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D. Wengrow, *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East & the Future of the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 217 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-969942-1

The introduction or “A Clash of Civilization?” tries to establish the origin of using the term civilization, its standing throughout time and what this idea represented for distinct cultures along history. Depending on those which tried to represent a pyramid of civilization, other cultures were compared with each other and scaled depending on their knowledge like using of writhing, planned and permanent settlements, monumental masonry and sophisticated equipment being a few of the considered traits (p. 4).

One of the most recent definitions used is one provided by Huntington where a civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have, it is defined by common elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions and by the subjective self-identification of people. (p. 9-10). But because people can and do redefine their identities, the boundaries of civilization are always changing. (p.10)

This being told, the author continues with “A Little Background” regarding the most famous and most researched cradles of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia (p.14) and why Egypt is the most famous one while Mesopotamian cultures were mostly left unknown until a century ago.

Part I “The Cauldron of Civilization”, starts with Chapter 1 or “Camouflaged Borrowings” and the story of Wenamun, an emissary from temple of Amon in Thebes to the port of Byblos (p. 19), arrived there for the materials needed for his ceremonies back at the temple. Part of the material was cedar wood found in this region of the world in abundant quantities during those times, being desired by both Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies because of its properties.

From what ancient sources we have it’s been possible to determine what both cradles of civilization viewed as their boundaries during the III millennia BC and there’s no straightforward evidence that their societies interacted directly, as the author states, they were more like “ships that passed in the night” (p. 22).

However, in the light of new archaeological discoveries Wengrow thinks that these societies were using same recipes for preserving their handmade Gods, same mixtures and borrowings from places outside their homelands, materials that can be traced as the iridescent blue stone known under the name of lapis lazuli. (p.31)

Chapter 2, “On the Trail of Blue-Haired Gods”, begins by showing how different artifacts originating around the Nile and Euphrates areas and which were most like used for religious practices were using the same barrowed blue stone called lapis lazuli to produce specific details on them.

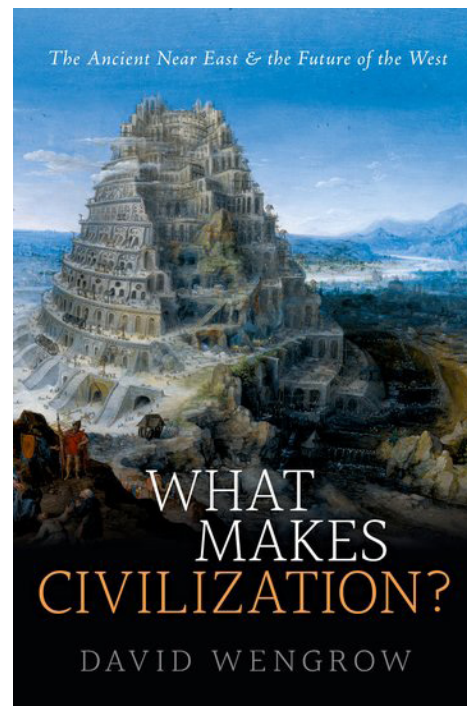
Taking into consideration that this precious stone was only found in the regions of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan it had to be carried over all the way through diverse methods to reach Egyptian soil. Like the later Silk and Spice roads the Bronze Age lapis routes were more than commercial paths, they were channels which spread values between disparate groups, from the mines of Badakhshan to the delta of the Nile (p. 37).

“Neolithic Worlds” or chapter 3, discusses about how besides lapis lazuli other precious materials like gold, electrum or tin, which was used alongside with copper for creating bronze, were brought from the highlands in the Mesopotamian lowlands (p. 41). On these plains some of the first urban settlements were founded and the first domestication of plants and animals took place.

The innovative ways were spread all over the Fertile Crescent and down towards the Nile valley, groups of settlers moving and creating new homes anywhere they could sustain their agricultural methods.

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Across much of northern Africa the early presence of ceramics implies forms of cuisine using the available cereals being transformed by boiling in porridge and beer just as fish and other meats were cooked by stewing. In South-Western Asia, where pottery was initially absent, a contrasting emphasis can be found upon the grinding of wild plants into flour and their baking to make flat breads which went together with the open-air roasting of meats. (p. 48)

In chapter 4, "The (First) Global Village" begins with V. Gordon Childe's idea that beside the Industrial Revolution there were two more great revolutions that shaped human history, the Neolithic Revolution which saw the introduction of farming and the Urban Revolution which facilitated the development of writing and urban cohabitation. (p. 54)

Alongside these changes, new technological discoveries like metallurgy and the use of the wheel for pottery making expanded the trade connections for these societies because of their need of resources to maintain their technological advantage.

Next chapter "Origin of Cities" talks about beginning of urbanization in Mesopotamia and mentions how new goods such as dairy products or beer influenced these new societies. How the expansion of one major city state, Uruk, affected the whole area by forming similar colony type settlements used to export its goods in the region. (p. 72)

The emerging of cities in Mesopotamia coincides with a range of innovations in large-scale commerce and extensive farming (p.75), the use of wheeled carts drawn by cattle, the making sealed commodities to distinguish the issuer.

Cities located towards the south of the Euphrates and close to the shore line were enjoining a variety of advantages. On one hand because of the extraordinary fertility in these flood plains which produced a surplus of crops, while on the other the coastline offered diverse marine food.

Manufacturing goods as dyes and woven textiles, alcohol drinks and dairy products, unguents and animal fats gave an upper hand for farming societies over the neighboring societies, records found on the site from Kanesh (1,900 BC), near Kayseri (modern Turkey), reveal how tin and textiles was traded in the area in exchange of gold and silver which was brought back to Ashur (p. 79).

The Bronze Age (3,000-2,000 BC) is also exposed by D. Wengrow in "From the Ganges to the Danube: The Bronze Age", where it shows that even if the "Early Dynasty" from Mesopotamia with the "Old Kingdom" from Egypt alongside the cities from the Indus valley were the major canters for this period, they were not alone (p. 90). Archaeological discoveries show large cities on the Iranian Plateau (2,500 BC) and oasis of Bactria and Margiana (2,100-1,800 BC).

During the III millennium BC bronze was enthusiastically embraced in three specific locations: the Mesopotamian lowlands, central Anatolia and northern Aegean coastal area like the site of Troy, being used in many forms such as vessels, pins, diadems, rings, necklaces, bracelets (p. 94).

By around 2,500 BC silver had achieved the status of currency among urban elites of Mesopotamian lowlands. While the silver, copper and gold supplies lay in the west of Sumer the sources for tin, used for bronze, were located east of Sumer. Thus, Mesopotamian elites exercised a tight trade monopoly on manufacturing of bronze which was used as a prestige material by Anatolian and north Aegean elites (p. 96-97).

Meanwhile in the "Barbarian periphery" there are many discovered hoards which contain sophisticated metalwork, buried in the earth, far from major centers of population. The major hoarding zones are located along the Danube in central Europe and on the valley of the Ganges in northern India. In the case of Europe, the hoards are found following the major river systems between the Black and Baltic Seas, more exactly the trade route for exchanging

copper and amber between areas (p.101-102). A comparable situation was discovered in India with hoards of weapons being found along trade routes and major rivers (p. 102-103).

Further on the author justifies how the hoarding movement is close related with the "barbarian" neighbors located outside the urban growth and using of seals centers, a side effect of the cradle of civilization and its monopoly on bronze which is traded for luxury items brought from the barbarian neighbors, which in term use the bronze objects as prestige items. This is followed by hoarding the items or placing them in tombs to maintain the artificial pricing and prestige which they represent for them.

Next chapter "Cosmology and Commerce" discusses about artifacts used for religious reasons, made to resemble gods by using mostly precious metals and the economic implications of creating and maintaining such precious items.

These idols were regarded as being born and not made by craftsmen, just like newborns they were washed and surrounded with cleansing liquids and fragrances before taking residences in their shires (p. 115). It was through contact with the gods that societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia expressed their sense of ancestry and belonging, yet the earthly bodies for these gods were made of similar exotic material and were nourished in common ways (p. 123).

"The Labors of Kingship" starts with an interesting and mostly forgot story, the tale of Kaiser Wilhelm II the last Emperor of Germany which was deposed after WW1 and lived his final years in Dutch province of Utrecht. Here he wrote "Das Königtum in alten Mesopotamien" (1938) where he realized what true power of kingships was the monarch's original role as mediator between a fragmented humanity and the mysterious supernatural (p. 125-126).

But long are gone the times of Kingship and their images as living Gods on Earth. Mesopotamian rulers were typically one among many, distributed across a divided political region formed by independent city-states, the Egyptian kings on the other hand was the sole protector of the Two Lands and a visible god, embodiment of Horus (p. 127).

Part II of this work or "Forgetting the Old Regime" is opened with "Enlightenment from a Dark Source" (p. 153) where Mr. Wengrow wishes to suggest that our contemporary understanding of the Near East as the birthplace of civilization is not just a recent legacy tacitly passed down to us from ancient Greek and Roman sources. It is the product of modern Europe's attempt to struggle with its own recent sacral kings and dynastic powers (p. 154).

When talking about West vs. East from a social and cultural point of view, many of us still consider the current stage of the Western model while the East stopped in our minds at its proto-historic age, thus creating a larger gap between the two models.

The title of the chapter is also fitting with the story of Napoleons military expedition in Egypt which carefully coordinated a scientific mission to recover knowledge from Egypt's ancient past, this model being followed by other European powers in future decades (p. 162).

"Ruined Regimes: Egypt at the Revolution" or chapter 10 reminds that during the aftermath of The French Revolution, many religious and royal symbols were burned by the people to remove their tides with the old regime.

In 1792 the 'Conseil Général de la Commune' ordered that a statue of Louis XVI located in the Place des Victoires be demolished and replaced by an obelisk (wrongly described in their directive as a 'pyramid') inscribed with the names of fallen revolutionary leaders. In the same year a large wooden pyramid was erected during a festival for martyrs of Revolution, leaflets being distributed along citizens to honor those heroes 'who helped us to vanquish the tyrants!' (p. 164).

Ironically, the new monuments used in place of old monarchical symbols were belonging to an ancient society characterized by its absolute authority.

The experience of French Revolution and the chronic social instability and periodic relapsed into old forms of authority that followed raised urgent new questions like “How does a society function without rulers?” and “What is the place and responsibility of the individual within the collective?” (p. 166).

While the French public was trying to answer these new questions, a new military attaché of France in Egypt, future emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, was engaging the Ottoman Empire in the name of liberty and encountered the ancient rulers of the Two Kingdoms.

The author continues to reveal paradoxes regarding French implications in Egypt, one of them being the false image that a glorious charge of Gallic warrior’s won the Battle of the Pyramids while the real winner was cold discipline and massed infantry, as General Berthier remarked “No battle has ever shown more clearly the superiority of European tactics over the undisciplined courage of the Orient.” (p. 168).

With a new interest for antiquity and prehistory and the rediscovery of ancient societies from the Near East new state museums were formed, which were also supplied by state wars and plunders of artifacts. Thus, the public was allowed to view and admire artifacts from ages past, kept safe by modern means, to stand by royalty and imagine how the ancients lived.

So, the question regarding “What makes civilization?” or the concluding chapter for this book, remains debatable. Mr. Wengrow states that Civilizations, from the historical perspective, are shown to be an outcome of mixtures and borrowings, often of quite arbitrary things, but always on prodigious scale (p. 175).

Since modern times when the Middle East started to be considered as The Cradle of Civilization, western societies started to extend their linear authority and origins from Ancient Rome and

Greece to Old Egypt, just as Kaiser Wilhelm II was linking his royal attributes and kingship to his predecessors the legendary Gilgamesh in Sumer.

In my opinion, the best way to represent this paperwork and the awareness that it brings to our times is a passage chosen by the author from 1791’s meditations of Comte de Volney on the ruins of the Orient: “Resting among the remains of an ancient city of the Syrian steppe, he is confronted by a ghostly apparition who revels to him a terrifying vision: the banks of the Seine and the Thames have become a landscape of monumental ruins, like those of the Nile and the Euphrates through which he passes. Civilization and progress have passed by the gaudy palaces of Old Europe, moving along on their westward march to the newly liberated shores of the New World...” (p. 164).

Thus, civilization is not just a state of society but a continuous process, carried by Golden Ages and falling with the kingdoms that it serves, it’s a model followed by some and wanted by many, a legacy which is carried on by others.

But just as the stories of Egyptian Pharos or Mesopotamia Kings were once forgotten, so our own civilization can be swallowed by time or because of our own mistakes.

This is a strong all-round paperwork, a lecture both informative and useful but not too overpopulated with notes, welcoming to both non-initiated and specialized public alike. Finally, the “Further Reading” part is a rich and high-quality bibliography for the book, with references for each chapter and debated idea, which can also serve as a launching platform for future studies.

All in all, this book is a keystone in knowing more about The Ancient Near East, the only note that I may make is to please use color pictures for lapis lazuli in future publications.