demands for theoretical rigor in delineating regularities in human behavior, a cross-cultural generalization about hunter-gatherers consists of a pattern he has observed among the Nunamiut Eskimos of Alaska that is not contradicted by sometimes casual observations that he and other anthropologists have made among the San (Bushmen) of South Africa and the Australian aborigines. The slightest evidence of regularity is accepted as indicating that certain forms of behavior characterize hunter-gatherer life everywhere (Binford 1983:144-92). This is very different from attempting a systematic comparison of hunter-gatherer cultures in different parts of the world.

Nor is any effort made to determine whether hunter-gatherer life has been modified by contacts with Europeans in recent centuries (Binford 1980). To what extent do similarities in hunter-gatherer life in Siberia and North America result from age-old patterns of adaptation to the natural environment or from a far more recent adaptation to the fur trade? In general, scholars tend to be highly critical of evidence that contradicts what they want to believe, while easily accepting what supports their presuppositions. In this instance, neoevolutionary faith in the uniformity of human behavior seems to encourage a belief that what holds true for one or two groups of hunter-gatherers, or any other type of society, is likely to hold true for all of them.

## Methodology

From the available literature I have tried to compile for each civilization as much information as I can concerning the environment, population density and distribution, technology, subsistence patterns, trade, manufacture and distribution of goods, family and community organization, religious beliefs and practices, legal systems, moral codes, art, and concepts about the nature of the individual and of desirable forms of behavior. My aim in each case has been to ascertain how these elements constituted a way of life in individual civilizations before attempting cross-cultural comparisons.

The amount of research that I do concerning each civilization is determined empirically, by noting when I start to encounter a marked and consistent decline in new information. I have found that this tends to occur after I have read thirty to fifty recent scholarly books dealing with each civilization. I then add recently published studies only if they elucidate a significant aspect of an early civilization that has not yet been covered. Securing adequate coverage of the literature is not an easy task. My comparison is not yet finished and my conclusions therefore remain tentative.

To limit imposing my own preconceptions on the data, I have tried as much as possible to understand each civilization as it was perceived by the people who lived in it; that is, from what social anthropologists would call an 'emic' perspective. I have done this by noting the terms used in each civilization for such items as social classes, administrative titles, categories of landholding, and supernatural beings. Only for ancient Egypt do I have even the rudimentary language skills required to do this systematically. Yet, even when depending solely upon glosses in secondary sources, I have found this approach helpful.

This is because words do not always mean what their English translations imply. The Aztecs had two terms that are often translated as 'peasant.' The first of these, *macehualli*, referred to a taxpaying member of a collective landowning group and the second, *mayeque*, to a rent-paying individual bound to land owned or held in return for service to the state by a member of the nobility. The word for king is also used differently in various early civilizations. The Aztec word *tlatoani*, meaning 'great speaker,' was applied to the ruler of every duly constituted city state, just as the English term 'king' refers to the ruler of any kingdom. Yet the ancient Egyptian word for king, *nsw*, was never applied to foreign rulers, who were designated *hk3* ('ruler') or *wr* ('prince'). It has long been recognized that words that are glossed as 'slave' have notoriously different meanings from one society to another (Watson 1980).

Terms referring to the supernatural can be particularly misleading. According to Jan Assmann, ancient Egyptian concepts of time cannot be understood without knowing that they had two words for 'eternity,' *nḥh* and *dt*, which did not mean the same thing; *nḥh* referring to eternal cycles of recurrence and *dt* to eternal changeless-

ness. Neither of these words referred to eternity as we understand it, but instead to a length of time corresponding to the duration of the existing cosmic order (Allen 1988:25–27). The Aztecs ascribed to each human being at least three ‘souls’ or ‘life forces’: the *tonalli*, associated with the head, which was a source of strength, vigor, and rationality, and which could be reborn in one’s descendants; the *teyoli*, associated with the heart and personality, which eventually went to the realms of the dead; and the *ihiyotl*, associated with the liver and with emotion. In life the Aztecs sought to maintain a harmonious relation among these forces, although such an integration could not last beyond death (López Austin 1988:253). This reminds us of Egyptian soul concepts, such as *b3*, *k3*, and *3h*, whose precise significance is the subject of continuing debate (Baines 1991:145). It also calls to mind the possible complexities of meaning that may underlie poorly understood religious concepts in other civilizations. As a result of ignorance, it is all too easy to impose our own concepts on other peoples. Hence for each civilization I have attempted to determine as much as I can about how they conceptualized their world before attempting to ‘translate’ such concepts into a ‘scientific,’ cross-culturally applicable terminology. Where this exercise does not produce enlightenment, because the original terminology is not systematically preserved or is inadequately understood, it at least helps to reveal the limitations of the current understanding of a particular civilization.

I have sought to examine the earliest phase of civilization in each region for which there is not only good archaeological evidence but also substantial written records that shed light on aspects of human behavior and belief that cannot be ascertained from material culture alone. These written records were produced either by the literate elements in the society being studied or by European visitors and colonists. A third, non-archaeological, kind of data consists of oral traditions and memories of indigenous customs that were recorded by or from native people after European contact. My requirement of substantial written sources means that I never study the earliest stage in the development of civilization in each area. This is especially the case with civilizations that did not develop their own writing systems. Such civilizations had flourished in the Basin of Mexico for over fifteen hundred years prior to the Late Aztec period and in parts of

Peru for an equal time prior to the arrival of the Spanish (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979; Keatinge 1988). We also know from archaeological evidence that at least some Yoruba states, as well as Benin, had existed for many centuries prior to the arrival of European traders and missionaries in West Africa and before the Yorubas learned to write as a result of European contact (Shaw 1978; Connah 1987).

On the other hand, we have information about earlier stages of literate civilizations. These include Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Mesopotamia from the Early Dynastic III (ca. 2600 B.C.) period onward, and Chinese civilization beginning in the late Shang Dynasty. After my research had begun, I added the Classic Maya civilization, which, as a result of recent successes in deciphering its hieroglyphic inscriptions, has joined the ranks of early civilizations whose scripts can be read. This was especially desirable as it added another tropical forest civilization to my sample. I would have liked to include at least one early civilization from the Indian subcontinent, but not enough information was available concerning the Indus and Gangetic civilizations to justify adding either of them to my sample. The same was true for the Khmer civilization of Southeast Asia. Probably the most detailed record, both archaeological and literary, of life at a single point in time in any early civilization is that for the Aztecs during the early sixteenth century. Following the Spanish conquest, Spanish priests and native Mexicans recorded an extraordinary wealth of information concerning traditional Aztec culture.

While the Mayas and Aztecs are historically and culturally, although not linguistically, related, I judged that adding the Mayas did not compromise my sample, which is not a statistical one. The very different environmental settings and different economic and political organizations of these two groups were reasons for including both. Nor is there evidence that the other civilizations are similar mainly as a result of historical contacts. Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia communicated with each other at various periods and both clearly emerged from a Neolithic ecumene that extended over much of North Africa and the Middle East (Frankfort 1956). The development of Chinese civilization may have been influenced to some degree by indirect contacts with the civilizations of Western Asia (Chang 1962) and there were limited contacts between Mexico and Peru at various periods (Hosler 1988). On the other hand, there

are unlikely to have been any significant contacts between China and the New World after human groups spread from Siberia into North America sometime before 12,000 B.C. Yet, if the religions of the Aztecs, Mayas, and the Shang Dynasty are all derived from historically-related shamanistic cults dating back to the Palaeolithic period, this might account for certain similarities among all three (Willey 1985). While I do not rule out historical connections among various civilizations, the fact that ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, which were separated by only a few hundred kilometers and grew out of historically-related Neolithic cultures, were so different indicates that the seven cases I am studying can be treated as essentially independent examples of early civilizations. Each represents a stage in the cultural development of a region that conforms to my definition of an early civilization. That seems to be more important for determining how representative my sample is of the various types of early civilizations than whether or not these societies are totally pristine or represent the earliest phase in the development of civilization in each region.

My original aim was to examine each society as a way of life that had existed at a specific point in time, thereby treating it in a manner approximating the traditional anthropological concept of the 'ethnographic present.' In this fashion I hoped to avoid conflating practices that might have existed at different periods in a single society's development. In practice, however, I did not find it possible, even as an analytical fiction, to limit my studies to a single point in time, nor do I now believe that it would have been a good idea to have tried to do so. I accept Evans-Pritchard's (1962) argument that the best way to learn how the parts of a culture fit together is to observe how they change in relation to one another. My findings so far suggest that this is particularly useful for understanding political organization, since bureaucratic structures often change rapidly as members of the governing hierarchy seek to alter such relations to their own advantage. Hence when I examine ancient Egypt I consider both the Old and Middle Kingdoms, and in some cases use New Kingdom literary texts to illuminate aspects of life that were not recorded earlier. I try, however, to exclude the major sociopolitical changes that occurred in Egyptian society after the end of the Middle Kingdom. Likewise for Mesopotamia, I

consider data from the earliest appearance of readable texts in the Early Dynastic III period to the lasting unification of the region during the Old Babylonian Period (ca. 1750 B.C.) and for China from the Shang Dynasty to the end of the Western Chou. While acknowledging that major economic, political, and social changes occurred in these civilizations over such a long time, I believe that the available evidence illustrates a particular kind of society that had many features in common and was significantly different from what existed both earlier and later. For the Mayas the period of substantial written documentation covers approximately six hundred years, while for the Aztecs, Inkas, and Yorubas it spans only one to two hundred years. In each of these cultures, these were times of major social change.

### Sources

There are numerous problems with data in a study of this sort. While archaeological findings are far from uniform, they provide the information that is most comparable from one early civilization to another. By far the best archaeological data come from the settlement pattern surveys that have been carried out in southern Iraq (Adams 1981), the Basin of Mexico (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979), and in recent years over large stretches of Maya territory (Culbert and Rice 1990). While much has been learned about the settlement patterns of ancient Egypt, the data base remains less comprehensive (Butzer 1976). Still less is known archaeologically about settlement patterns in Shang China (Wheatley 1971; Chang 1980) and Inka Peru (Hyslop 1990). Despite these shortcomings, archaeological data, in their concreteness, provide much information about daily life in early civilizations. They are also data which, while they may have been biased by regional patterns of archaeological research, are unlikely to have been deliberately distorted by the people who produced them.

Written sources, on the other hand, while essential for understanding many aspects of life, rarely provide unbiased information. The records produced by early civilizations, either in the form of indigenous writings or of oral traditions recorded under various colonial regimes, tend to reflect the preoccupations and interests of

officials and the upper classes. It is also increasingly being appreciated to what a great extent indigenous peoples modified their oral traditions to adapt them to colonial situations (Gillespie 1989, Apter 1992:193–211). In particular, the native elites who survived into the colonial period were anxious to promote an image of their traditional culture, and especially of their personal ancestors, that would win the approval of influential Europeans. Histories were also revised as a way to cope with national defeat and humiliation. The records produced by colonists reflected to no less a degree the issues that interested them. In particular, these included indigenous patterns of land ownership and tribute payments, in order to facilitate acquiring control over local resources; and religious beliefs, in order to assist Christian missionaries in stamping out traditional religions (Durán 1971:34–35).

## Interpretations

Modern interpretations of early civilizations are also markedly biased. Understanding and making allowances for these biases is vital for the success of any investigation that depends mostly on secondary sources. Anthropological interests in the early civilizations have changed significantly in recent decades, as anthropology has shifted its principal focus from a concern with social behavior to a renewed interest in culture. Studies of the early civilizations produced in the 1960s were dominated by a materialistic perspective that encouraged an interest in subsistence patterns, craft production, exchange, settlement patterns, and to a lesser degree political organization as the most important factors shaping human life. Today there is an escalating interest in religious beliefs and culturally determined perceptions, both for their own sake and as major determinants of social and political behavior. While the idealist perspective that underlies much modern research is clearly at odds with the materialism of an earlier era, the research of these two periods tends to be complementary and, when combined, produces richer and more nuanced insights into the nature of earlier civilizations than the literature of either period does by itself.

Other biases color studies either of individual early civilizations or of all of them, the latter sort creating the more serious problems of comparability for cross-cultural investigations. Interpreters of

Aztec culture have long been divided between those who view the Aztec elite as cynical imperialists or bloodthirsty cannibals (Caso 1958; Soustelle 1961) and those who see them as philosophers seeking to understand the mysteries of life (León-Portilla 1963, 1992). Inka studies have been dominated in recent decades by the assumption that the Inka state was constructed by utilizing the expectations of reciprocal aid that were deeply rooted in the traditions of Central Andean peasant life to validate the increasingly asymmetrical relations between different classes (Masuda, Shimada, and Morris 1985). These studies read very differently from Thomas Patterson's (1991) investigation of Inka dynastic politics, which places a heavy emphasis on the practice of realpolitik among the various branches of the royal family and their supporters.

The interpretation of ancient Mesopotamian civilization has been heavily influenced by that civilization's historical connections with the Old Testament, which have stimulated scholars to seek in it the origins of Western civilization. That in turn has led them to interpret their data in ways that probably make Mesopotamia appear more like modern Western civilization than was actually the case, and hence exaggerate the differences between it and other early civilizations (Bottéro 1992).

Two Dutch social anthropologists, Thomas Zuidema (1964, 1990) and Rudolph van Zantwijk (1985), have presented extremely elaborate structural analyses of Inka and Aztec religious beliefs. Of these studies one can state, as Barry Kemp (1989:4-5) has about some of the more arcane interpretations of ancient Egyptian symbolism, that, while their constructions may "be quite true to the spirit of ancient thought," we have no way of determining whether such ideas "ever actually passed through the minds of the ancients."

The study of ancient Egypt has long been dominated by the rationalist belief that all human beings share a nature that is similar to our own and that this similarity makes the ancients immediately comprehensible to modern scholars. Most Egyptologists I have known seem convinced that they can duplicate in their own minds the thought processes of a Hatshepsut, Akhenaton, or Ramesses II. As a result of this pervasive uniformitarianism, Egyptology has never produced a work of critical theoretical insight comparable to Leo Oppenheim's *Ancient Mesopotamia* (1964). This rationalist approach is the opposite of the romantic anthropological assump-

tion held by Inka specialists, many of whom believe that human nature is powerfully molded by individual cultures and that hence, without paying careful attention to the idiosyncratic postulates of Inka culture, it is wholly impossible to understand Inka behavior. Although Barry Kemp, who has discussed these theoretical issues in detail, agrees with Henri Frankfort (1956) that certain distinctive themes shaped Egyptian culture, even he interprets much ancient Egyptian behavior as being influenced by concepts of self-interest and entrepreneurship that he considers common to all human beings.

Finally, I must stress that each of the early civilizations I am studying was a complex institution that endured over many generations and embraced millions of human beings, each of whom thought her or his own thoughts and lived her or his own life. Even those who study the best-documented early civilizations are in the position of the proverbial blind men trying to comprehend an elephant. There is much that is important about every early civilization that we do not know and that in some instances we may never be able to learn. Moreover, what we do know about one early civilization is often radically different from what we know about another. One of the chief benefits of comparative study is that knowledge of one early civilization may reveal gaps in our knowledge of others and stimulate research that helps to fill these gaps. For example, the striking archaeological successes achieved in studying the settlement patterns of southern Iraq and the Basin of Mexico have challenged Egyptologists to seek more comprehensive information about ancient Egyptian settlement patterns.

## Conclusion

In the chapters that follow I will not be able to describe in detail each of the early civilizations that I have been studying. I will try, however, to ascertain some of the ways in which ancient Egypt resembled other early civilizations and some of the ways in which it was unique. Cross-cultural parallels may provide Egyptologists with new insights into the nature of ancient Egyptian civilization, while those aspects that are unique to Egypt may help anthropologists to understand better the nature of early civilizations and of humanity as a whole. No doubt Egyptologists will consider some of

my generalizations about ancient Egypt to be premature, questionable, or even plain wrong. There is little about ancient Egypt, or any other early civilization, that is not subject to debate among specialists. I ask Egyptologists to treat my statements not as evidence of the uselessness of what I am attempting but as a challenge to debate issues that are significant not only for their discipline but for the general understanding of early civilizations. When it comes to the study of ancient Egypt, Egyptologists and anthropologists have much to learn from each other, and their different orientations are a potential source of mutual benefit. Rather than trying to turn Egyptologists into anthropologists or anthropologists into Egyptologists, I suggest that specialists in either discipline can best help each other by continuing to do what they have learned to do best.