

# The Nature of Civilization

## A Final Exam

Laurie Schmitt

*Laurie Schmitt begins her course with the final examination. She begins teaching using the ideas of Islamic historian Ibn Khaldoun to structure a final essay. She includes in this chapter an example of a sophomore essay by one of her students. This assignment may be used as a template with ideas of twentieth-century world historians providing the structure of the final exam second semester.*

When the students walk into ancient civilizations class on the first day of school, I hand them their final exam. Their first assignment, to be repeated at the end of the year, is to write an essay based on the following description of the observations of Ibn Khaldoun, the fourteenth-century Islamic historian, about the nature of civilization:

Ibn Khaldoun was concerned with the *nature* of civilization, its rise and decline. He considered that settled cooperative human life was the goal of civilization, the attainment of a certain level of luxury; that it went in cycles of growth and decay, like all forms of life. He thought that overconsumption in society was an inevitable cause of decline, but that under certain favorable conditions of geography and climate and the character and customs of the people, culture could acquire a rootedness that he called the "habit of civilization."

This assignment, inspired by the *Legacy* video series by Michael Wood, provides the backbone for the year's study of ancient cultures. Showing relevant episodes of *Legacy* in class during the course of study of various subject areas such as Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, and Egypt, helps the students to reflect on the application of Ibn Khaldoun's ideas. At the end of each unit, we return to reflect on their relevance for the civilization we have just studied.

Each student does a substantial amount of independent research for this course, so that each has a different perspective to bring to his or her analysis. As an example, the first major research project is to examine archaeological data for the development of early cultural complexity. The students are assigned primary civilizations from various parts of the globe, with the goal of contributing specific information to decide, as a class, if there is a common pattern that can be

used as a model to predict the evolution of civilization. Their individual input, as well as the corporate results of the project, forms a basis for comparison as we progress through the year.

For the final exam, I encourage students to compose an outline that encompasses all of their primary areas of study and research. They are allowed to write for two hours. The exam itself is open-book, since I am far less interested in memorization than I am in how the student processes information. The exam is graded according to how well the student has incorporated each of the subject areas into his or her overall analysis of Ibn Khaldoun's observations. A part of their evaluation is based on the long-term development of their thought by comparing their essay from the beginning of the year with the final exam.

The following essay, by tenth-grader Clio Mallin, was an especially successful summary of her year of study in this course. She included elements from all of our major areas of investigation to consider Ibn Khaldoun's ideas, bringing evidence from work we did as a class as well as from her own research into early civilization in Southwest Asia.

### Final Exam—Ancient Civilizations

Ibn Khaldoun provides a reasonable argument concerning the nature of civilization. However, he does not mention that unequal distribution of power in any complex society (which accompanied the changeover from a pastoral to an agrarian economy) makes social injustice a powerful fact of every civilization.

Whether we look at modern Western civilization or such ancient civilizations as the Mesopotamian, Egyptian or Greek, we are always looking at man's patterns of power distribution accompanying cultural complexity. Different variables will affect the way that cultures meet the needs of the individual and of the society and attain levels of cooperation. One would wish that the noblest ideals of humankind and high civilization could always be met, but civilizations have engendered their share of violence, greed and destruction based on power distribution. Nevertheless, the desirable goal of social cooperation does, in spite of all else, drive mankind towards the "habits of civilization." This paper will look at the various civilizations to see how Ibn Khaldoun's assessment applies.

Civilization does not just automatically "occur." It takes time for development of community and progression to happen. There seems to be a process that takes place and certain elements that are necessary for cultural complexity and "civilization." From the hunter/gatherer stage, where survival is the main focus, we move into a stage where people become more settled and start living in communities. These groups of people have usually centered themselves around a river or some other water source. Agriculture allows man to settle in one place and to build cooperative communities, and to know that the plants and animals that they domesticate will be right there when they are hungry, as a constant food supply. Also not having to work all the time and spend all his time gathering food, man is now able to develop art and culture, so that specialization comes forth. Man is far more able to control his environment. Agriculture presumes other inventions: weaving, metalworking, the wheel, the plow and even writing. It is when man learns how to control the water sources available to him that he has the ability to make genuine progress. Generally, there were two types of agriculture that developed: one was rainfall and the other, riverbased. A rainfall-based agricultural society can have small multi-centered villages that are semi-nomadic. However, those who were using the technique of riverbased agricultures (which implies a certain amount of fertile soil around the riverbed) will most likely have been organized and used irrigation to water their fields and crops. With control of the water source, they have a kind of stability that can be relied on, whereas those depending on the rain have a much less predictable and reliable source. So the riverbased people would probably see a population increase, occupational specialization, class structures, writing, differentiation of burials, monumental architecture, warfare, fortifications, weaponry, and eventually an empire may emerge to engulf the small rainfall-based groups. So, with favorable conditions and climate and geography (good soil, temperate climate, water source, natural boundaries, etc.), there is a good chance that early civilizations and complex societies will develop. . . .

The Late Bronze Age was a time of mixing and trading. Empires were fluctuating, and changes in diplomacy were taking place. Different power configurations and different kinds of trade were most likely based on the search for bronze. However, dominant powers declined at the end of this period, as palaces were burned in Crete and mainland Greece, the Trojan War perhaps being a part of this unrest. War, migrations and depopulation led to the destruction of the Hittite empire. The Egyptians were forced back to their own borders because of the Sea Peoples, and their empire, too, was lost. These events usher in the Iron Age, a time when dominant empires were in decline, allowing smaller groups to emerge and make their mark. The Phoenicians and the Hebrews were two such groups.

On the subject of ancient religions and Ibn Khaldoun's ideas, religion extends the unit of human cooperation beyond the immediate family, and for the ancient Hebrews, who had been patriarchal and nomadic, the monotheism of Moses bound the people closely even when all around them, religion was polytheistic. The force of the Ten Commandments and the belief in one god was powerful, but might not have led to social cohesion had the Hebrews been politically stronger in the ancient world. Since they could not master the Canaanites or the Philistines, and were in constant danger of being attacked, clinging to their religious beliefs and to their movable, omniscient God gave the Hebrews a sense of togetherness and inner strength. Later, after the destruction of their temples and the fall of Jerusalem, this

cohesion persisted. If Ibn Khaldoun is right and overabundance leads to decay, then in the modern world when Jewish life is threatened, it grows strong, whereas when it has the luxury of flourishing openly, Jewish life tends to decline.

For the Greeks, religion contained the notion of fate, a hierarchy of Olympian gods, and rituals. But Greek social cohesion and high civilization came from their ability to humanize their gods and confidently express a realistic acceptance and appreciation of the limits of human life. Not gods, but man, with his creativity and vitality, was seen as the center of the universe. At its peak in the fifth century B.C.E., Hellenism permitted an astonishing psychological health and freedom from repression in its citizens. Greek beliefs made the enjoyment of a natural existence possible and promoted man's confidence in his ability to guide his life by using reason. It is said that as individualism became dominant, it was more important than the welfare of the social whole (as Ibn Khaldoun might have said, individualism "overconsumed") and Greek civilization began its decline. Greek culture and civilization flourished during its Golden Age, when Athens reached its height of power and prosperity. This was a time of great artistic and literary accomplishment and huge monumental structures (the Parthenon on the Acropolis) were built to show this wealth and power. The Peloponnesian War (beginning in 431 B.C.E.) ended the Golden Age of Athens. The war was ruinous and lasted for over twenty years, totally weakening Athens. The war was not necessary, but it was perhaps inevitable. It all comes down to power and control, two major determinants of process and progress among groups of people. The "real" cause of war was the tremendous growth of power in Athens and the alarm that this caused Sparta. Once the desire for power comes in, the concern centers around who has the power, who has the most, and who can get it from whom. So, in a way, war was inevitable between Athens and Sparta. The human desire and want and need for control and power are usually the underlying cause of events. . . .

Clio traces the development of early civilizations of Southwest Asia and, applying the material she learned during the semester, she concludes with the following paragraphs:

In all our work this year with ancient civilizations, it is clear that man is a glorious creature—imaginative, creative, and sometimes even wise—in building civilizations and aiming for improvement in the conditions of human life. But human greed and rivalry for the control of resources (including human resources), property and people can lead to tragic imbalances of power within individual civilizations and between civilizations.

In the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldoun hoped for continuing cycles of growth and decay. Today, without enough social "cement" and with the twentieth and twenty-first century technology of destructive weapons, one wonders whether there will be one last cycle of decay, or whether Khaldoun will be on target and man will continue, in little windows of time, to find wisdom and restraint and achieve balance instead of destruction.

One last note. It seems ironic that it is so easy to point out the blundering and plundering of ancient civilizations, yet so hard to look at our own civilization. We deplete the ozone and our forests, and we build weapons for total destruction. Are we aiming to move from order to disorder and decay—or is every civilization much more fragile at any moment than we or people like Ibn Khaldoun want to think?