



9-2022

### Book Review: Hans-Joachim Gehrke, ed. *Making Civilizations: The World Before 600*

Robert Bedeski

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

#### Recommended Citation

Bedeski, Robert (2022) "Book Review: Hans-Joachim Gehrke, ed. *Making Civilizations: The World Before 600*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 87: No. 87, Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol87/iss87/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

**Hans-Joachim Gehrke, ed. *Making Civilizations: The World Before 600*.  
Cambridge MA: Belden Press of Harvard University, 2020.**

Reviewed by Robert Bedeski

Studying ancient civilizations is not a precise enterprise, and many statements are approximations, subject to validation or dispute. Several key concepts describe the flow and progress of collective human development. Individuals, families, clans, and tribes precede formation of civilization, which provides the foundation for states. Governments are managerial organizations of more complex societies, providing concentrated focus on defense, currency and infrastructure. Civilizations improve life security as urbanization, innovation, and division of labor increase, requiring more complex and powerful governing institutions.

*Making Civilizations*, in more than a thousand pages of text and charts, provides a readable and scholarly tour of latest research and interpretations of man's quest for life security and meaning. Civilization<sup>1</sup> is a form of social and political association with characteristics of adaptation to the physical environment, a common or dominant religion, culture and language, a government, a degree of urbanization and occupied territory. A later layer of organization is the state, in the form of autonomous cities (the polis), kingdoms and empire. The distinction between civilization and state is crucial, and a more complete title of the book might be *Making Civilizations and States* since state-making often appears as the sub-text.

The volume begins with Hermann Parzinger's survey of the pre-written record. Advances in archaeology and forensic technology have contributed to a rapidly expanding understanding of ancient humans and their works. Old hypotheses on the spread of humankind are replaced by newer discoveries, such as migration of peoples, not across the Straits of Gibraltar, but from Africa through the Middle East. Ancient Egypt, mother of later civilizations, adapted to its riverine environment, flourished and created a complex culture that glorified the cult of the dead with pyramids and elaborate tombs. A combination of agriculture, war and religion established a political order lasting several millennia and twenty-six dynasties. Karen Radner traces the evolution of material, social and political progress in Egypt and Mesopotamia, whose records in hieroglyphics and cuneiform provide rich sources of information. Metallurgy was a key development in improving tools and weapons, as well as requiring an increasingly complex division of labor and expanding trade for acquisition of needed ores and metals.

Hans-Joachim Gehrke examines Greco-Roman civilization, with Crete as cultural intermediary through contacts with Egypt and various Mesopotamian entities.

---

<sup>1</sup> "...complex form(s) of social and political organization and cultural conditioning." p. 33.

The inter-polis wars of Greece led to its downfall and ushered a launching platform for Alexander to spread Hellenic culture into Asia. In its glory days, the Greek polis created the roots of the modern democratic state with government accountability. Festivals were an important part of building Greek civilization, including not only worship and sacrifices, but sport competition, dramas, and mutual learning. Participants and organizers came into contact and war was suspended during the ancient Olympics. The Roman Republic adapted parts of that culture and raised law into the essence of the state, ostensibly to provide justice in disputes, but actually becoming a major tool in enforcing compliance within an autocratic empire.

Ancient China is the third major civilization surveyed. Mark Edward Lewis traces growth of the empire from the earliest Shang and Zhou states, through the period of Warring Kingdoms, into the unification under Qin and subsequent Han dynasty, followed by fragmentation then reunification by the short Sui dynasty, which ushered in the Tang dynasty. The empire was centered on the person of the emperor, with the bulk of the military at the frontiers. A canon of texts, in a non-alphabetic orthography, became a source of continuity and stability for society and state.

Indian civilization is considered last, with more cultural than political continuity. The Harappa culture appeared early, evolved into a state and then disappeared. Axel Michaels traces religious and cultural creativity, though state forms tended to be less continuous than in other regions. Nonetheless nationalist scholars search for evidence of a past unity. Vedic civilization's division of labor evolved into a caste system. Ancient Indian rulers and priests venerated sacred texts like the Upanishads. Hinduism, Jainism and other religions characterized the non-secular culture, with priests exercising considerable political power.

In sum, the book is a *tour de force* addressing the main features of four major ancient civilizations and their antecedents.

### **Civilization and the State – Who is in charge?**

In the remainder of this review, I will consider how ancient states took civilizations to a higher stage of organization and in the process created a new form of human association — one which is rearranging modern civilization. Accompanied by violence and destruction, state building in ancient through modern eras has given societies more stable order, improved economy and moved to greater freedom from raw necessity. The state has also accompanied man's search for meaning with emphasis on spiritual transcendence while adapting to changing circumstances. The consequence of state growth from ancient times is that it was separating from its foundational civilization, while simultaneously drawing on society's resources and giving it greater cohesion.

Gestating within earliest societies, governments became the template for state growth and by the Bronze Age became defenders of territory and managers of society — in other words, government, as engineer of state formation, gradually captured the commanding heights over civilizations, and carved out a space for state domination through law, military force and culture. Law and the military were two main tools of creating the state and taking command over society.

### **Law and the State**

Law has been a primary instrument of government management of society. Successful civilizations produced complex and powerful states when the government exercised dominance over society and control over occupied and claimed territories. Codification and enforcement of a common law have been at state foundation since ancient times. Law requires both voluntary and enforced compliance to be effective. Establishing a common law for early Mesopotamian kingdoms was accomplished by compiling a set of exemplary cases that judges could consult in reaching verdicts. Hammurabi was presented as a king of justice, invoking compliance by protecting the rights of taxpayers and other useful subjects (p.382). In Greece, the laws were considered eternal and inscribed on bronze or stone and had the protection of the gods (p.534). Solon not only presented a set of laws but also accompanied them with poems to inspire compliance (p.538). Rome took law further and placed it at the center of state activity (p.656). Law strengthened authority of the state by establishing a final legal authority which evolved into the doctrine of sovereignty (p.657). Justinian sought complete reform of the Byzantine state and collected the key texts of Roman law, a measure that shaped later Western legal development (p.694). The Chinese emperor was the source of law and his proclamations had the force of law (p.768). Roman law not only developed as a means of settling disputes but also became a way of dealing with trouble spots and making the Republic stable and orderly (p.626). Rule of law assisted in the incorporation of a state. By placing a region acquired by conquest under the conqueror's law, whole peoples were made subject to that law, including whatever taxes or obligations were imposed (p.80). The refusal of Socrates to flee Athens after he had been sentenced to death expressed his conviction that he had been nurtured by the city and its laws and now must abide its decision (p.8). Law and the legal system was a key building block of states.

### **Military Force and State Formation**

Enlightenment philosophers Hobbes and Rousseau described state formation as a peaceable Social Contract, with men surrendering their right to use force to a sovereign authority. In reality, most states were the result of credible military force maintaining and expanding political and economic jurisdiction. A civilization that constructed a state depended on a warrior class and professional military to protect territory and preserve public order.

Greece flourished with a citizen army and navy until weakened by war and taken over by Philip and Alexander's stronger forces. The Roman Republic ended with growing militarization and civil wars (p.631). King Sargon had a large standing army which strained the resources of the Akkad state (p.352). Emperor Wu transmuted compulsory military service into a tax that he used to hire professional soldiers (p.770). In ancient China, ties of loyalty to commanders were reinforced by lineage. Private forces of armed lineages were incorporated into the state army and heads of clans were promoted to generals (p.806). The Roman Praetorian guard became a political force that raised and removed emperors (p.663). Greek development of the infantry phalanx required solid battle lines and the effectiveness of close physical proximity led to upward social mobility, or at least recognition, of the middle-class men who could afford weapons and armor (p.503). A military force often began as summer soldiers and farmers arming and drilling to fend off raiders, to be replaced by full-time soldiers as the polity prospered. With ancient state development, losers of war lost property, were enslaved, or became human sacrifices. As the military foundations of Chinese imperial power increased, a dynasty and its apparatus became separated from its social base (p.710). Military operations allowed what civil society condemned: the maximum use of force and the killing of human beings created a moral antithesis to law. This paradox matured later in positing a non-moral universe where *raison d'état* superseded ordinary ethics and law. It was the ancestor of "the end justifies the means."

### **Civilization, Culture and Community**

Civilizations adapted to their environment, flourished, and developed religions, governments, social and political hierarchies, armies, and writing. Not all groups accepted government rule peacefully and a government/religion/army complex evolved as manager and expeditor of compliance. Its instruments ranged from liquidation of recalcitrants through assimilation. Persuasion, punishment, and reward were accompanied by alteration of myth and justification for expanding the definition of civilization as community. Integration of the Greek city-states was facilitated by their defeat of Persian army and navy, and then taken a step further by Alexander the Great who envisioned a global empire.

The relation between state and civilization became a dialectical challenge and response as government increased its partnership with military and religious powers. State sponsorship of religion, as in early Japanese adoption of Tang Dynasty Buddhism, has been one effective method. Assimilation and promotion of indigenous population has also created greater compliance with laws. Rome's broad granting of citizenship to conquered peoples reinforced acquiescence to her laws. A conquered people may lose their identity, but the conquerors must also bend if they are to maintain their position.

I am suggesting that the state must be recognized as an entity that has become superior to civilization in terms of its power over society.

While heirs to Greco-Roman civilization have been mildly successful in keeping their respective states under control of society, partly through democratic processes and partly through constant material and scientific innovation which has produced increasing prosperity, there are signs that a stronger and more controlling state is seducing the political-intellectual-media class. Recognizing the state as more than mere government and that free society is not a product of complacency but of engaged activity, may be the challenge of our present civilization.

In defining the separation of existential entities state and civilization, a metaphor suggests itself. A civilization is a fertile field of grass and occasional bush where the wind and birds carry tree seeds which germinate, grow and become broad, tall trees, casting their shadows over rich new domain, attracting birds, insects, reptiles and mammals with fruit and security from ground-bound predators. The "tree" is like the state — nourished and supported by the "field" of civilization, yet separate and creating a new environment. Over time forest shadows blot out the fields forcing individual trees to contend for nourishment and sunlight. The fertility of the fields has produced a new form of existence, just as civilizations produce states. For a time, the new environment facilitates growth of new populations, but success breeds its nemesis, as the "trees" expand and prevent new growth below. Society, like a grassland, enhances life up to certain limits and with the advent age of the state, introduces richer and more multiform life. Civilization produces the state, which comes to dominate and overshadow society.

We live in an age when the nation-state has matured and dominates civilization. Taxation, regulation, a professional political class, government-media partnership, military-nourishing science and technology gravitate to and from the modern state. Society is no longer the first responder to healthcare including epidemic prevention and control. The state is involved in management of education, currency, banking, roads and bridges, border control, labor employment and with more areas of social life added every election cycle – all have expectation of greater state involvement and jurisdiction.

Civilizations are organic in the sense that they grow and flourish in response to basic human needs — which we can summarize as life security, the quest to Prolong Life, Postpone Death. Individuals since earliest times have sought food, shelter and safety through migration, hunting, farming, and building. The human life-force has energized actions to sustain life. The state, in contrast, is more the product of human reason and cunning that is activated and sustained by several forms of the will.<sup>2</sup> Compliance with laws, taxes and demands comes from simple calculation of costs and benefits.

---

<sup>2</sup> These are enumerated and described in Robert E. Bedeski, *Dynamics of the Korean State: From the Paleolithic Age to Candlelight Democracy* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2021).

It is more explicit while society and civilization operate more implicitly through custom, morals and habit. A state's specific outputs are laws, policies and actions. Since the early twentieth century, these have nurtured political order, science and technology and sometimes democracy for the benefit of mankind. Where violent revolution has midwived the modern sovereign nation-state, as in Russia or China, the costs have been heavy in human life.

Successful states, upon eliciting compliance from society, have claimed universality and use wealth and power to propagate a doctrine that their nation and belief system have more than regional or ethnic validity. Alexander's vision of Greek and Persian conjoining expressed a concept of a universal state, which was expanded by the Roman Empire. When China was united in 221 BCE, the emperor claimed: "All under Heaven." A unified global civilization inspired ambitious Roman emperors in announcing Pax Romana. More recently, the end of the Soviet Union heralded a new world order and an accelerated global civilization. Nonetheless, reports of the demise of the sovereign nation-state are premature.

The paradox of human civilization is that it has produced the modern state with borders and the most successful states begin to think and act as if their experience represents a superior culture to be shared with or imposed on other societies. Nazi conquests, Japanese intrusion into China and Southeast Asia/ and Soviet Communist expansion and subversion were examples of this belief in their superiority. American ascendancy as a softer hegemon after the Cold War may be declining and we have no reason to think that another state will not seek to take its place. We are no longer in an age of civilizations. Their pre-eminence has been replaced by the state — a complex form of association which has done great destruction and perhaps bestowed even greater benefits to humankind.