

On the Origin of Civilizations

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Many people exhibit a compartmentalized view of history. Different civilizations today have different ancestors that, due to various barriers, developed independently from each other. This view is especially prevalent in the West, where many point out that the ancient Greek and Roman cultures were the progenitors of Western civilization today. Some take great pride in the Greeks and Romans, claiming they were Western culture's sole founders. With a selection of examples, this essay will refute this view. It shall be argued that civilizations, even ancient ones, have rarely developed independently. What makes history is not just simply diverse global cultures but also the links they forge with one another.

The Greek culture, which began in the sixteenth century B.C.E. with the birth of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, is widely regarded as the ultimate “stem” of Western society. There is a common notion that everything started with the Greeks – they were the inventors of the fundamental political, economic, and cultural values governing the Western world. However, while the Greeks made many significant contributions, their culture did not progress in isolation. Thus, it is more fitting to claim that the Western civilization today is not derived solely from the Greek one, as neighboring peoples impacted the Greeks themselves.

To examine this point in greater detail, consider some of the connections that the ancient Greeks shared. The Greeks were in frequent contact with the Egyptians. The New Kingdom of Egypt reached its apex during the sixteenth century B.C.E. Like the Greeks, the Egyptians were also becoming an international power, expanding its influence to Syria and the Levant. Through trading with the Egyptians, they placed their influence on Greek art and architecture. For example, the utilization of stone columns in Greek architecture was chiefly inspired by Egyptian prototypes. Analogously, Greek sculptors adapted many standard poses from Egyptian figurines and other sculptures. When archaeologists compare ancient Greek and Egyptian sculptures, they conclude that many Greek sculptures display a straight standing pose with the arms held rigidly at the sides, resembling Egyptian figurines. While historians subsequently documented ancient Greek architecture or art as vital and glorious aspects of their culture, the development of these facets was partially dependent on the Egyptians.

As a maritime power, the Greeks were also engaged with the Phoenicians – traders that dotted the Eastern Mediterranean coast. During the Minoans and Mycenaeans' era, the Greeks invented a writing system called Linear A and B. Unfortunately, this system faded from popularity with the decline of the Mycenaeans towards the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E. The Phoenicians were the “exporters” of a new alphabetical writing system that would be a cornerstone of modern Western writing. This example suggests that the development of Greek

culture was not isolated. Instead, the establishment of links with other peoples fueled such innovative development.

Finally, many credit the Athenians as the inventors of democracy. The direct democracy model that the Athenians ran, people argue, was the prototype upon which the structure of Western states was built much later. However, new research by the historian Josephine Quinn suggests that other neighboring powers might have influenced Athenian democracy. Civilizations in modern-day Libya experimented with democracy earlier than the Athenians. Usually associated with dictator rule, even the Persians imposed democracy upon many conquered city-states. Being in such proximity to these states, the Athenians could have taken inspiration or exchanged ideas regarding the form of government through trade or warfare. As a nexus of the ancient Mediterranean world, Greece could not exhibit a culture that was not “stained” by elements of other surrounding civilizations.

Many argue that, like the Greeks, the Romans should be upheld as a sacred civilization. They should be regarded as the sole inventors of many pillars of modern society, such as the law code or complicated architectures. However, upon closer investigation, the Roman culture also developed while blending with other cultures. When Rome first emerged as a substantial power in the Apennine Peninsula, their immediate neighbor was the Etruscan civilization. The Etruscans heavily influenced the Romans. For instance, several distinctive Roman architecture characteristics, like the stone arch or cuniculus, were Etruscan inventions. Sporting events such as slave fighting or chariot racing were the first Etruscan traditions. Even the Roman religion had elements of Etruscan belief systems. What moderners believe as products of the ingenuity of the Romans might find their roots in the Etruscan culture. While the Romans subsequently subjugated the Etruscans via brute force, previous exchanges of culture had left their marks on the conquerors. These marks allowed the Romans to be inspired, innovate, and deliver an even more significant impact on their sphere of influence.

Another civilization that Rome engaged with was Carthage. Carthage dominated Northern Africa and the Iberian Peninsula until Rome conquered it following the three Punic Wars. Cultural mingling occurred as the Romans interacted with the Carthaginians mainly through warfare. Carthage brought a trading, mercantilist culture into Rome. The city-state was a significant nexus between Greek, Phoenician, Iberian, Italian, Nubian, and Libyan cultures. By conquering Carthage, Rome gained access to all the connections that Carthage established with the greater Europe and beyond. The Romans subsequently developed a sophisticated trade network both on land and sea. The fusion between the Roman and Carthaginian cultures promoted the former, attaching new cultural values as Rome grew its hegemony.

Following the expansion of its sphere of influence, Rome forged links with Eastern powers, namely Han China. The establishment of the Silk Road introduced silk to the Romans. This commodity from the East impacted the cultural ideas surrounding fashion, wealth, and social status. Silk became a symbol of wealth or high social status. To an extent, the silk trade with China strengthened the hierarchical structure of Roman society as the differences between social groups were more pronounced. Alongside economic trade, historians have surmised that there must have been intellectual exchanges. These exchanges might have left a mark on Roman philosophy, worldview, mathematics, astronomy, and many other fields. The Roman civilization illustrates, again, that civilizations do not emerge or progress independently. Every civilization's elements may be born from interactions with different cultures.

Even ancient China, a land known for its cultural longevity and unity, did not develop in isolation. Some of the most prosperous times in Chinese history, such as the Sui and Tang Dynasties, emerged due to interactions with other cultures. Before the Sui Dynasty, China was in a period known as the era of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. During this time, northern nomadic cultures mingled with the central Han culture. It was a period marked by continuous warfare, chaos, cultural assimilation, and mutual inspiration. These interactions with the northern peoples led to the establishment of some cultural cornerstones that defined the prosperity of the Sui and Tang. For example, the Sui and Tang period hailed religious diversity. There was a mix of Buddhism, Taoism, and belief systems from the nomadic tribes. Previously, owing to a range of political factors, ancient China had not displayed a variety of religions. The social and religious intercourses during the Northern and Southern Dynasties promoted the relative flow and exchange of ideas.

This essayist believes that contact across cultures, often over long distances, has been the engine of human civilizational development. This argument is relevant today, especially to those who contend that history is passé and the world order should be based purely on exchanging hard, cold interests. This essay has shown that, apart from creating warfare, cultural protectionism is also unfeasible in an interconnected world, making it doubly wrong. If leaders still value cultural diversity or desire to guide humankind to make the right choices in an increasingly unpredictable future, they must recognize the importance of sharing cultural discourses at every level.



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