



Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

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In *Civilizations*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto once again proves himself a brilliantly original historian, capable of large-minded and comprehensive works; here he redefines the subject that has fascinated historians from Thucydides to Gibbon to Spengler to Fernand Braudel: the nature of civilization.

To Fernández-Armesto, a civilization is "civilized in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment" ...by its taming and warping of climate, geography, and ecology. The same impersonal forces that put an ocean between Africa and India, a river delta in Mesopotamia, or a 2,000-mile-long mountain range in South America have created the mold from which humanity has fashioned its own wildly differing cultures. In a grand tradition that is certain to evoke comparisons to the great historical taxonomies, each chapter of *Civilizations* connects the world of the ecologist and geographer to a panorama of cultural history. In *Civilizations*, the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not merely a Christian allegory, but a testament to the thousand-year-long deforestation of the trees that once covered 90 percent of the European mainland. The Indian Ocean has served as the world's greatest trading highway for millennia not merely because of cultural imperatives, but because the regular monsoon winds blow one way in the summer and the other in the winter.

In the words of the author, "Unlike previous attempts to write the comparative history of civilizations, it is arranged environment by environment, rather than period by period, or society by society." Thus, seventeen distinct habitats serve as jumping-off points for a series of brilliant set-piece comparisons; thus, tundra civilizations from Ice Age Europe are linked with the Inuit of the Pacific Northwest; and the Mississippi mound-builders and the deforesters of eleventh-century Europe are both understood as civilizations built on woodlands. Here, of course, are the familiar riverine civilizations of Mesopotamia and China, of the Indus and the Nile; but also highland civilizations from the Inca to New Guinea; island cultures from Minoan Crete to Polynesia to Renaissance Venice; maritime civilizations of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea...even the Bushmen of Southern Africa are seen through a lens provided by the desert civilizations of Chaco Canyon.

More, here are fascinating stories, brilliantly told -- of the voyages of Chinese admiral Chen Ho and Portuguese commodore Vasco da Gama, of the Great Khan and the Great Zimbabwe. Here are Hesiod's tract on maritime trade in the early Aegean and the most up-to-date genetics of seed crops. Erudite, wide-ranging, a work of dazzling scholarship written with extraordinary flair, *Civilizations* is a remarkable achievement...a tour de force by a brilliant scholar.

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