

Rise and fall of civilizations

Government



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Chanelle Samuel The Inevitable Progression of Complex Societies Ancient civilizations and the civilizations of today all share a commonality. That commonality is that all civilizations seem to go through this pattern of rise and fall. The civilization will grow, prosper, accumulate wealth and power, but eventually due to a variety of factors including natural disasters, economic decline, invasion, and so on, the civilization will slowly lose power and land and relinquish any sort of ties that once held them together.

This is clearly evident in most civilizations, and the civilizations that it is not clearly evident in are those that can technically be called civilizations today. But since they are still civilizations of today, the cycle or rise and fall may not be complete yet. This rise and fall of civilizations is an inevitable process that continues to be a factor in today's world. For the purpose of this essay I would like to clarify the definitions of terms that I will be using.

The first is the term rise and fall. I clarify rise to be when a group of people gains power over their geography and environment, are unified in some way, and have the ability to not only sustain their power but have the potential to expand that power and influence outwards. Fall will be defined as when a group of people have no potential to expand, are losing their sustained power, and when there is no chance for them to rise again.

A harder term to define is that of civilization, but for the purpose of this essay civilization will be defined as occupying a geographical area, the defining feature of how that civilization responds to the challenges from their location, maintain a social organization (that may change over time), a common religion, a form of communication, and an economic system (that changes over time). So from this point onwards these are the meanings of <https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-civilizations/>

the terms I will be using. From the beginnings of time humans have aggregated together, and lived within family groupings.

These groupings at the beginning were very small, usually only containing of one family. But as humans began to learn, with the innovations of new tools and ideas were formed, as well as the ability to travel in larger numbers emerged. These were known as the hunter-gatherer civilizations. They were nomads who continually migrated in search of food resources with the changing of the seasons. From natural progression some of these peoples evolved to stay in one area and cultivate crops that beforehand they had mostly gathered. They began to domesticate regional plants and animals found in the area.

This transfer from nomadic peoples to agricultural settlements was the first real implications of a true civilization. One of the first agricultural settlements that expanded and became a prosperous civilization was that of the Indus River Valley in present day Pakistan and India. It was built on the floodplains of the Indus and Saraswati Rivers, which created a problem as leaders would have to deal with environmental factors such as intense flooding during the rainy season. The civilization was at its height from twenty-six hundred to nineteen hundred B. C. E. , and contained as many as five million people. Its economy was based heavily on trade which they prospered from due to their valuable commodities of ivory, cotton, hardwoods, and precious stones. They also had a unified culture, art and script. As I have outlined here the Indus River Valley clearly meets the criteria of a civilization. Although the historical evidence for this society is scarce as we cannot interpret their script, it is clear that this society

expanded and flourished with the help of an extensive trade network and a fortified city.

This would constitute the civilizations rise to power and extension of that power from trade alliances. This led to the height of the civilization which was showcased with the societies planned streets, with complicated plumbing, bath houses, and assembly halls. But by eighteen hundred B. C. E. the civilization began to collapse. The most likely reason for the collapse was due to environmental factors including constant river flooding which could be due to increasing temperatures that caused the Himalayan glaciers to increase water in the rivers.

This then affected their ability to cultivate crops and had an impact on sustaining high population numbers and the effectiveness of trade. There also may have been earthquakes which changed the landscape and may have altered the course of the rivers. The Indus river Valley clearly follows the rise and fall cycle of civilizations. It came to prominence beside the Indus River and based its agriculture on the fertile flood plains of the river. It grew in power and influence as the wealth of commodities they held were traded with neighbouring peoples.

But environmental factors caused strain on the civilization that over time they were not able to solve or cope with which led to the eventual decline and fall of this once thriving civilization. Another example of civilizations that followed the same course were the shorted-lived civilizations of West Africa. These civilizations prospered in sub-Saharan Africa around the Senegal and Niger Rivers. The first civilization to rise there was that of Ancient Ghana. It

developed around the fourth and fifth century C. E. from nomadic peoples known as the Soninke banding together for protection.

They rose to power as the kings of Ghana maintained a monopoly on the trade of gold. They were in a key location which contained some of the largest gold resources of that time, and as civilizations in the Mediterranean based their currency on gold, it was in high demand. This caused Ghana to rely heavily on trade for their economy, as Arabs from Northern Africa crossed the Saharan desert to bring goods from elsewhere and trade for gold and salt. But Ghana began to weaken in power as the trade routes shifted further east and also lost its trading monopoly on gold.

In addition other peoples envied Ghana's wealth and pressured Ghana with attacks that further weakened the empire. Soon after, Ancient Ghana was overtaken and swallowed into the Mali Empire, which had the same characteristics of the Ghana Empire. It also relied heavily on trade and especially that of gold and salt. And similar to Ghana the Mali Empire slowly weakened and another empire the Songhay Empire exerted influence and encompassed Mali into their empire. The West African civilizations are characterized by short periods of power, and eventual decline and take over by another society.

That is why some people and I believe that those three civilizations can really be considered as one larger civilization. When taken as one civilization, you can think of Ghana and Mali and Songhay as three peaks of this one larger civilization, but as Songhay began to lose control of the trade routes another rising power from around today's Morocco caused the final fall of the West African civilization. West Africa fits in as a civilization by having common

<https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-civilizations/>

language roots of the Mande and Arabic, as well as a tolerant religion of a mixture of Islam and polytheism.

They were located in western sub-Saharan Africa and maintained a heavy reliance on trade for their economies. But since they relied so heavily on the trade routes through the Saharan deserts once they lost control of those routes, they eventually diminished in power, and were invaded by other powers. The third civilization I would like to discuss is the Mayan Civilization. Its geographic location encompasses today's Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. It was established in one hundred C. E. in an inhospitable landscape.

The culture was undoubtedly polytheistic as there were enormous amounts of natural disasters in this area which could be why a lot of their gods are angry and vengeful gods. Their economy was based on trading with the peoples of the north. They also established religious centers and the formation of city-states. Mayan society was very advanced but all technological innovations pertained to religion and appeasement of their gods. They had a unified written script which allowed them to communicate. The height of Mayan civilization was in three hundred C. E. and was followed by a period of decline. There are many factors that caused the decline of the Mayan civilization. Firstly, environmental factors played a large role as a period of drought commenced after many successful rainy seasons which led to huge increases in the population. So when the drought hit and crops began to fail, there just wasn't enough food to support such a large population. They also used slash and burn agriculture which only supports crops for a short period of time before that same land becomes arid and unusable.

Also the arrival of the Spanish in Peru led to the spread of epidemic diseases that the Mayans had no immunity for including small pox, measles, and chicken pox. Internal rivalries were also present which caused conflict and instability within the society. The Spanish also conquered territory and with their superior weapons and military they were able to defeat the Mayans. At the height of Mayan Civilization it is obvious that this civilization was strong and very advanced. But, like the other civilizations a variety of factors came about that led to the decline and further more fall of the Mayan Civilization.

However there are still people of Mayan descent that I do believe protect the language and customs, but Mayan civilization no longer has its own economic base or power and influence over other peoples or on the environment. And lastly, I would like to look at Roman Civilization. The Roman Empire was founded in eighth century B. C. E. , and was originally a small city-state ruled by a single king. However, in five hundred and nine B. C. E. the city's aristocrats deposed the king and instituted a republic. When the republican constitution was in place, Roman civilization really began to rise in prominence.

Between the fourth and second centuries B. C. E. , the people of Rome transformed their city from a small vulnerable city-state to the center of an enormous empire. In early Rome, polytheism was common, which was their belief in many Roman gods, but as they conquered lands new religions were brought into the empire including Judaism and Christianity. They consolidated their power in the Italian peninsula, and expanded outwards to conquer lands. They absorbed the land they conquered and allowed those

peoples to govern their own internal affairs, and if they wanted, to gain Roman citizenship.

This expansion brought wealth and power to Rome, but also increased class tensions where the disparity between the poor and the wealthy, and also administering to all the conquered lands began to strain resources. The Roman Empire was based on trade, and since they had such a large territory there was a lot of specialization that allowed them to trade in many goods. But with the over reach of the Roman Empire and the strain on resources, the Roman Empire was just too large to control and maintain. Internal tensions and attacks from outsiders also led to the fall of Rome.

I have just outlined four cases that come from completely different areas of the world in which civilizations have risen, reached some sort of peak, and then declined and eventually diminished altogether. There are many more examples of civilizations throughout history that have also followed this pattern, but does outlining the instances in which these civilizations became established and then subsequent fall really explains why rise and fall is inevitable in all civilizations? I do not believe it explains the inevitability part that I have mentioned.

I think in order to really understand why civilizations are bound to repeat this process lies within the human psyche. Humans are essentially the most complex species on the planet. It is our brain and the ability to make tools that sets us apart from all other species and has allowed us to grow and develop in the way that we have. But humans also have another side which is not as bright. It is our consumerism, greed, and the belief that our species is the superior species and therefore we have the right to do what we will.

<https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-civilizations/>

This belief in superiority and greed has led to an evolution where we do not take into account the environment and the land that gives us sustenance and the ability to breathe clean air. This dominance over the environment and superiority has directed many civilizations to their downfall due to overconfidence, overextension of their power, and overharvesting of their resources. An example I have already spoken about is Rome. The need to conquer more land, and their greed in gaining wealth and power by taking other's resources only amounted in weakening the empire to a state that left them vulnerable to invasion and collapse.

In Mesoamerica civilizations like the Mayans, used the slash and burn technique in agriculture which had devastating effects on the land. The destruction of forests for agricultural land releases a large amount of stored carbon that will all be released in the atmosphere. It also extinguishes nutrient cycling by creating crop land since no decomposition of organic matters occur, the soils then become very poor and arid and makes way for soil erosion, and can also lead to desertification. The biosphere actually has a carrying capacity for each environment.

A carrying capacity is the amount of individuals that can live off the environment in a certain area. Once that plateau is reached there will be no more food, water, or shelter for those excess people. The earth cannot just contain an infinite amount of organisms. It has a limit to the amount it can supply. Once that plateau is hit there is no possibility of growth or extension of power and influence unless people find a way to live sustainably. The progression of civilizations will not overcome the rise and fall course of development unless humans make a shift in their thought processes.

As presented in this essay the evidence of rise and fall within a civilization is sound. From past civilizations the overexpansion, internal dissent, invasion, or environmental factors have been the cause of decline in all those civilizations. In the civilizations that still exist today; the human beliefs are still the same. There is still this want to expand, to exhibit a greater power or influence over others, and to gain in wealth. This consumer way of life is the mindset that leads to declines of civilizations. The exploitation of the environment including agriculture, fishing, metals, oil, and logging is causing a degradation of the environment and could lead to the collapse of the last remaining civilizations. Unless there is a switch to sustainable living in which the environment can recuperate and replenish, there will be nothing left to consume and nothing left to form the basis of today's global economic society. Therefore all civilizations need to live and grow with the thought that natural resources are not infinite but in fact are running out very fast. If humans continue to live as greed-filled, corporation based unsustainable societies then it is inevitable that they will all fall.