**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**Comparing First Civilizations (Chapter 2)**

**SLIDE 2.1**

Why limit this section to a comparison of just Egypt and Mesopotamia?

**SLIDE 2.2 [Images: Egypt and Nubia and The Standard of Ur Peace]**

The simple answer is sources. We know far more about Egypt and Mesopotamia than any of the other First Civilizations. The reason for this is that their physical remains are relatively well preserved, often in dry desert conditions. Moreover, the written records of both societies have survived in unusually large quantities and in scripts that are still decipherable today. Indeed, these are the only two First Civilizations that we can compare with this degree of detail. No other First Civilization left behind a comparably rich set of sources.

**SLIDE 2.3 [Map: First Civilizations]**

This raises a second question. What can this comparison of the two best documented First Civilizations tell us about the others?

Their comparison should leave us cautious about generalization. Egypt and Mesopotamia shared a great deal. They emerged at about the same time in large river valleys. Moreover, they made contact with one another relatively early in their histories. Nonetheless, they differed significantly in their political structures, religious beliefs and practices, and social structures, particularly in terms of gender. If these two civilizations developed along distinctive trajectories, then it is likely that others like Norte Chico and the Olmec did as well. After all, these two American civilizations emerged in very different circumstances from Egypt and Mesopotamia. They were completely isolated from other civilizations, much smaller in size and population, lacked a single major river valley as a focus for settlement, and possessed different sets of technologies.

**SLIDE 2.4 [Image: Mohenjo Daro]**

The surviving physical evidence from the Indus River Valley civilization raises further questions about the extent that one can generalize from our comparison of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Indus Valley cities possessed neither the temples nor palaces from which Egyptian and Mesopotamian governments operated. Nevertheless, the grid layout and elaborate sewage systems of these cities provide evidence of central planning.

**SLIDE 2.5 [Image: A seal from the Indus Valley]**

The Indus Valley appears to have possessed a different organizing structure from either Egypt or Mesopotamia, but what form it took remains a mystery. The Indus River Valley possessed writing, but we have yet to decipher it. Perhaps in the future written records from the region will reveal more. But for now the undeciphered script serves as a reminder of how little we know about many of the First Civilizations and how much more we know about Egypt and Mesopotamia.

**SLIDE 2.6 [Map: First Civilizations]**

So what can this comparison of the two best documented First Civilizations tell us about the others? Egypt and Mesopotamia provide useful examples of how these civilizations took shape and operated. Indeed, they provide our best windows into the world of First Civilizations. In addition, their comparison provides us with a sense of the diverse political, religious, social and cultural developments that accompanied the emergence of civilizations. But we must avoid the temptation to use the better sources from Egypt and Mesopotamia to draw conclusions about the other first civilizations. Egypt and Mesopotamia are just the best documented examples of civilizations that emerged in isolation from one another.