

ORIGINS OF CIVILIZATION

ANTHROPOLOGY 3315

Fall 2014

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Dedman Life Science 132



Scorpion Macehead (detail)- Possible depiction of the “Scorpion King” of Ancient Egypt involved in a ceremonial opening of a dyke representing his control over the Nile, fertility, and life itself

For nearly two million years human societies consisted of small nomadic bands whose members relied on hunting, fishing, and foraging wild plants. Between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago, after the end of the last Ice Age, some of these societies began to change dramatically. At several places in the world- Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, China, Mesoamerica, and the rugged South American Andes- human societies adopted entirely new characteristics. Small bands settled into agricultural villages then into larger towns and eventually into bustling cities. For the first time, settlements incorporated monumental architecture, elaborate art styles, and advanced technologies; life was characterized by great differences in wealth and power, long-distance trade, large-scale warfare, and complex religions—all of the characteristics which, for better or worse, compose "civilization." In this course we will examine the processes that fostered the rise and fall of early (and in some cases nearly forgotten) civilizations. We will examine the dynamics behind the process of "cultural evolution" and will ask- and attempt to answer- why ancient civilizations experienced repeated cycles of rise, expansion, and collapse. How were these processes similar in Sumer, Egypt, India, South America, and Mesoamerica, and how do they differ? We will consider the role of specific elements in the rise and collapse of these civilizations, not only material elements such as ecology, farming, pastoralism, trade, and exotic goods, but also ideological elements like religious beliefs, cosmology, and worldview.