CONTACTS AND THEIR LIMITS

No regular contacts among the major population centers developed during the long early phases of human history. Even at the end of the early civilization, no such patterns existed. To be sure, separate developments did not prevent many similar features. In broad outline, early civilizations developed many of the same functions, as they introduced formal governments, writing systems, and significant cities. Agriculture generated common tendencies to establish patriarchal family structures, but these developments occurred spontaneously, the result of similar needs, not because peoples in different regions learned extensively from one another. And, of course, the specifics varied considerably—the system of government and gender relations in Egypt, for example, differed from those in Mesopotamia or China.

Three kinds of contacts did exist during the early phases of human history. Their results were significant, although they were somewhat sporadic. First, local or long-distance trade could spread knowledge of new developments or products. People in one region could learn about innovations in the region next door. Local exchanges of products or symbolic gifts—the latter designed to help keep the peace—served as conduits. Through this kind of interaction, diffusion occurred—that is, a gradual spread of key ideas and techniques. This was the mechanism through which the knowledge of agriculture gradually spread from the areas where it was first developed to neighboring regions, and ultimately over whole subcontinents. New technologies, like metalworking, spread the same way. So did new foodstuffs: Some crops original to southeast Asia, for example, reached Africa by 1000 C.E. and gradually became staples.

These kinds of diffusion were the most important contacts in early human history. We do not always know the precise processes involved. For example, an Indian Ocean trade system existed by 1000 C.E., involving timber and perfumes; this led to southeast Asian migrations to the island of Madagascar. But we know almost nothing about the specifics of this process. It is also true that some trade contacts, like the Phoenician voyages to southern England to get tin, do not seem to have produced wider diffusion of products or technologies.

A second type of contact resulted from migration and invasion. We have seen that this combination occurred frequently in the Middle East, leading to changes in ruling dynasties, language, and the spread of new technologies. The wheel was almost certainly invented in central Asia, then brought by a migrant group to the Middle East. Migrations and invasions could be extremely disruptive, as when the Indo-Europeans moved into India. But they could also expose immigrants and local populations alike to new knowledge and technologies.

A third kind of contact involved a mix of direct trade, diplomatic relations, and military activity among two or more major early civilization centers. While Mesopotamia and Egypt developed separately for the most part, there were periods of invasion from one direction or another, some trade, and some cultural exchange. Tablets have been found, for example, whose text was written in both cuneiform and hieroglyphics, showing a need for direct translations. Egyptians and Mesopotamians both interacted with parts of Greece, including the island of Crete, which was therefore able to borrow from both societies. Some trade (although no military...
contacts occurred among Mesopotamia, China, and the Indus valley. Early civilizations in the Americas were much more isolated.

Contacts brought fundamental changes to the people involved, even in these early periods. Diffusion, particularly, was responsible for basic shifts in economic and therefore social systems. Most contact was sporadic, however, and did not lead to elaborate exchanges of religious or scientific ideas or political institutions. Here, the emphasis on separate patterns of development remains valid.

A Sumerian clay tablet with cuneiform characters aimed at tallying numbers of sheep and goats as part of early agriculture.
COMPLEXITIES

The early period of human history offers a great deal of variety. While the most important developments involved the Neolithic revolution and then the emergence of several early civilizations, it is vital to remember that hunting and gathering societies persisted in many places. Nomadic herding economies dominated several regions as well, presenting yet another pattern.

The substantial separation of major regions also generated huge differences in the timing of key changes. We have seen that there are at least three separate dates for the advent of agriculture: in the Middle East, in East Asia, and in the Americas. The initial foundation of civilization also varied with the region. Almost 3000 years separate the Sumerian civilization from the emergence of a complex culture in the Andes. Analysis of the early period requires comparison of patterns across a wide stretch of time.

THE END OF THE PERIOD

Regional separations also complicate decisions about when to end the early period, for there was no decisive, sweeping change that affected all of even most of the individual centers. By 600 B.C.E., some of the early civilizations did seem to be losing dynamism. Most obviously, the flourishing period of Olmec civilization had ended, and Harappan civilization had essentially disappeared. New patterns were beginning to emerge in these same areas, with the initial formation of Mayan culture in Central America and the religious changes among Aryan peoples in India that would ultimately lead to Hinduism.

In China, the Zhou dynasty, formed around 1100 B.C.E., continued, although it was after 600 that important cultural innovations took shape, particularly around the philosophy of Confucius. In the Middle East and northeast Africa, the heyday of the major early empires had passed, with Egypt in partial decline. Again, no single formula captures the variety of situations around 600 B.C.E.

Two or three changes were, however, on the horizon. Some new centers of activity were beginning to emerge, although they benefited from the legacy of the early civilizations. Mayans built on Olmec achievements. City-states arising in and around Greece would use both Egyptian and Mesopotamian heritage. Further, a number of areas were poised to introduce new cultural patterns that would ultimately provide new regional links. China's major philosophies and religions arose in the centuries after 600, and important religious developments were also taking shape in India and Persia. Finally, growing knowledge of iron technology, for tools and weapons, would gradually generate political, military, and economic changes in the Middle East, in China and other parts of Asia, and in the Mediterranean world (although not in the clearly separate societies of the Americas).

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why do some historians argue that the advent of agriculture was an unfortunate development?
2. Why was there no major protest against the emergence of patriarchal gender relations in agricultural societies?
3. Compare Olmec civilization with one of the early civilizations in Asia/North Africa. How do problems of evidence complicate the comparison?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using 600 B.C.E. as an approximate date for ending the early period?