

4 A POLYCENTRIC WORLD

1700 B.C.E. – 1000 C.E.

CITIES AND STATES IN EAST ASIA, THE AMERICAS, AND WEST AFRICA

COMMENTARY

Chapter 4 concludes the second section of the book (*Settling Down*) with a comparative survey of the final four of the seven “primary innovative” urban civilizations identified in the second chapter: (1) those of the **Yellow River** valley in China; (2) the urbanized societies of **Mesoamerica**; (3) civilizations of the Peruvian coastal areas and the **Andes Mountains** in South America; and (4) the earliest urban civilizations of the **Niger River Valley** in west Africa. The common denominator of all these urban societies is that they developed considerably later than those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Indus Valley. Urbanization and state formation apparently did not begin in China until Sumerian city-states and the Old Kingdom of Egypt were at their respective zeniths (c. 2200 B.C.E.) and did not begin for another thousand years in the Americas (c. 1200 B.C.E.) and yet another millennium or more in west Africa.

Several of these civilizations also “stretch our definition of urbanization,” according to Spodek (p. 86), for, while all of them exhibited most of the standard features of cities he enumerated in Chapter 2, there were significant exceptions. All, of course, had evolved from earlier agricultural settlements. All exhibited considerable occupational specialization and professionalization. City-states developed in all areas and some extended their control over large agricultural and trading regions. And all appeared to have served as important religious and cultural centers, as well as administrative capitals and commercial entrepôts. In the Americas, however, neither metal tools nor wheeled vehicles ever-developed, and only the **Maya** ever developed a system of writing. Even large draft animals such as the horse or ox or water buffalo were lacking, thus making transportation, construction and agriculture much more labor intensive than it was in the eastern hemisphere. Similarly, the inhabitants of **Jenne-Jeno** and other west African city-states never developed an indigenous writing system and, while they did possess iron tools, wheeled carts and draft animals, they were not used to build any of the monumental temples, tombs, and palaces or sophisticated irrigation and flood-control systems associated with cities in all of the other areas. Moreover, African cities do not appear to have exhibited the high degree of social stratification and unequal distribution of wealth so characteristic of those in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and the Americas, nor was their power and influence based as much on their control over territory and their function as religious shrine centers, as it was on their domination of important trade routes.

A second theme that is stressed throughout the chapter is the importance of cities as “**cosmo-magical**” centers, or locations for important religious rituals, often those which served to demonstrate and strengthen the identification of “**shaman** priest-rulers” as intermediaries between their people and deities or deceased ancestors. Hence the importance of royal tombs in China (as in Egypt) and the construction of monumental temples, statues, and pyramids in Mesoamerica (as in Sumerian, Egyptian and Harappan cities). Only in west Africa was this not a central feature of urban development.

There were also significant differences in the connection and interaction among cities in the different areas. As was the case with the city-states of Sumer, the **Xia**, **Shang**, and **Zhou** states of China and the major Mayan cities (**Palenque**, **Tikal**, **Uxmal**, **Chichen Itza**) shared a common culture, language and religion and evolved more or less on parallel lines with one another for centuries. In other parts of Mesoamerica, in South America and in west Africa, separate urban societies evolved, with different languages, economies and traditions; connected at times by trade but never consolidating, unless they were conquered by an imperial power, such as the **Aztecs** or the **Incas**.

What these comparisons suggest, perhaps, is that “urbanization” – like “civilization” – should not be understood as an immutable model or a term of measurement of a people’s “progress” or development, but like “culture” is a term referring to the interaction of a society with its environment. Different physical environments produce different types of cities: people have to work with what they have, or can trade for.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- A. Introduction: Cities and States in East Asia, the Americas, and West Africa
- B. China: the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties
 - 1. Earliest times: How Do We Know?
 - a. Texts
 - b. Oracle bones
 - c. Archaeology
 - 2. Earliest times: What Do We Know?
 - a. The earliest villages
 - b. Historical evidence of the Xia dynasty
 - c. Similarities among the three dynasties
 - 3. City and state under the Shang
 - a. The nature of the Shang state
 - b. Anyang, the last Shang capital
 - c. FOCUS: the Cosmo-Magical City
- C. The Western Hemisphere: Mesoamerica and South America
 - 1. Urbanization in East Asia and the Americas: similarities and differences
 - 2. Origins, migration and agriculture
 - 3. Mesoamerican urbanization
 - a. Olmec civilization along the Gulf Coast
 - b. Zapotec civilization in the Oaxaca Valley
 - c. Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico
 - d. Toltec civilization in the Valley of Mexico
 - e. Aztec civilization in the Valley of Mexico
 - f. Maya civilization: How Do We Know?
 - g. SOURCE: the *Popul Vuh* (p. 101)
 - h. Maya civilization: What Do We Know?
 - i. PROFILE: Great-Jaguar-Paw, Mayan King of Tikal (pp. 106-107)
 - 4. FOCUS: Agricultural Towns of North America (p. 102)
 - 5. Urbanization in South America
 - a. Comparisons and contrasts with Mesoamerica
 - b. Coastal settlements and networks
 - i. The Moche
 - ii. The Chimú
 - iii. SPOTLIGHT: The Royal Tombs at Sipán (pp. 108-109)
 - b. Urbanization in the Andes Mountains
 - i. The Chavín
 - ii. Tiwanaku, Huari, and Nazca
 - iii. The Inca
- D. West Africa: the Niger River Valley
 - 1. Introduction: questions about the origins and function of the earliest West African cities
 - 2. West Africa before urbanization: Nok iron-smelting and Bantu agriculture
 - 3. Jenne Jené: How Do We Know?
 - a. Age, size, layout and purpose of “ancient Jenne”
 - b. Which came first: West African cities, or trans-Saharan trade?
 - 4. State formation?
 - a. Did Jenne-Jené represent an alternative kind of urbanization?
 - b. Or did it represent a stage in conventional urban development?
- E. The First Cities: What Difference Does it Make?

IDENTIFICATION TERMS

For each term, students should be able to provide an identification or definition, an approximate date, a geographical location (if relevant) and – most important – a concise explanation of its significance in the context of the chapter. Terms that appear in the *Study Guide* are listed in **bold** font in the first column.

Jenne-Jeno	Shang Dynasty	Great-Jaguar-Paw
Xia Dynasty	Yellow River (Huang Ho)	Toltecs
Tikal	Zhou Dynasty	Cahokia
Moche	Yangshao Culture	Chavin
trans-Saharan trade	Longshan Culture	Sipan
chinampas	Valley of Mexico	Andes Mountains
oracle bones	La Venta	Niger River
Teotihuacan	Zapotecs	Nok Culture
Anyang	Maya	Bantu
Olmecs	The <i>Popul Vuh</i>	Timbuktu

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After students have read and studied Chapter 4, they should be able to:

1. Describe and explain the geographical and economic factors contributing to urbanization in the earliest cities in China, the Americas and West Africa.
2. Explain the role of religion in those early civilizations and its relationship to urbanization and state formation.
3. Be able to explain and compare the different patterns of state formation in China, the Americas and West Africa, and to discuss the controversies surrounding the question of state formation in the latter.
4. Give specific examples of how archaeological evidence can be used to illustrate and explain the existence of class systems in ancient cities.
5. Be familiar with the various theories of the origins of Olmec and other civilizations in the Americas, and with the questions pertaining to the downfall of Teotihuacan and of Mayan civilization.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LECTURE TOPICS

1. Discuss Paul Wheatley's thesis concerning cities as "cosmo-magical centers" and use it to compare cities in early China and Mesoamerica with those in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
2. Discuss the development of metallurgy – and iron-smelting in particular – in ancient cultures and relate it to issues of "innovation" vs. "diffusion" in early African history.
3. Explain the evidence for the existence of social classes in the various societies and discuss their relationship to political structures, agricultural methods, organized religion and warfare.
4. Discuss the role of climate and topography in the different civilizations reviewed in Chapter 4.

TOPICS FOR ESSAYS OR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What characteristics did all of the cities described in Chapter 4 have in common? In what important respects did they differ from one another?
2. Describe the powers, responsibilities and functions of Xia, Shang, and Chou dynasty rulers. How did they attain their positions? What was expected from them by their subjects? How would the term "cosmo-magical" be applied to them?

3. Compare the functioning of the Shang dynasty state in China (1766-1122 B.C.E.) with that of the later Inca Empire in South America (1476-1534 C.E.) How were the states formed? How were they governed? What was the relationship between the ruler and the official religion if the state?
4. How might one account for the comparatively slow development of urbanized societies and the lack of such basic attributes of urban civilization as metal tools, wheeled vehicles and a written language in most societies of the Americas, even as late as the arrival of Europeans, c. 1500 C.E.?
5. Debate: Were the population concentrations that developed in Jenne-Jeno and other urbanized sites in West Africa true urban civilizations, like those of China, Egypt and Mesopotamia? Why or why not? And what does this controversy possibly reveal about such terms as “urbanization” and “civilization” – not to mention attitudes towards early African history?
6. In addition to the urban civilizations of Central and South America, extensive evidence of agricultural settlements has been unearthed at numerous sites in North America. Where were these settlements located? Citing specific examples and evidence, explain the ways in which these settlements demonstrated the “urban” characteristics of their southern counterparts and other urban societies. Why do many scholars argue that these were not fully urbanized civilizations?
7. Group activity: Compare the Mayan creation myth related in the *Popul Vuh* with the Hebrew creation myth found in the book of *Genesis*, the Indian creation myth in the *Rigveda* and the Akkadian *Enuma Elish* (pp. 5-6). In what respects are they similar? Different? What does each myth reveal about its culture’s concepts of the relationship between humans and their gods or God? [The Japanese, Greek and Inca myths in Chapter 1 of the *Documents Set* and the Fang creation myth in the *prenhall.com* web-site may also be used.]

TEXT RESOURCES (Spodek, 2nd ed.)

Timetables, charts and graphs:	Early China	(p. 87)
	Early Chinese Culture	(p. 90)
	The Early Americas	(p. 94)
	Civilizations Flourishing in Central America Before Columbus	(p. 105)
	Civilizations of South America	(p. 110)
	Early Africa	(p. 112)
	Large photographs or illustrations:	Inscribed oracle bone, China
Teotihuacan, Mexico		(p. 99)
Blood-letting rite, Mexico (Maya)		(p. 103)
Temple at Tikal, Guatemala (Maya)		(p. 104)
Pirogues, Niger River		(p. 114)
Maps:	Shang China	(p. 89)
	Classic cultures of the Americas	(p. 96)
	Teotihuacan	(p. 98)
	The spread of Bantu	(p. 113)
	Trade across the Sahara	(p. 115)
SPOTLIGHT:	The Royal Tombs of Sipan	(p. 108-109)
PROFILE:	Great-Jaguar-Paw	(p. 106)
FOCUS:	The Cosmo-Magical City	(pp. 92-93)
	Agricultural Towns of North America	(p. 102)
SOURCE:	The <i>Popul Vuh</i>	(p. 101)

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY SOURCES (*Documents Set & www.prenhall.com/Spodek*)

- 4-1 “Shih ching”: a glimpse into the mind of China during its legendary phase [*The Book of Songs*]
- 4-2 Might makes right: the “Shu ching” sets forth the Mandate of Heaven [*The Book of Historical Documents*]
- 4-3 Ch’u Yuan and Sung Yu: individual voices in a chaotic era
- 4-4 “Wagadu”: the Soninke epic of ancient Ghana
- 4-5 Sundiata: the Malian epic of an empire-builder
- 4-6 The Mesoamerican mind: Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, and music
- 4-7 The Mesoamerican mind: the Aztecs and holy warfare
- www Mwindo: the “Little-one-just-born-he-walked”

AUDIO-VISUAL RESOURCES (videos, DVD’s, CD-ROM and web-sites)

The Civilization of the Olmec: <http://loki.stockton.edu/~gilmorew/consort/1bcenso.htm> [web-site]

Interprets the evidence for the origins, history and legacy of the Olmecs, based on archaeological sources.

The Incas: PBS Home Video. [video; 60 minutes, color]

Comprehensive interpretation of Inca civilization.

Legacy: Ambrose Video Publishing Co., 1991. [video; 57 minutes, color]

Part of a six-video series that explores the influence of ancient cultures on our lives today.

Lords of the Earth: Maya/Aztec/Inca Exchange: <http://www.realttime.net.maya/> [web-site]

Surveys the history, art and culture of the three great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas.

The Maya: Lords of the Jungle: PBS Home Video. [video; 60 minutes, color]

Comprehensive survey of Mayan civilization.

Mayan Civilization, Past and Present: <http://indy4.fdl.cc.mn.us/~isk/maya.html> [web-site]

This site is a search engine, linking viewers to a number of different Maya web-sites.

The Mystery of the Maya: <http://www.cmcc.muse.digital.ca/membrs/civiliz/maya/mminteng.html> [web-site]

A comprehensive exhibit of Mayan sources and artifacts.

Out of the Past: Annenberg/CPB. [eight 60 minute videos; color]

This series is a topically-arranged survey of aspects of ancient world civilizations and their legacies in the modern world. Sumer, Egypt, India, China, and African and American civilizations are included in videos that focus on origins, families, religion, warfare, trade, government, symbols and other topics.

Wonders of the African World, with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: PBS Home Video, 2000. [3 videos; 360 min, color]

Gates explores Africa from Egypt to Great Zimbabwe and Kenya to the Atlantic. Excellent segments on the Malian cities of Jenne-Jeno and Timbuktu.