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A Proposal on the Nature of the Onset of Civilization

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This is an investigation of the coming of civilization. The approach taken is basically historical: civilization has existed through several thousand years of record-keeping, and presumably any elements that are key to its existence will be visible in these records. In highly developed periods so many institutions exist that identifying any particular ones as key is well nigh impossible and certainly subject to infinite debate; therefore the historic periods used as tests were the so-called dark ages, when civilization, being at its lowest level, provided the lowest number of candidate key elements.

To a Westerner the words "dark age" are a specific label for several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, an age of political dissolution, economic collapse, social rearrangement and barbarian invasion. By nearly universal agreement the institution which held together such civilization as survived was organized religion, the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise in the east Orthodox Christianity and Islam were in at least as strong positions. Looking elsewhere, India after the fall of the Gupta Empire and China after the fall of the Han Dynasty suffered almost identical dark ages, and emerged with equally strong religious emphases. Religion had become the accepted vehicle of organized knowledge for those times. Such a system, once formulated and recognized as valid, becomes capable of integration and expansion limited only by the technology and outlooks which themselves become products of the system, and as an organization it acquires an existence independent of the lives of its original makers and location. This was also recognized at the time by the rulers of the barbarian proto-states forming on the borders of the religious civilizations; they accepted civilization and its knowledge by accepting the religions and their teachers. Thus this first stage of the investigation suggests that religion as organized knowledge is a proven agent, and its formation and diffusion a proven process, whereby civilization goes out into the world.

The second stage of the investigation was therefore the search for the earliest formation of these bodies of organized knowledge. Since religion is one of the most heavily chronicled items even in earliest times,
this was a quite straightforward process. All recorded religions involve particular designated central symbols, for example the crucifix, so it is possible to trace the earliest historical religions back into the millennia attested only in archaeology by means of tracing their symbols. The evidence suggests that the entire Old World, at least from Europe to Southeast Asia, belongs to a single religious tradition with at least four central symbols: the Mother Goddess, the Mother’s Son, the Bull (historically a Son-related fertility symbol) and the Mountain (historically a seat of power, originally of the Goddess, then after the change to male-dominated pantheons as the Mountain of God). The first three are general throughout the area and the Mountain is historically a central element everywhere from Greece east. The first three can also be traced as a religious complex back to a single oldest site, Çatal Hüyük in southern Anatolia about 6250-5400 BC, and one Çatal Hüyük shrine is also known with a picture of a mountain. We cannot on present evidence recreate the relationships among these four symbols at this early date, but they do form an interrelated central group in historic times, and on present evidence only Çatal Hüyük Anatolia is properly located in space and time to stand ancestor to all the Eurasian religions with these four central symbols.

Assuming for the moment that Çatal Hüyük did have an organized religious knowledge system, the next question is the background leading to this development. Recent thought has emphasized that the seventh and immediately preceding millennia were a time when the Near East was forming as a regional entity, when different local environments were coming into contact and the products of these contacts were spreading on a regional scale. In 1969 Jane Jacobs synthesized these interactions into a proposed two-stage process in which long-distance (regional) trade in some key item(s) was the cause behind the mixture of old and formation of new products, including agriculture. Her formulation has been seriously attacked in its details, but the general idea has combined with concurrent similar formulations such that nowadays trade has been promoted, in one recent bit of irreverence, into “the King Kong of all prime movers.”

Long-distance trade is therefore becoming accepted as an initial key agent in the beginning of the development of civilization. The second indicator of this development in progress is the mixture of these traded products to produce things not known before, most especially that infinitely reproducible and economically crucial set of innovations called agriculture. Presumably agriculture can exist in many different forms, but it is archaeologically visible and in the long run most important in
the way it transforms the human environment: Old plants become new (hybrid/selected) varieties, grown in places where they did not grow before, by people living as they did not live before, in general displac-
ing the practices of earlier times. These items and points of behavior in turn become Knowledge, the beginnings of a changed understanding which can visibly be transferred to other places, introducing the very concept of an active long-term relationship of man changing his envi-
ronment and benefiting from the change. I propose that the final and crucial stage in this development toward civilization is then the transfer of this concept of synthesized active understanding into general applica-
tion, creating some early pretender to the status of universal knowledge system. Every such system is by nature expansionist, with every new unknown being a challenge to its claim of general understanding, and so will necessarily either be defeated by the inexplicable or eventually ex-
pand over its whole world. Once such a system is accepted as successful it assumes a life of its own, and whatever degree of complexity one may choose as a definition of civilization will eventually be achieved.

In strict observational terms, then, the process of formation of civili-
ization is proposed to appear in archaeological evidence as a sequence of three key developments: first the appearance of long-distance trade, then the appearance of transform agriculture, finally the development of (the symbols traceably central to) organized religion.

In the Near East this sequence is well attested. The most visible trade item, obsidian, was moved over some distances well back into the Pa-
leolithic, but towards 8000 bc its use and movement became long-
distance and fairly regular; by then it appears in Jericho, 700 kilometers away from its Anatolian sources. Stage two begins ca. 7000 bc with the arrival of hybrid domestic wheat and barley. Stage three then occurs in the time of, and probably centering on, Çatal Hüyük, ca. 6000 bc. Current estimates suggest that transform (village) agriculture also be-
came a stable system during this period, with the estimates each includ-
ing a range of several centuries during 7000–5000 bc. By the time of the fall of Çatal Hüyük, ca. 5400 bc, the Near Eastern interaction sphere stretched at least 2400 kilometers, from the Balkans at one end to Pales-
tine and northern Iran at the other.

The next stage of the investigation was required by scientific disci-
pline. Necessarily to prove the thesis it had to be visible somewhere else; there must be other instances in which the same three key develop-
ments visibly lead to civilization. The investigation turned toward the Americas, in particular to the two famous indigenous American nuclei of civilization, Mesoamerica and Peru. This was immediately reward-
ing. The presence of the third key was noted by an outstanding American archaeologist some twenty years ago:

The great styles ... Olmec [of Mesoamerica, ca. 1250–400 BC] and Chavín [of Peru, ca. 1500/800–200 BC] ... are but the symbols of the religious ideologies of the early farming societies of Mesoamerica and Peru. I would further suggest that in these ideologies these early societies had developed a mechanism of intercommunication, a way of knitting together the smaller parts of the social universe of their day into a more unified whole than it had heretofore been or would otherwise be. In a way similar to that of the interchange of objects, plants and techniques which had previously prepared the village agricultural threshold, the sharing of common ideologies led to the threshold of civilization by enlarging the social field. By this enlargement more individuals, more social segments, more local societies combined and coordinated their energies than at any time before.

There is quite a lot of debate on the meanings and development of Olmec and Chavín symbology (especially Olmec!), but it is accepted that development around them was continuous henceforth.

The Olmec climax itself is readily datable. The key site is San Lorenzo, Veracruz, the dates 1250–900 BC, with formulation of the basic style apparently complete by 1150 BC. The style itself appears so suddenly that invasion is suggested, but the surrounding areas have been intensively researched and no other Olmecs of greater or even the same antiquity have been found. I therefore suggest conscious formulation in situ at San Lorenzo, in line with the three-keys thesis.

The centuries preceding Olmec development at San Lorenzo do show considerable resemblance to those before Çatal Hüyük, with a notable increase in trade and the rise of transform agriculture. However, on present evidence the specifics are rather different from Southwest Asia’s. Long-distance trade should be first. There are bits and pieces of evidence for movement of obsidian, one piece near Mexico City around 6500/5000 BC, another in Guatemala about 8700 BC, some movement of flint and shell besides. But this seems on hardly a greater scale than is known in Southwest Asia in Paleolithic times. Excepting some scanty evidence from Belize, interregional trade is now known only as of about 1600 BC, and then becomes firmly established in only two centuries, just before Olmec times. Domestication of plants on the other hand is argued (both pro and con) to have begun as early as 6000 BC and is reasonably certain by 3000 BC, though with only the slightest physical changes in the presumed domesticates. These changes begin to appear much more strongly about 2500 BC, when "plant cultivation apparently
‘exploded’. . . . This ‘explosion’ coincided with the appearance of hybridized strains of maize.‘‘ After this the resemblances to Southwest Asia are closer; by consensus it was some 1000 years after this first hybridization that Mesoamerica converted it to village agriculture, and within the next thousand years (that is in Olmec times) that such agriculture became the predominant part of the subsistence economy. Thus while the Mesoamerican development does show all three keys present in the proper period, on present evidence trade played a much smaller role than would be expected.

The background of Chavín Peru is much less well known. Even the date of onset of the culture is argued over a range of seven centuries, 1500–800 BC, with the probable solution being that the type site, Chavín de Huántar, is actually a rather late peripheral addition to the Chavín culture. Before Chavín there is the same division into early less intense and later more intense interaction periods, with trade and transform agriculture appearing this time almost simultaneously. Obsidian and other highland materials reached the coast not later than 10,000 BC, and during the next several millennia some wild plants may have been changing slowly into cultigens to the accompaniment of loud argument in the archaeological bleachers. But towards and after 2500 BC the exchange of goods and, probably, ideas expanded considerably; likewise in the early third millennium BC maize appeared in Peru and quickly began “explosive evolution and racial diversification.” During 2300–1900 BC plant cultivation became much more important. Chavín saw the culmination of this: Village agriculture was established, maize became an important main crop, and most of the domesticates of later times spread throughout Peru. The extent of Chavín trade is not discussed either absolutely or relative to earlier times, but Amazonian and Ecuadorian goods were both reaching the Peruvian highlands in this period and the existence of several trade nets is reported. One source assesses that only during Chavín times did trade become really significant. Thus all three keys were in place, with trade this time having a respectable antiquity over the Chavín complex, if not as of present evidence over the coming of agriculture.

Thus the prospective beginnings of the three accepted civilized areas under the three-keys thesis. The next stage of the investigation was research of the rest of the world for other examples, either partial and therefore presumably abortive or complete and therefore presumably establishing other nuclear civilizations. Most of these will not be discussed in this brief report, but one other complete sequence did come to
light. This occurred in the eastern United States, much more recently than the other three. Indeed by comparison with the Near East, 5000 BC was only four hundred years ago around the Mississippi River.

This culture/tradition prospectively parallel to those of Çatal Hüyük, the Olmecs and Chavín is called the Mississippian, and its suggested knowledge system (or rather its archaeologically known symbology) is variously the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or Southern Cult. James Howard confirms that the Cult’s archaeologically known symbols all survived to be central to the ceremonies of historic times in the southeast, and its archaeologically visible connections seem quite properly universal. “One could single out from the Southern Cult laundry list [of associations] a symbolic system, the trappings and accoutrements of states, a cosmology, trade networks, ritual life, art style, and even a technology.” I propose that the very existence of such a laundry list of associations is the best evidence one can expect archaeologically for a universal knowledge system, and further that exactly such a list would be characteristic of any archaeological evaluation of the medieval churches of the Old World mentioned earlier in these pages.

The same sequence as preceded the other three cases is clearly visible preceding the Mississippians, indeed being more recent and therefore less damaged than elsewhere. The first movement of copper, which seems to have been the key exchange item, began towards 3000 BC (one source suggests 4200 BC); by 2500 BC intraregional trade in other goods is also noted; in the late 2000s Kentucky was getting copper from the Great Lakes and shells from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. During the 1000s BC this exchange increased markedly and ideas were probably also moving. The earliest dates of cultigens are subject to the usual argument, but there is some consensus of domestication of at least two local plants towards 1000 BC. And one millennium after this, possibly about 200 BC to AD 400, there occurs what one authority assesses ”the first great cultural climax” of the eastern United States.

This is the Hopewell culture. From the record of the other three examples Hopewell would be predicted the beginning of a civilization. And everything does seem to have been in place during the Hopewell climax: a trade net that reached from the Atlantic to the Rockies, from the Gulf into Canada; agriculture, primarily in the imported cultigens maize and squash, extensive enough for some comment that this period saw its establishment in eastern North America; a religious impetus strong enough that the archaeological division including Hopewell is usually subdivided as Burial Mound I, II and III. But Hopewell seems never to have put all this together. Our evidence comes almost entirely
from the burial mounds, but even so the trade net seems to have served them almost exclusively. Agriculture appears in bits here, pieces there, pure hunting and gathering somewhere else. There are at least two core Hopewell areas quite different from each other. Hopewell had all the pieces but no integration of them. And when Hopewell collapsed the pieces collapsed with it. The trade net vanished; the evidence for agriculture is at least far less after Hopewell than during it; maize nearly or completely vanished for centuries. Hopewell seems almost designed to illustrate the importance of having not just all the elements of civilization but an integration tying them together.

Resurgence began after only two or three centuries, with a gradual return of such importance as agriculture had achieved under Hopewell. By AD 900 the resurgence is fully under way, moving toward restoration of the trade net over most of the eastern United States if not all the way to the Rockies, with agriculture growing to provide some 50% of subsistence and becoming so ingrained a practice that there is discussion of a genuine peasantry. Most important (from the viewpoint of the three-keys thesis), this time the mounds are not just for burial but are distinctly integral institutions of the living community as well. By about 1200 the Mississippian culture is reaching its climax, and the symbolism of the integration is clearly visible: the Southern Cult. Sometime after 1400, possibly because of the devastating introduction of European diseases, the great Mississippian centers went into permanent and total decline, but the knowledge system and its accompanying economic system remained.

Thus the proposed four examples of the three-keys thesis in operation. All three keys appear in each one and (with considerable room for dispute in Peru and especially Mesoamerica) occur in sequence. But as Hopewell particularly illustrates, the third key is the crucial one; it is the formation of a universal knowledge system which stabilizes these achievements and allows civilization to survive and grow. Although it cannot be proven, there is an at least logical reason why such should be the case.

Pre-civilized man lives a very immediate existence. The hunter-gatherer may have to learn a whole compendium of data about every pebble and blade of grass in his roaming range, but the results of application of this knowledge are direct, reasonably certain, and very uncomplicated. Civilization on the other hand specializes in complication; as time goes on more and more of civilization's products, both physical and mental, are manufactured by a multi-stage effort over time, an effort whose increasingly differentiated stages also become increasingly
subject to locally abstract value judgments. Indeed it seems to be a key concept of civilized value systems that indirect and abstract values are somehow more worthy than direct and immediate ones, that the future/distant/group gain is more important than the present personal profit, that sacrifice now brings reward later. The hunter-gatherer may refuse farming because the work is too hard, but that is no excuse in civilization.

And this orientation works. Some versions may work better than others, but all of them work better than any system of strictly immediate and local benefits, particularly in sustaining the system, civilization, itself. These universal knowledge systems can integrate many orders of magnitude more people than any direct and limited system, and can do so for indefinite lengths of time. For pre-civilized man the horizon is his roaming range, the forces and locations that act on himself and his group. For civilization the horizon is the universe.

The foregoing is a statement of research in progress. The author invites comments, suggestions and questions.

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NOTES

1. It does, however, remain an assumption that the presence of the same central symbols in two separate knowledge systems is a valid indication of prior connection. I shall first make one exception to that: For reasons not discussed here, the primacy of the male Storm god and association of the male Sky god follows a different rule. Otherwise, however, the assumption should hold, and should therefore be subject to rather easy test:

1) Is there any civilization known which has the same central symbols as any other civilization (anywhere, anytime) with which it is demonstrably not connected?

2) If not, and if the reader wishes to postulate the common occurrence of Mother-Son-Bull-Mountain around the Old World as such an instance, then what would account for the presence of this group in those areas demonstrably in some eventual contact with the most ancient Near East (if not necessarily the particular contact I suggest) and not in such other areas as the Americas, Siberia, Australia? I.e., if this group is postulated to have developed autonomously all around this rather extensive region, why did it develop only in this region?

I shall also remind the reader of Occam's razor: Thou shalt not multiply entities unnecessarily. That is, pending further evidence, a single hypothesis which explains both events and non-events in a field is automatically to be preferred over any suggestion(s) requiring multiple origins or causes and/or not explaining both events and non-events. (Non-event: The Çatal Hüyük tetrady was not part of the central symbology of the indigenous American religions: because the American civilizations did not form as part of the Çatal Hüyük line of development.) Occam's razor is so central a part of our present Western knowledge system that I should not think it needs justification.
2. The symbol "be" indicates a radiocarbon date not recalibrated to real time. Since the recalibration is debated and there is some conflict between radiocarbon and real dates (dates "BC"), in the Old World all unrecalibrated radiocarbon dates are indicated "be" herein. In the Americas, with very little such confusion so far at least, all dates are listed "BC" regardless of actual origin.


10. With the addition of a subsistence system, which is also visible, this laundry list should apply to all the prospective nuclear knowledge systems. Certainly Willey’s assessment of Olmec and Chavín ideology suggests a similar development. However, for Çatal Hüyük this is not presently visible. I shall for the moment only suggest this to be due to a lack of data. Since religious values are quite thoroughly integrated with the others in historic times, and since the Çatal Hüyük development provides a close match with the others in all other respects, a suggestion that the Çatal Hüyük divinities existed independent of the rest of life seems unwarranted.