Civilization is a complex way of life that came about as people began to develop urban settlements.
The earliest civilizations developed after 3000 BCE, when the rise of agriculture allowed people to have surplus food and economic stability. Agricultural populations advanced beyond village life, and many people no longer had to practice farming at all.

Civilizations first appeared in Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq, then in Egypt. Civilizations thrived in the Indus Valley by 2500 BCE, in China by 1500 BCE and in Central America, what is now Mexico, by 1200 BCE. Civilizations developed on every continent except Antarctica.

**Characteristics of Civilization**

All civilizations have certain characteristics. These include: (1) large population centers; (2) monumental architecture and unique art styles; (3) written language; (4) systems for administering territories; (5) a complex division of labor; and (6) the division of people into social classes.

Large population centers, or urban areas (1), allow civilizations to develop. People, like farmers, who live outside urban centers but sell their goods and services there, are still part of that region’s civilization. The huge urban center of Teotihuacan, in modern-day Mexico, for example, had more than 100,000 residents between 300 and 500 CE. The development of the Teotihuacan civilization was made possible in part by the rich agricultural land surrounding the city. As the land was cultivated, fewer farmers could supply more food, such as corn and beans, to more people.

All civilizations work to preserve their legacy by building large monuments and structures (2). This is as true today as it was thousands of years ago. Western civilization, another name for civilizations of European origin (which include Australia and much of North America), has monuments like Mount Rushmore, in the U.S. state of South Dakota, or the Eiffel Tower, in Paris, France. These monuments represent the civilization that made them.

Similarly, pyramids and other monumental structures have represented Egypt for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptian civilization is also represented by a distinct art style. Characteristics of this art style include hieroglyphics and stiff human figures.
Written communication (3) is another element that all civilizations share. Writing allows systems for trade, government, and thought to develop. Written language also allows civilizations to record their own history. The world's oldest known written language is Sumerian, which developed in Mesopotamia. Sumerian civilization began keeping records about 3100 BCE. Sumerian writing was called cuneiform, meaning it was made up of different collections of wedge (triangle) shapes. Just like written records of modern civilizations, Sumerian cuneiform kept track of taxes, grocery bills, and laws for things like stealing.

Civilization comes from the Latin word "civis," meaning "citizen." Latin was the language of ancient Roman civilization, which stretched from the land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Scotland in the north and the Black Sea to the east. To rule an area that large, the Romans, based in what is now central Italy, needed an effective system for administering territories (4).

Romans used a variety of methods in this system. They built a network of roads so communication between far-away territories was quick and easy. Roads also made travel by the Roman military much easier. Romans built structures of their civilization everywhere they went: aqueducts to supply fresh water to towns and baths for improved hygiene, for example. They also spread the Latin language. The so-called "Romance languages" (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, and Italian) are called that because they all developed from the Roman language: Latin. Having a similar language made communication and leadership easier for Rome in its far-flung territories.

Romans used local leaders, as well as Romans, to administer the law in their territories. Residents were more familiar with their own leaders, and more likely to follow their instructions. Jewish leaders worked with Roman authorities in what is now Israel, while British leaders often worked with Romans on the island of Great Britain, for example. Some people born in Roman territories eventually became Roman emperors: The emperor Constantine, for instance, was born in what is now Serbia. This interaction reduced conflict between Rome and its territories.

It didn't reduce all conflict, of course. People who live in territories or colonies are rarely happy with the administration, or leadership, of a foreign civilization. Ancient Rome endured many revolts, from North Africa to Great Britain. Western Civilization has endured its own revolts, many of them successful. The South
American independence movement led by Simon Bolivar against Spain in the early 19th century led to the independence of the countries of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Panama. Mahatma Gandhi led a successful, nonviolent revolt against British rule in the 20th century, which resulted in independence for the nation of India.

Civilizations are also marked by complex divisions of labor. This means that different people perform specialized tasks. In a purely agricultural civilization, most members of the community know how to farm, cook, and hunt. In complex civilizations, farmers may cultivate one type of crop and depend on other people for clothing, shelter, and information.

Civilizations that depend on trade are especially marked by divisions of labor. The city of Timbuktu, in the modern country of Mali, was an important trading center for several African civilizations. Residents of Timbuktu specialized in trading such goods as gold, ivory, or slaves. Other residents provided food or shelter for caravans traveling on camels from the Sahara Desert. The urban center of Timbuktu was also a center of learning. Its division of labor included not only merchants, but doctors, religious leaders, and artists.

The last element that is key to the development of civilizations is the division of people into social classes. This is a complex idea that can be broken down into two parts: income and type of work performed. Changing classes has traditionally been difficult and happens over generations.

Social classes can mean groups of people divided by their income. Western civilization usually divides economic class into wealthy, middle-class, and poor. This is not always the case, however. In medieval civilizations of Europe, there were few social classes based on income. Kings and queens had enormous amounts of money and land. Serfs, or people who worked the land, had almost nothing. Eventually, a merchant economic class developed.

Social class can also refer to the type of work people perform. There are many divisions of social class. In the ancient civilization of China, there were four classic types of social classes. Scholars and political leaders (known as shi) were the most powerful social class. Farmers and agricultural workers (known as nong) were the
next most-powerful group. Artists (known as gong), who made everything from horseshoes to silk robes, were the next order of social class. At the bottom of the social classes were the merchants and traders, who bought and sold goods and services. Known as shang, these merchants often had more money than the other classes but had a lower social status.

Development of Civilization

Civilizations expand through trade, war, and exploration. Usually, all three elements must be present for a civilization to grow and remain for a long period of time. Ancient Rome is a good example.

The ancient Romans traded goods, services, and ideas with the lands they had contact with. They traded in silver from the island of Great Britain, spices such as cloves from partners in what is now India, and exotic animals such as giraffes from civilizations in Africa. They also traded ideas with civilizations such as Greece, where Romans were exposed to the ideas of democracy and citizenship.

Roman civilization also developed a powerful military. One of Rome’s most important political figures was actually a general: Julius Caesar. Caesar conquered Gaul, what is today France and Belgium, through years of war and armed conflict. Gaul remained a part of Roman civilization for hundreds of years.

Exploration was the foundation of Roman civilization. Early Romans explored the land around the Mediterranean, seeing what areas were good for agriculture (such as Gaul) and what areas had large trading centers (such as Egypt, which traded with almost all of Africa). These early explorations allowed Rome to grow from a kingdom in what is today central Italy to a republic expanding across the Mediterranean region to an empire that spread across three continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Fall of Civilizations

Many civilizations have flourished and then failed or fallen apart. There are many reasons for this. The reasons can be internal, such as conflict within the civilization. It can also be external, such as a natural disaster.
Internal conflict may have led to the fall of the **Anasazi** civilization, in what is today the southwestern part of the United States. The Anasazi civilization developed around 1200 BCE. The Anasazi seem to have abandoned their complex urban areas in the cliffs at Mesa Verde, Colorado, and other sites around 1300 CE. The disappearance of the Anasazi civilization remains a mystery, although many scientists say groups competed for land and resources. The Anasazi people never disappeared, of course: Groups developed their own, competing civilizations after the Anasazi civilization migrated or fell apart. These groups include the Pueblo and Hopi civilizations.

Some anthropologists, people who study cultures and civilizations, believe that **misuse** of the environment may have helped cause the **collapse** of some civilizations. The **Rapa Nui** civilization of Easter Island collapsed because of **deforestation**. Residents cut down almost all the island’s palm trees before new ones could grow. Trees were used for building homes and community structures, and were burned for **firewood**. Trees were also used to construct tools, such as large sleds, to transport huge **ceremonial** stone structures known as **moai**. Easter Island is isolated from other islands in the South Pacific, as well as South America. The Rapa Nui civilization had no trading partners, so they could not trade for trees or finished goods, such as chopped firewood or wooden sleds. People first arrived on Easter Island around 300 or 400 CE. By the time Europeans arrived on the island in 1722, the palm forests of Easter Island were gone.

Some anthropologists believe that modern societies’ use of natural resources will affect future civilizations. **Oil**, **coal**, and **natural gas** are natural resources that, like the palm trees on Easter Island, may be used more quickly than they can be replenished.