The last major development in western Asian prehistory was the emergence of cities, a phenomenon datable to the period between about 3500 and 3200 B.C.E. Since some villages imperceptibly turned into cities over the course of about five hundred years, it is easier to describe the difference between a city and village on the basis of how the city appeared at the end of its development. Unlike the village, the city housed people from a wide variety of occupations. All early cities housed farmers, for the fields around a city needed to be tilled just like any others; cities additionally housed small numbers of artisans and merchants, since cities began to take shape at a time when some handicraft skills had become very specialized and when trading was also becoming a specialty. But the predominant personalities in cities, whose presence really determined the difference between the city and the village, were full-time warriors, administrators, and priests.

In a nutshell, cities existed to exploit villages. The foremost city dwellers themselves of course would not have put things that way. Since they were professional warriors, administrators, and priests, they would have said that their callings were to protect their regions by military means, to enhance regional productivity by good management, and to conciliate the gods with prayers. But since none of these people worked in the fields they surely could not have existed without the surpluses produced by those who did. Put it another way, the leading city dwellers were *rulers* in their society, and the inhabitants of subordinated villages, as well as other city dwellers, were *the ruled.*

There is no doubt that the earliest western Asian cities arose in Mesopotamia, a region in modern-day Iraq lying between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and it is virtually certain that the ultimate cause for this lay in population pressure. We have already seen that settled people tend to reproduce more quickly than wanderers. Certainly, once people in western Asia became adept at settled agriculture food yields began to increase spectacularly, and so did human numbers. By a conservative estimate, the population in the hilly areas of western Iran, where settled agriculture had found one of its earliest homes, increased fiftyfold between 8000 and 4000 B.C.E. At a certain point excess populations needed to move on to new terrains in order to survive, and this was particularly true among early agriculturalists, who tended gradually to exhaust the fertility of their lands since they knew nothing of crop rotation or fertilizing techniques. In western Asia this point was reached around 4000 B.C.E. when excess peoples in Iran and Iraq began to move in considerable number into the previously uninhabited valley between the Tigris and Euphrates.

Two requirements are necessary for successful agriculture: fertility and moisture. The earliest western Asian agricultural settlements were located in hilly regions where grain originally grew wild. These terrains were not particularly fertile, but at least they were fertile enough to support the beginnings of crop growing, and they did have abundant moisture from rainfall. The Mesopotamian valley, on the other hand, was extremely fertile but so lacking in moisture for long parts of the year that farming there was impossible without the introduction of artificial irrigation systems. Building and maintaining irrigation systems, however, called for a degree of planning and of intense, coordinated labor that was unprecedented in human societies until that time. The irrigation in question, initiated in the millennium between 4000 and 3000 B.C.E., had to be accomplished by means of leading canals and channels from the two big rivers in crisscrossing patterns over the dry lands, and the work was never completed because the canals and channels had constantly to be cleared when they began silting up. Such labors required that people be organized in force, that provisions be assembled to support them, that pots be mass-produced to serve as their food receptacles, and so forth. Obviously, therefore, planners were needed to determine how, when, and where to work, overseers were needed to direct and coerce laborers, and governors were needed to plan and oversee the overseers. Accordingly, under such circumstances society became divided into the rulers and the ruled.

As population pressure entailing the necessity for irrigation systems created a trend toward government and coercion in Mesopotamia between 4000 and 3200 B.C.E., the trend was reinforced by the advance of militarism. How did some people manage to emerge as rulers? Surely the main explanation lay in brute force, the strongest in society being those were the most skilled in fighting. During the millennium in question, military power would have led to governmental power and ever more military power by a continual spiraling process: metal weapons were superior to stone ones but much more expensive, thus those who had acquired wealth from subduing and exploiting others were the only ones who could have afforded to acquire metal weapons with which to subdue and exploit still more people. It is particularly noteworthy that Mesopotamia has no natural supply of any metals or metallic ores, yet relatively large quantities of metal weaponry have been found there dating from between 3500 and 3000 B.C.E.; obviously the warrior-rulers of Mesopotamia were becoming ever more dominant and entrenched.

Given that dominant warriors needed trained administrators to help them govern and supervise the local irrigation works, the grouping together of these two classes in central locations might alone have created cities. But in fact there also emerged a full-time priesthood, which united with the first two groups in forming cities. Needless to say, religion was not invented in Mesopotamia. Belief in supernatural forces must have existed millennia earlier among the Neanderthals who buried their dead with provisions and among Ice-Age cave peoples whose art apparently was meant to work magic. What was new in Mesopotamia was the emergence of a full-time priesthood—people attached to centers of ritual practice, temples—whose performance on incantations and rites was supported by the agricultural labors of others.

Why a priestly caste first arose in Mesopotamia is a speculative question, but it seems likely that by about 3500 B.C.E. economic demands and social complexity there were becoming so great that people in effect needed priests. Wandering bands had no difficulty in maintaining social cohesiveness because there was little or no private property to fight over, because occupational functions were more or less equal, and because the bands were small enough in size—customarily numbering no more than 500 persons—for band members to feel united by mutual familiarity. But such conditions started changing in villages. There communal labor and distribution were still the rule, but inequalities in possessions would have become more pronounced over time, especially with the development of trade, and the growth of village populations from the hundred to the thousands would have made it harder for people to recognize each other on, so to speak, a first-name basis. Attacks from the outside probably provided the basis for sufficient social cohesiveness among villagers to keep them from fighting each other intensively, but during the stressful beginnings of irrigation in Mesopotamia still more cohesiveness would have been needed. On this admittedly speculative reconstruction, religion inspired newly large groups to feel loyal to common cause. And religious dedication on this scale called for priests to propagate the faith and to preside over elaborate rituals in impressive temples.

Discussing the origins of cities is really the same as discussing the origins of *civilization*, which may be defined as the stage in human organization when governmental, social, and economic institutions have developed sufficiently to manage (however imperfectly) the problems of order, security, and efficiency in a complex society. Around 3200 B.C.E. Mesopotamia was “civilized.” That is, at least five cities existed, which all included among their inhabitants warrior-rulers, administrators, and priests, which all encompassed several monumental temples, and which all boasted in addition elaborate private residences, communal workshops, public storage facilities, and large marketplaces. Rudimentary forms of record-keeping were being mastered, and writing was on its way. Herewith the story of civilizations in the West begins, and herewith we may begin following a story that is based on interpreting written evidence as well as archaeological artifacts.

SOURCE: Philip Lee Ralph, Robert Learner, and Standish Meacham. *World Civilizations.* 8th edition. W.W. Norton, 1991.