INTRODUCTION

The *Journal of World History* is also an excellent source for diverse recent work on world history, from authors in various regions. *Teaching World History in the Twenty-First Century: A Resource Book*, edited by Heidi Roupp (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010) also contains compelling, recent essays on the subject. The American Historical Association publishes many good works on the subject, among them Jerry Bentley’s *Shapes of World History in Twentieth Century Scholarship* (Washington, D.C., 1996) that provides articles on global and comparative history that are useful.

Reliable internet resources include the American Historical Association (AHA) which serves the broad field of history (www.historians.org); and the World History Association (www.thewha.org), a leading learned society for the promotion of world history teaching and scholarship. See also World History Matters, http://chnm.gmu.edu/world-history-matters/, which is hosted by George Mason University; and World History Connected, http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/, which is an affiliate of the World History Association.

A WORLD HISTORY SKELETON

This chapter is an introductory guide to world history, a summary of a standard framework — a textbook in a few pages. Emphases are threefold: first, most obviously, since history is a time-based discipline, what are the definitions of key time periods and what are the main features of each? Second, within each period (different regions move into different positions depending on timeframe) what are the geographical highlights? And third (some periods feature change in certain topics — providing the main focus — but substantial continuities in others) what are the key subjects in each period? The chapter introduces the more analytical focus explored in later chapters, but it can also be used as a highlights-in-advance approach to any of the large textbooks that will expand on each of the points here in greater detail. It’s the woods, for this purpose, in advance of the trees.

THE EARLY STAGES: 2.5 MILLION BCE TO 10,000 BCE

All comprehensive world histories start well before what historians used to call the advent of recorded history, i.e. the arrival of writing. The early human story is also enlivened by all sorts of recent new discoveries, based on fossil finds in Africa and on improved methods of carbon testing for dates and also genetic analysis. From the advent of human-like species to the timing of human migration...
from Asia to North America, novel findings have pushed back what had been regarded as standard dates and opened some exciting debates about the long period of early human history and about the relationship of human evolution to that of other primates.

For world history purposes, several points are central. First, the human species went through complex and lengthy evolutionary development, from its first appearance two and a half million years ago, or perhaps even longer, in East Africa. Various distinct species not only emerged but in some cases migrated to other areas. The arrival of the species to which all contemporary people belong, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, was a late result of this long process. Gradually, through superior adaptability — particularly for changing conditions in hunting animals, where short bursts of speed became a priority; through outright warfare; and through intermarriage, *Homo sapiens sapiens* became the only human species around, upwards of 120,000 years ago. Crucial genetic changes, including the capacity for speech and language, accompanied this final (to date) major evolutionary process.

TECHNOLOGY AND MIGRATION

Early humans also generated at least two other basic achievements. First, as humans operated within a hunting-and-gathering economy, where men hunted and women gathered nuts, seeds and berries, they gradually became increasingly skillful tool-users. Humans are not the only species to find objects in nature that they can use as tools and weapons, but they ultimately gained the ability not only to find but to manufacture tools, shaping bone, wood and stone to serve more precise purposes, particularly for hunting and fishing (including ultimately manufacturing early boats). The advent of the Neolithic, or new Stone Age period about 11,000 years ago, capped this process of tool improvement within the confines of stone-age technology.

The second big news was migration, which several human species had accomplished but which *Homo sapiens sapiens* took up about 70,000 years ago. The reasons for migration were simple: hunting and gathering groups, usually about 70–80 strong, need a lot of space, on average over 2 square miles per person. Any small population increase forces some members of the group to push out into new territory, or there will not be enough food. Most important was the surge of groups from Africa across the Red Sea to the Middle East, from which some bands headed north and west, into the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, and another stream ultimately reached eastern Asia. From Asia also, groups ultimately ventured to the islands of Southeast Asia and to Australia — at a point at which the Southeast Asian land mass extended much farther southward than is the case today. And, by 25,000 BCE or perhaps earlier (there is debate about this), other Asian groups crossed from Siberia across what was then a land link to present-day Alaska, from which some moved quickly southward, reaching other parts of both North and South America. By 10,000 BCE a small global human population — about 10 million people in all — inhabited virtually all the areas where people now live. This dispersion reflects the adaptability of the human species. It also produced increasing differentiation, though not at the basic genetic level (which means, the different groups of humans could still interbreed) but rather in languages and cultural practices.

In sum: for the long early periods of human history, look for: the main phases of the evolutionary process but particularly the ultimate characteristics of *Homo sapiens sapiens*; grasp the nature and the social implications of the hunting and gathering economy; look for the major phases of tool use and particularly the improvements attained by the time of the Neolithic period. And, perhaps above all, register on the nature, timing and implications of human migration.

MAIN PERIODS IN WORLD HISTORY: ONE SKETCH

ADVENT OF AGRICULTURE

The early periods of human history were transformed by the arrival of agriculture, or what is sometimes called the Neolithic Revolution. This is the first sweeping change in the basic context for human history, and world historians usually pay a great deal of attention to it. Responding to improved tool use and, probably, reductions in the big game available for hunting, people (surely inspired by imaginative women, who had been the seed-holders
Hunting and Gathering Age
- Early Developments: 2.5 million BCE; emergence of the species, tool use, global migrations
- 1,500,000–700,000 BCE: use of fire
- 500,000 BCE: Hunting with spears
- 200,000 BCE: Homo sapiens sapiens
- Neolithic Revolution (agriculture): 8000 BCE; rise of patriotism

Agricultural Age
- 4000–1500 BCE
- Early Civilizations (river valley) – 3500 BCE–1000 BCE: organized states, more cities, writing
- 1500 BCE
- Spread of major religions
- Classical period (1000 BCE–500 CE): expansion of key civilizations, integration of regional territory, more regular interregional trade
- Postclassical period (600–1450 CE); spread of civilizations, spread of world religions, rise of wider trans-regional trade networks, expansion of regional influences and imitations
- Early Modern Period (1450–1750): Columbian exchange, global trade, gunpowder empires
- Long 19th Century (1750–1914): industrial revolution, rise of Western Power and imperialist, greater global economic inequality, emancipations
- Contemporary (1914–): rebalancing of world power, decolonization; population explosion; globalization and new global technologies; replacement of agricultural institutions like monarchy, aristocracy, patriarchy; new levels of collective violence

Bronze Age
- 3500 BCE–1000 BCE: organized states, more cities, writing

Iron Age
- 1500 BCE

Rise of Science
- Early Modern Period (1450–1750): Columbian exchange, global trade, gunpowder empires
- Long 19th Century (1750–1914): industrial revolution, rise of Western Power and imperialism, greater global economic inequality, emancipations
- Contemporary (1914–): rebalancing of world power, decolonization; population explosion; globalization and new global technologies; replacement of agricultural institutions like monarchy, aristocracy, patriarchy; new levels of collective violence

Industrial Age

Figure 2.1

DATES AND DISSEMINATION

The first instance of agriculture emerged in the Black Sea region in the northern Middle East, around 9000–8000 BCE, and was based on the cultivation of barley, oats and wheat. From this site, agriculture would gradually spread to other parts of the Middle East, to India, to northern Africa (and possibly all of Africa) and to Europe. But agriculture was separately invented in at least two other places: Southeast Asia, based on rice cultivation, around 7000 BCE; and Central America, based on corn, around 5000 BCE, with dissemination from both of these centers. There may have been other separate inventions, for example in sub-Saharan Africa. We don’t know for sure in some cases if the arrival of agriculture reflects dissemination or new discovery.

Even when agriculture was established, it spread only gradually. It took thousands of years for agriculture to reach key parts of Europe, for example. The slowness of diffusion had two causes. First, contacts among peoples were halting, particularly outside individual regions: news of major developments did not travel fast. But second, there were lots of reasons not to appreciate agriculture. Compared to hunting and gathering agriculture required more hours of work (particularly from men); it challenged male hunting prowess; it led to other problems, such as a new incidence of epidemic diseases once groups of people began to settle and concentrate rather than moving around. It was, in sum, a big change, and many groups long resisted even when they knew of the possibility. It is historically and philosophically important to realize that agriculture was not pure gain but, like most major shifts in human history, an interesting mixture of plusses and minuses.

Finally, partly because of climate and soil conditions, a number of regions did not adopt agriculture at all until much more recent times. Huge areas, including much of North America, persisted in hunting and gathering, though this was sometimes spiced by a bit of seasonal agriculture. Other major human groups moved to a nomadic herding economy, rather than agriculture, relying on domesticated animals (horses, cattle, camels) rather than farming. Nomadic groups never developed the population levels of successful agricultural regions. But their control over key regions and their ability to contact agricultural centers through trade, migration and invasion
give them great importance in world history until at least 500 years ago. The most important nomadic region was central Asia, but nomadic tribesmen in the Middle East and parts of sub-Saharan Africa also deserve attention; the key herding regions developed in and around a great arid zone that stretches from the Sahara desert in the West to central Asia and western China in the east.

The Neolithic revolution, then, involves a somewhat scattered chronology, a surprisingly slow and uneven spread, and the emergence of important alternatives.

It was, nevertheless, a fundamental development in world history. Even with its drawbacks, like greater vulnerability to contagious disease, it produced larger food supplies than hunting and gathering could, and so permitted expansions in the human population. Agriculture allowed families to have more children and, even with characteristically high infant death rates, more children surviving to adulthood. Its service in expanding the human species was ultimately irresistible to many regions. Human population began to grow, doubling every 1600 years to reach a level, worldwide, of 120 million by 1000 BCE.

NATURE OF AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES

This means in turn that, several thousand years ago depending on region, a new economic system took shape that would last until about 300 years ago (and that still predominates in many places). It's vital to realize that most of textbook world history coverage involves agricultural societies, usually with a fairly short section on the experience of the human species before agriculture and a longer section on industrial, or post-agricultural, changes. World historians can easily demonstrate that within the framework of agriculture, important changes and important variations would occur. Some agricultural societies, for example, never generated many significant cities, whereas others produced a lively urban economy and culture. So there is every reason to devote substantial attention to the ways different agricultural regions changed and diverged. But still, the fact that they were agricultural commands attention.

For agricultural societies shared several key characteristics, no matter where they cropped up and no matter how much they changed. Most agricultural societies quickly developed more permanent settlements, usually in peasant villages. This allowed communities to clear land; dig wells; and sometimes set up irrigation systems; but also to develop connections that only a settled existence could allow. All agricultural societies focused primary attention on growing food; most generated a bit of surplus, but it was limited. Few agricultural societies could ever free up more than about 20% of the population for nonagricultural pursuits, including urban life, and many kept even more on the land. Limited surplus also helps explain why so many agricultural societies generated a well-defined, but rather small, elite of wealth and power. Agricultural societies also emphasized marked disparities between men and women, in patriarchal systems that gave men preeminent power. Historians have discussed why this occurred, in contrast to hunting and gathering societies where women's economic importance assured them a more prominent role and voice. Because agricultural societies increased the birth rate, more of women's time was taken up in pregnancy and early child care. In most (though not all) cases, men took primary responsibility for bringing in the major crops, assisted by children and, in peak season, by their wives. Women's day-to-day work was also vital, in caring for gardens and animals around the house, but men overmatched them and presumably claimed disproportionate power in consequence. Additionally, agriculture redefined childhood, seeing children primarily as a source of family labor. This explains why an increase in birth rate was vital, but also explains why agricultural societies emphasized the importance of obedience and discipline as primary qualities for children.

A final note: all agricultural societies generated some concept of a week (though they differed widely on how many days it had), the only major time unit that is invented entirely by humans, with no relationship to any natural process. Presumably weeks were desirable to provide a leisure day, amid intense work, and to permit time for some trading activities. Often, a period for spiritual activity was designated as part of the weekly cycle, instead of simply leisure time per se.

Despite a common foundation, agricultural societies varied greatly, even in the specific interpretation of features like patriarchalism. But the common features and constraints must be factored in for any comparison, for there were limits to variation as well.
CIVILIZATION

Several thousand years after the arrival of agriculture, some human societies began to change and, in many ways, complicate their organizational structure. The result — the more complex structure — is what many world historians mean when they talk about the advent of civilization. Compared to other kinds of agricultural societies, civilizations had more surplus production, beyond what was needed for subsistence. They could on this basis afford more occupational specialties, from government personnel to skilled craftspeople. They also, typically, displayed more inequality than non-civilizations did. Beyond this, civilizations normally had more elaborate cities, and a clearer urban culture, than non-civilizations did, where if there were cities at all they were usually small and scattered. More cities also meant more need for trade, to provide food and the exchanges necessary for food. Civilizations had formal governments and at least small bureaucracies, rather than the less formal leadership present in simpler societies. They were societies with states, rather than “stateless”. Most civilizations, finally, had writing, which helped government bureaucracies; which helped trade, through better and more standard record-keeping; and which encouraged fuller retention of knowledge than purely oral transmission could.

LOCATIONS

The first civilization emerged in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley — the region often called Mesopotamia — around 3500 BCE. It was preceded by some important technological improvements with the agricultural economy, including the wheel, the use of metal (bronze, an alloy of copper and tin) for tools and weapons, and of course the invention of the first writing system. The Sumerian people introduced their cuneiform writing style, and then the first known organized government on the heels of these key developments. Early civilizations emerged in several other centers soon thereafter: in Egypt; in the Indus river valley of present-day Pakistan; and, a bit later, in northern China along the Yellow River. All four of these early civilizations operated around complex irrigation systems along major rivers. Irrigation required particularly elaborate organization and legal arrangements, lest one group take all the water and deprive everyone else; this undoubtedly encouraged the need for more formal government. Irrigation also helped generate particularly productive agriculture, which provided further resources that could be used to help support cities and generate tax revenues for governments. A fifth early civilization case, considerably later, emerged in Central America with the Olmec peoples, but this was not based on irrigation systems primarily.

It is important to note that, for a long time, many agricultural peoples did not generate civilizations. They operated successfully without the civilization apparatus, often with some small cities as trading centers but without writing or formal government. Civilization did tend to spread, partly through conquest, but in some places, like West Africa, “stateless” agricultural economies continued to function until relatively recent centuries. Civilization, in other words, was not a quick or inevitable product of the advent of agriculture.

RIVER VALLEY CIVILIZATIONS

In North Africa and in several parts of Asia, the four early civilization centers operated for many centuries. They developed more formal legal structures; the first known law code, the code of the King Hammurabi, came from a later Mesopotamian regime. The centers developed characteristic monuments, the most famous of which emerged in Egypt with the great pyramids. They produced art and literature, some of which has survived to the present. The first known literary work, almost certainly a written record of what had been an oral story, the Gilgamesh, came from Mesopotamia. Some of them generated extensive trade and travel. From Mesopotamia, for example, traders sought sources of tin and also precious material, like the stone lapis lazuli found only in Afghanistan.

For world history, the most important achievement of the river valley civilizations was to generate types of social infrastructure that would not have to be reinvented, including writing and formal laws. Early civilizations introduced money, obviously vital for more extensive trade. Several of them invented further technological improvements, for example in the manufacture of pottery. Several also developed new understandings in mathematics and science, revolving around issues of measurement and calculation of the
seasons. So: look at the early civilizations to determine what their durable achievements were, that might outlast their own centuries of operation. Urban development, for example, was one common feature: there were about eight cities in the world with over 30,000 inhabitants by 2250 BCE, but sixteen cities that large by 1250 BCE.

At the same time, each of the river valley civilizations had something of its own character, and together they allow the possibility of comparison. It is also true that we know far more about some of the river valley cases than others — the Indus river valley’s history is particularly challenging, because scholars have not yet translated the writing system. Egypt and Mesopotamia are most commonly compared, with different religions and cultures, different political systems and social structures, even (though both were patriarchal) different approaches to women.

Comparison of internal characteristics leads to two other topics for the early civilization period: the durability of characteristics and regional outreach. We know that the river valley civilizations introduced specific arrangements from which we continue to benefit — like the Mesopotamian notion of measuring in units of 60, which we still use for calculations of the circumference of circles or minutes in an hour. Did they also generate more profound cultural features that still shape particular societies? Some scholars have argued, for example, that Mesopotamia and Egypt developed ideas about the separation of humans from nature that would later shape major religions like Christianity and Islam, and that also differ from characteristic south or east Asian approaches to the same subject. The fact is that we don’t know enough about either early comparisons or later connections to be sure.

We are on firmer ground in noting how the river valley civilizations generated influences that went beyond their initial centers, helping to spread particular civilization systems. Egypt, for example, had trade and cultural influences both on other parts of the eastern Mediterranean, including Greece, and even more important on the upper Nile river valley, where they helped shape important African societies like Kush and, later, Ethiopia. Equally clearly, a series of aggressive Mesopotamian empires gained control over larger parts of the Middle East, bringing a variety of active contacts as a result. It was not surprising, thus, that a Mesopotamian story about a great flood showed up later in Jewish culture and the Bible. The Indus River civilization traded widely. All of this set the stage for later contacts and expansions.

END OF THE EARLY CIVILIZATION PERIOD

The early, or river-valley, civilization period drew to a close around 1000 BCE, though there were no sweeping events to mark the change. The period of big empires ended for a time in the Middle East. This allowed some important smaller societies to emerge, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean. The sea-faring Phoenician peoples were one such, forming cities at various points around the Mediterranean Sea. Of even more lasting importance were the Jewish people, whose first definite historical records date from about 1100 BCE and who began to shape the world’s first great monotheistic religion, of importance in its own right and the seedbed of two other later, great religions from that region of the world. Egyptian dynasties continued for a time after 1000 BCE but with declining vitality. The Indus River civilization disappeared entirely — and we don’t know exactly why, possibly because of local environmental exhaustion. China, the last of the river valley civilizations, demonstrated greater continuity, with the Zhou dynasty, formed shortly before 1000, continuing, though amid weak organization, for several centuries beyond.

What is clear, particularly outside of China, is that a new series of civilizations, partly co-located with where the early civilizations had been and certainly building on their achievements, was actively in the wings by 1000 BCE or shortly thereafter. These civilizations would assume greater power than the river valley societies had mustered. They would also benefit immensely from the use of iron, rather than bronze, for tools and weapons. Iron use, introduced in southwestern Asia around 1500 BCE, generated a metal far stronger than bronze, the basis both for greater agricultural productivity and for fiercer warfare. Here was a technological underpinning for the next great era in world history.

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD, 1000 BCE TO 600 CE

The most obvious focus of world history during the 1500 or so years after 1000 BCE is on the expansion and development of major