

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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STRAYER:**

Chapter 2 is about first civilizations. For the most part, historians use the term "civilization" in a technical way, to refer to a particular new kind of human community, one that has cities and states, very different from Paleolithic bands or agricultural villages. But in ordinary speech, civilization suggests something positive, progress, a higher form of society, while "uncivilized" is normally understood to mean something inferior.

As you consider the first civilizations described in chapter 2, think about the ambiguities. On the one hand, these civilizations have given us monumental art and architecture, like the pyramids of ancient Egypt; profound reflections on the meaning of life, such as those contained in the "Epic of Gilgamesh"; more productive technologies, such as the plow; increased control over nature; and the art of writing. All of this has been cause for celebration.

On the other hand, as one anthropologist put it, with civilization, human beings learned for the first time how to bow, grovel, kneel, and kowtow. Massive class inequalities, state oppression, slavery, periodic rebellions, large-scale warfare, the subordination of women, epidemic disease, all of this likewise accompanied these first civilizations. It's a strange paradox that we count the creation of civilization as among the great achievements of humankind. And yet, people within them have often complained bitterly about the constraints, the artificiality, and the inequalities of civilized living. But paradox and ambiguity are among the marks of intellectual maturity. And they are among the great gifts that the study of history offers to us all.