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# Civilization and the Environment: The Norse and Ancient Egypt

**Baard Pettersen**

This paper will compare the Norse civilization to the ancient Egyptian civilization, with a focus on each civilization's environment, to show what their similarities and differences meant for how the civilizations developed.

## THE NORSE

The Norse were a people who lived in the Scandinavian region in Europe between the 8th and 11th century. The mountainous region of Scandinavia created a natural border between the chiefdoms, while also isolating them from the rest of the world. They were also surrounded by ocean, creating another layer of separation. During the 11th century, Scandinavia adopted Christianity and started modeling themselves on the government and cultures of the rest of Europe, changing their cultural identities from pagan to Catholic Europeans.

The Norse were seafarers, tradesmen, herders and farmers. They raised sheep, pigs, goats and cattle, and wool from the sheep were the most common material used in their clothes. In Scandinavia, the ground consisted of a lot of granite, making farming difficult. Wheat and barley were the most common crops used in farming, but the harsh climate limited the effectiveness of farming in the region, causing the people to look outside of the region for supplies.

The difficulty of farming, coupled with an increase in population, lead to raids across Europe, as there simply weren't enough resources in Scandinavia to supply everyone (Marcus 1956). While "the Norse" is the

name for the people of the Norse region, the raiders themselves are referred to as "Vikings." A mythology based upon raids on the rest of Europe, northern Africa and Asia Minor became dominant in the region, and these aspects from Norse mythology are the most remembered today, creating an image of a violent and ruthless people. While the Vikings definitely were violent and ruthless, they were considered a people separate from the rest of the Norse, who didn't turn to violence to supply themselves.

Moreover, raiding wasn't the only option available to the Norse. Due to their mountainous environment, one of the few available methods for transport was the sea. The Norse therefore became experts at travelling and navigating the oceans in their famous longships and Knarr boats (Curry 2013). The development of ships hadn't reached a point in Europe yet where sea travel became normal and preferred, so this opened up the world to the Norse and allowed them to travel mostly unhindered through Europe and neighboring regions. This also allowed the various settlements of Scandinavia to be connected to each other, but to a lesser degree than if they could stay connected through land routes, since sea travel has several restrictions. Some of these restrictions were weather, a limited number of boats, and limitations on how much these boats can carry. Trade became vital to the Norse and tradesmen became their own social class. The men would travel the oceans trading, while the women stayed home and managed the farms and animals (McGovern 1990).

## Culture, Society, and Praxis

Service (1975) explores the origins of civilization and considers the formation of a centralized government to be the starting point for a civilization. This centralized government came as a result of a surplus of food that allowed people to focus on other endeavors besides gathering more food. However, in relation to the Norse, this description doesn't match. One of the main driving forces for the expansion of the Norse was a lack of food and resources in their home region, and they were not a unified state, but were instead divided into several chiefdoms.

Despite the Norse not being united under one state, I still consider them a civilization because they developed their own unique culture—including imagery and religion—that was shared across settlements, as well as similar government structures and laws. The Norse might not necessarily have managed to create a surplus of food for the populace, but Marcus (1956) argues that the lack of food was a result of a population explosion in the area, which changed the civilization into the one we know today, instead of creating it from scratch. Service (1975) claims that civilization is the centralization of power into a unified state, but although the Norse weren't unified, the various tribes had lawmen and leaders, and they shared the same laws across the settlements. This coupled with my reasons stated above make me think of the Norse as being a fragmented civilization, which I think is similar to the city states of Greece and the ancient Harappan civilization, which were divided into city-states, but is still considered their own civilizations.

### ANCIENT EGYPT

Egypt is a civilization that has existed for over 5000 years and is considered the second oldest civilization in the world, giving it a long history that would be difficult to summarize in this paper. That is why I will

focus on Ancient Egypt, which ends with the start of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt in 323 BCE, and compare this period of Egypt with the Norse.

The civilization is located right between several deserts, creating a natural barrier between it and the rest of the world. The area is so harsh that we still speculate as to how humanity first managed to migrate out of Africa, since they would have to pass through these deserts. Passing right through this region is the river Nile, whose banks are suitable for large-scale farming and allows for the creation of a food surplus.

It's thanks to the Nile that the Egyptian civilization exists at all, as without it there would be few opportunities for people to sustain themselves in the region (Hassan, 1997). Wheat and barley were grown along the Nile, creating a surplus of food. This surplus, combined with the natural barriers that restricted trade, allowed the civilization to focus on centralization. Ancient Egypt started off as city states that eventually became unified under a pharaoh. These pharaohs managed to create an image of themselves as god-kings, making them the sole rulers of Egypt, when they weren't being overthrown (Wenke, 1991).

The centralization of power in Ancient Egypt allowed Egyptian leaders to organize massive workforces, which led to the creation of some astonishing pieces of construction that still stand today; the Pyramids are the most prominent example. Ancient Egyptians developed a culture that focused on the dead, with the belief that death is just a passage between two different ways of life. Imagery from this period still survives to this day and is used frequently in all forms of media. The period of Ancient Egypt ended when Alexander the Great conquered the nation in 332 BCE and declared himself pharaoh, creating a new period in Egyptian history.

## Culture, Society, and Praxis

### CONCLUSION

We have looked at how an isolating environment can shape civilizations in very different ways. In cases where the isolation extends to within the region itself, as opposed to surrounding the region, it can prevent centralization from occurring, creating several smaller states with similar culture and values instead of a unified state.

In Scandinavia, the mountains made centralization difficult. The Norse felt the need to go out into the world and trade or raid for what they needed because their isolation was so bad it couldn't support the whole population, creating a culture that, in one way, focused on trade and exploration, and in another way, focused on taking what they needed and wanted through force. The Norse also emigrated en masse in several ways to the British Isles, France, Iceland and even North America because there simply wasn't any more space in Scandinavia due to the infertile mountains.

In Ancient Egypt's case, the river Nile served as a connector for the various city-states, allowing The ancient Egyptian civilization was surrounded by desert on three sides, with an ocean separating the civilization to the north. This isolated Egypt from the rest of the world, but unlike Scandinavia, the Nile allowed for farming on a large scale. A surplus of food allowed for unity and the development of a government that could support several cities and settlements across a vast area. Egypt therefore had an opportunity to centralize itself.

Isolation within a civilization can fragment the populace and create a government system more akin to chiefdoms rather than one state. Isolation from other civilizations can make the populace focus on internal politics instead of looking outwards like the Norse did. This can lead to unification of the region and the creation of a well-organized civilization.

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