In the late 1820s the young Thomas Cole quickly built a successful career as a painter of Hudson River landscapes, but he harbored ambitions of turning the landscape form to a larger purpose. As early as 1827 he conceived a cycle of paintings that would illustrate the rise and fall of a civilization, and a few years later he began sketching and developing his ideas. The artist attempted unsuccessfully to persuade Robert Gilmor, a Baltimore patron, to commission the series, and in 1833 he secured a commission from New York merchant Luman Reed to paint a cycle of five paintings for the art gallery in his home. In the resulting series, The Course of Empire, Cole presented a cyclical view of history in which a civilization appears, matures, and collapses. The artist's distinctly pessimistic vision differed from that of many of his peers; in the early years of the United States'
history, its future was considered limitless. Cole drew from a number of literary sources, such as Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and Byron's epic Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. The motto he attached to the series was taken from Byron's popular poem: "First freedom, then glory; when that fails, wealth, vice, corruption." The artist finally settled on a title in 1835, taken from Bishop George Berkeley's 1729 poem, "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," which begins "Westward the Course of Empire takes its way." Cole also drew upon paintings he had seen on his recent trip to Europe (1829-32), including the work of J.M.W. Turner and Claude Lorrain. The five paintings follow a dramatic narrative arc, anchored by the imperturbable mountain in the background, and expounded with rich and complex symbolic systems that illustrate this imaginary world's history, including the course of the sun across the sky, the changing relation of man to nature, the role of animals, the arts, and the military, and even the placement and character of his own signature. Luman Reed, Cole's generous patron, did not live to see the completion of the series. He died in June of 1836, but Reed's family encouraged Cole to complete the work. The series was exhibited to great acclaim in New York later that year. The Course of Empire, along with the rest of Reed's collection, became the core of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts. That group of works was donated to the New-York Historical Society in 1858, forming the foundation of its acclaimed collection of American landscape painting. Cole executed the series of paintings in their narrative order beginning with this work, which he had completed by 1834. In a letter to Luman Reed, Cole envisioned that this first canvas, "representing the savage state, must be a view of a wilderness." The untamed terrain recalls the work of the Baroque painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) and is the foundation for this interpretation of the dawn of civilization. The Savage State is derived from A Wild Scene (Baltimore Museum of Art), which Cole painted in 1831-32 for his patron Robert Gilmor in an attempt to persuade him to commission the entire cycle. The two works share turbulent skies, a mighty, looming mountain, and aboriginal figures hunting for their daily meal. Several elements in The Savage State commence the symbolic systems that trace the arc of civilization. The sun rises over the water, signaling a new day. Cole himself identified the season as springtime and pointed out his depiction of the rudiments of society, with men banding together for the hunt; as well as the beginnings of the arts in the making of canoes and huts, and "in the singing which usually accompanies the dance of savages," seen at the far right. Cole signed the painting at the bottom right, incising "T. Cole" on a rock.

Physical Description:
An untamed wilderness landscape depicted at sunrise, symbolizing the dawn of civilization. A violent storm sweeps over the mountains and ocean inlet. The foreground features a blasted tree trunk and a hunter clad in animal skins who has just shot an arrow into a leaping stag. In the distance the hunter's companions pursue a pair of deer that have been cornered on a precipice by a pack of hunting dogs. The plateau above bears an encampment with figures performing a ritual dance around a fire.

Signed: Signed at lower right: "T. Cole"