The Invention and Diffusion of Civilization

After thousands of years living as nomadic hunters and gatherers, around 10,000 BC human beings began to settle down into sedentary communities. They domesticated plants and animals and found new ways of feeding themselves. Within 3,000 or so years (a relatively short period of time considering the countless millennia humans spent as hunter-gatherers), human populations exploded, complex societies formed, and civilization was born. Cities formed, and these grew into kingdoms, which in turn became empires. From Mesopotamia came the empires of Sumeria, Babylon, and Assyria. From the fertile flood plains of the Nile emerged the Egyptians, with their great monuments and sophisticated society. From the Iranian Plateau came the Medes and then the Persians, who nearly succeeded in uniting the entire civilized world under one empire. In the East, civilization emerged in the Indus River valley, and from the Yellow River came the beginnings of Chinese civilization. And a bit later than these others, the Greeks—whose ideas still live on in the present, and who shaped Western civilization for all time—emerged in southern Europe.

The reasons for the rapid changes in human lifestyle from hunting and gathering to settled life are complex and not fully understood. Nonetheless, in this unit we will examine some possible explanations of how and why this happened, chart the course of the rise of human civilization, and study some of the greatest and most important civilizations of this ancient period.