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## METAMORPHOSES IN THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NON-EUROPEAN WORLD

### Summary

The book presented to the readers is, in many respects, unconventional and unique. It is one of the first comprehensive pieces of scholarly work in Lithuania to thoroughly analyze complex problems in civilization studies based on comparative research strategies and methods. Its main focus is on the most important non-European and non-Western civilizations, emphasizing their development until a decisive encounter with Europeans in the modern era.

Based on the established academic study and the authors' own judgments and choices, the book provides a comparative analysis of the principal civilizations of the western (Mesopotamia, Levant, Iran), eastern (China, Korea, Japan) and southern (India) parts of Asia, Ancient Egypt, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Pre-Columbian Americas and Oceania. It also features a separate examination of the Arab-Muslim and – somewhat controversially and for the first time in Lithuania – the Eurasian nomadic civilizations, both of which combined several of the aforementioned civilizational spaces and had their own global ambitions. The book discusses various external and internal factors that influenced their development and peculiarities, as well as the complex problems of interaction among them.

The comparative case study of non-European pre-modern civilizations conducted by the authors confirmed that there are indeed many commonalities of internal structure and development phases, even between the civilizations that seem to differ the most. According to the authors, most of the patterns and processes researched in the book can be described by the arguably fitting concept of “metamorphosis” borrowed from life sciences.

The research reveals that most of these “local civilizations” were characterized by ambiguities in their limits, in both the spatial and temporal sense. Part of the reason behind this ambiguity was deeply related to their interactions with one another, since some “civilizational actors” developed on the basis of previous actors in the same areas, while others affected their contemporaries through military conquests, trade patterns, migration and cultural diffusion. Tellingly, such ambiguities often proved to be problematic not only for modern scholars, but for the “actors” themselves, and in order to enforce and legitimize their own position, identity and power, they had to opt for various strategies, with state-building, myth-making, isolationism, and stress on the civilization/barbarian dichotomy being among the most important.

The research also demonstrates that the European/Western Christian civilization was not truly idiosyncratic or predominant on the global scale until the early modern era. Even though the book does not contain a separate case study of our own civilization, other comparative analyses affirmed that there had indeed been partially successful attempts to globalize the world and make a push for modernity. In fact, the much lauded “rise of the West” since the Late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery was only possible because the Europeans came into contact with much earlier scientific achievements and technologies of the Chinese, Indians and Arab-Muslims, were largely spared by the Mongol hordes, and successfully plundered the riches of the New World later on.

In addition, the study highlights the unsustainability of the supposedly universal and ideal theoretical model of Western civilization that mirrored the above mentioned success on the ground. Indeed, the case studies of the so-called “marginal” or “undeveloped” civilizations of the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and the Eurasian nomads particularly showcase the need to reconsider the ideal type of wheel- and iron-based urban civilization, and to appreciate the fascinating artistic, technological and socio-economic developments throughout the parts of the world that were much different in terms of geographical location, ecology, natural resources and other fundamental traits.

Finally, the authors’ deliberate attention to visual materials prompted them to try to reveal the sheer essence and value of the civilizations studied through the actual artifacts representing them, depicted in numerous illustrations throughout the book. This decision represents their deep conviction that it is precisely the purview of arts and aesthetics that best serves the book’s ultimate goal of destroying long-standing, often Eurocentric prejudices and providing a less biased, fundamentally humane outlook on the non-European world that has so much to show and teach us all.