

Early Civilizations

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Section 1: Introduction

This Premium TimeMaps Unit is based on a **sequence of maps** showing the Early Civilizations. More specifically, it covers the early civilizations in world history, in the **Eastern Hemisphere**. Those in the Western Hemisphere (North and South America) are not covered here - they will have their own units.

So, this unit covers the early civilizations in the Middle East (Ancient Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Israelites, and the three great empires of Assyria, Babylon and Persia), South Asia (Indus Valley, the early phases of Classical India), East Asia (the early phases of Ancient China), and Europe (Minoan, Mycenaean, early Greek).

The period covered is between 4000 BCE and 500 BCE - that is, in terms of world history, the final stages of the Late Stone Age (Neolithic), the whole of the Bronze Age, and the Early Iron Age.

The unit does not aim to deal with these civilizations in any detail. Rather, it is to quickly and clearly show students when and where each major civilization flourished, and how they relate to each other in time and place. Such a chronological and geographical overview is essential to an understanding of this crucial phase of world history.

For more detailed treatments of the civilisations of this era of world history, see our other Premium units:

- [The Ancient Middle East](#)
- [Ancient India](#)
- [Ancient China](#)
- and the forthcoming unit on the Early Mediterranean.

One Unit, Two Resources

This sequence is presented in **two resources**, a slide show and a series of map pages, facilitating **two approaches** to covering the topic with your students: a whole-class presentation; and individual project work, for which the institution will need a multiuser licence so that the students can access the resources for themselves.

1. Slide show

The slide show is primarily designed for use as a whole-class presentation. [Commentary notes](#) are available as an *aide memoir* for the teacher when delivering the presentation. They provide talking points on each map in the slide show.

The slide show can also be used by the students in their project work. A [students' commentary](#) is also provided.

2. Timemaps map pages

These are designed specifically for use by students in their project work.

Each map shows a large section of the Ancient World of the Eastern Hemisphere (i.e. most of Asia and some of Africa and Europe) at a particular date. The maps are accompanied by information about what is happening in the region at that date.

This combination of map and information makes it easy for students to use the map pages, though not so ideal for teachers to use as a class presentation (hence the slideshow, see above).

Section 2: Using the Resources

The unit can be used in one of two ways:

1. Whole-class presentation

The **slide show** is specifically designed for teachers to use as a whole class presentation. It offers a visual, panoramic overview of the topic. It can be used as an introduction to the topic, or as a wrap up, or as a stand-alone resource.

A commentary is provided to help teachers cover the key points for each slide.

In Section 3 Task 2 (below), are a series of questions (they are also found at the end of the commentary), which can be answered by a single word or short phrase. The questions aim to reinforce the learning outcomes from the presentation, and can be used as a test or reinforcement exercise at the end of the presentation.

Alternatively, you could print the questions out and give them to the students, and ask the students to note down the answers as the slide show progresses. They can either submit their answers for marking, or collaborate in small groups to come up with an agreed set of answers.

2. Student-based enquiry work

Students use the maps, plus linked information, to find out for themselves about the topic. In the process, they gain knowledge and understanding of the topic, whilst at the same time developing analytical and other thinking skills.

Students can use either **map pages** or **slide show**. In the map pages, the linked information is right next to the maps; in the slide show, it is in the student commentary.

In either case the institution will need a multiuser licence.

Both slide show and map pages are built around the same series of maps, following the history of the Ancient World from 4000 BCE to 500 BCE.

Simple **forward/back** navigation buttons (and in the map pages, a timeline below the maps) make it easy to move through the map sequence.

To start the sequence of map pages, click on the map dated 4000 BCE.

To start the slide show, click HERE.

Teachers may wish to combine the whole-class presentation approach with the student-based approach - for examples, see Section 4.

Section 3: Suggested Activities

In this section are some suggestions to using this Premium Unit actively in the classroom.

Students can do the activities as individuals or in small groups. They will obviously need to have direct access to this Premium TimeMap unit, for which a multi-user licence is required.

Task 1. Preparatory work - Geographical Background

Students will benefit from some preliminary work to fix in their minds the area of the map being used, in the context of the world map.

A suggestion might be to have the first Map of the unit (dated 4000 BCE) on the class screen, or on the students' desk computers, and at the same time give students access to a world map (perhaps also on screen). Students then locate the area shown in the 4000 BCE map with the world map.

Point out that the area on the unit's 4000 BCE map is mostly well north of the equator, and therefore has a warm but not-too-hot climate. Much of it is therefore well suited to agriculture - especially along the banks of great rivers (point out the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the India, Ganges, Yangtze and Yellow rivers).

Task 2. Questions

These questions can be used with the slide show (see above; hence they also appear at the end of the [slide show commentary](#)). They can also be used in the context of student-based enquiry work, as a simple way to reinforce knowledge of the topic. If so, in place of whole class presentation, students access the slide show or map pages directly to answer the questions.

The answers are given (*in Italics*).

1. Who were the first people to live in cities and develop writing? (*The Sumerians*)
2. On what agricultural technique did the rise of the earliest civilisations depend? (*Irrigation*)
3. On what river did Egyptian civilization depend? (*The Nile*)
4. On what river did the first civilization in the Indian subcontinent depend? (*The Indus*)
5. On what river did the state ruled by the earliest dynasty in China depend? (*The Yellow River*)
6. What was this dynasty called? (*The Shang dynasty*)
7. What label do we give to a group of closely related languages, spoken by peoples whose ancestors originally lived on the plains of central Asia before moving southwards into the Middle East, westwards into Europe and south-eastwards into the Indian subcontinent? (*The Indo-European languages*)
8. Name one of the peoples who invaded the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age, around 1000 BCE (*One of the following: The Dorians, the Peoples of the Sea, the Philistines, the Arameans, the Israelites, the Chaldeans, the Iranians, Medes and/or Persians*)

9. Name one of the advances and innovations (whether technological, cultural or social) that took place around this time (*One of the following: iron weapons and farming tools, alphabet, monotheism, republics or democracies, camel-riding*)
10. In which region of the world did the Vedic belief system take shape, with its concepts of Karma, reincarnation and castes? (*India, or to be more precise, the Indian subcontinent*)
11. Which dynasty came to power in China around 1000 BCE? (*The Zhou dynasty*)
12. What was the empire that rose to dominate the Middle East in the centuries after 1000 BCE? (*The Assyrian Empire*)
13. Which people spread alphabetical writing to the Greeks and other peoples in the Mediterranean region? (*The Phoenicians*)
14. Which people, who come to prominence after 1000 BCE, have a monotheistic religion centered on the God, Yahweh? (*The Israelites*)
15. What was the name of the Greek poet to whom the great epic poems of the Iliad and Odysseus have been attributed? (*Homer*)
16. Who was the Babylonian king who sacked Jerusalem and forced the Jewish elite to leave their homeland and live in the city of Babylon? (*Nebuchadnezzar*)
17. Which was the first kingdom to mint metal coinage? (*Lydia*)
18. Which great empire succeeded the Babylonian Empire? (*The Persian Empire*)
19. Which Greek city state was the first in world history to adopt democracy as its form of government? (*Athens*)
20. Who founded one of the great religions of the world in India around 500 BCE? (*The Buddha, or Gautama Siddhartha*)
21. Who was the great Chinese thinker who developed a teaching that would be followed by millions of people, right up to the present day? (*Confucius*)

Task 3. Critical thinking questions

The aim of these activities is to develop analytical thinking skills, and in particular getting students to grapple with history-specific issues such as cause and consequence, and change and continuity.

General Instructions:

1. Students read the questions below, which either they or their teacher has chosen.
2. They then go through the [map sequence](#) or [slideshow](#) (in the latter case they will have to have access to a copy of the [student commentary](#)).
3. As they do this, they carefully take notes, focusing on the questions they are answering. They should bear in mind when and where events or developments happen; why they happen; and what changes as a result of them happening.
4. Students use their notes to prepare their answers. These can be in either essay form or as presentations.

(Note to teacher: suggested answers are given in italics and brackets)

Short questions:

1. What is irrigation? Why was it so crucial to the rise of the early civilizations?

(The answers in brief are:

- Irrigation is a way of diverting, distributing and storing water by means of channels, dykes, and ponds.*
- In hot, dry areas, the water from rivers is needed to enable crops to grow properly, but without ponds, channels and dykes the water from the spring floods would soon flow on down to the sea, too quickly to sustain proper plant growth.*
- The spring floodwaters brought rich mud from the hills, which provided fertile soil in which crops could grow.)*

2. Which of the advances being made in the period of transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age (c. 1200 BCE and 800 BCE) would have the greatest impact on future world history, do you think?

(No correct answer, but students should give reasons for their choice. They should be able to give the immediate benefit(s) of the innovation, and suggest some wider and longer-term impacts.)

3. When looking at the civilizations of China, India and Greece in the period leading up to 500 BCE, can you see some common factors which led to the emergence of great thinkers who would have a huge impact on world history?

(Students' answers should include such factors as the expansion of trade, the rise of inequality, the emergence of new social classes, and the inadequacy of old beliefs and practices.)

Extended exercises:

Complete one or more of the following activities. There are no right or wrong answers for them, but students should give reasons.

Question 1: What is a "Civilization"?

This TimeMap unit mainly covers the major "civilizations" of the Eastern Hemisphere up to 500 BCE - but why are certain societies given the label "civilization", and some not?

*(Points to consider: Categorizing societies helps archaeologists and historians make sense of the past; they therefore apply different terms to different kinds of societies - "prehistoric", "hunter-gatherer", "pastoralist", "agricultural", "nomadic", "ancient", "medieval" and so on. "Civilized" or "Civilization" is one such term, and in its usual sense denotes a society which is based around urban settlements - i.e. towns and cities. This relates back to the Latin root word for "civilization", which is **cives**, or citizen - an inhabitant of a city.*

The existence of cities also implies the existence of a "state", i.e. a well-organized system of government which rules an area with (more or less) settled boundaries, and which exerts a (more or less) strong control over the whole population within these boundaries. States must be governed from somewhere where the rulers live, along with their advisors, officials, soldiers and so on. This is usually also the location for the leading place of worship in the state, with its priests; and all these people are served by a population of craft workers, traders and servants.

On the other hand, most cities have to control enough land surrounding it provide the surplus food to feed all the people who live in it . The city and its surrounding “hinterland” make up a state. Hence, cities and states go together.

Professional archaeologists and historians also differentiate between “complex” and “simple” societies, with “simple societies” being those which don’t have towns and cities, are non-literate, and which are organised into tribes, clans or family groups. “Complex societies” on the other hand have things such as towns and cities, different social classes with different levels of wealth and power, monumental architecture, beautiful artworks, literacy and so on.

Also, most ancient societies have left little or no trace of their way of life, nor even of their existence. It is usually the ones we know most about which we label “civilizations” ; and it is these that have left the most - and most impressive - ruins behind. It is also these that have often left written records which tell us so much more about them.

Students might also come up with reasons of their own.)

Question 2: The Ancient World - chronological divisions

Are the terms “Bronze Age” and “Iron Age” useful when looking at the ancient world?

(Points to consider: There’s plenty of information to answer this question in the Timemaps presentation. Answers should include references to:

- Bronze Age trade routes*
- Limitations of bronze for use in things other than weapons and luxury decoration, due to its expense*
- Comparative cheapness and wide availability of iron, making it useable in everyday farming implements and so making farming more productive, leading to growing population, trade, towns and cities and so on.)*

Question 3: Different forms of government in the Ancient World

What different forms of government do we encounter in the long period covered by this unit?

(Some points to consider: The list of different forms of government should include

- city-states (Mesopotamia, Greece, the Aegean);*
- kingdoms (or monarchies: all civilizations);*
- empires (Mesopotamia - Akkadian, Babylon, Assyria; Egypt; Hittites);*
- republics (Greeks, India),*
- one democracy (Greek - Athens).*

If they are being imaginative, students could also include family groups (hunter-gatherers), clans (pastoral nomads) and tribal kingdoms (India after the Indus Valley civilization, early China, early Greeks, steppe nomads).

Also, students could usefully distinguish between a unified kingdom such as Egypt, and a fragmented kingdom such as China under the later Zhou dynasty.)

Question 4: An overview of Ancient Civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere

Students divide into small groups. Each group looks at one of the following civilizations:

Mesopotamian

Egyptian

Indian

Chinese

European (Minoan and Aegean)

They note down the key changes (social, technological, political or other) which take place in the civilization they are studying, and present their findings to the class. They finish by summing up what was different about the experiences and achievements of this civilization from others, and what was similar.

Students then answer the following question, either as a class to debate, or in small groups, or as individuals: Which of these civilizations has had the most impact on human history, and why?

(Some points to consider:

- What technologies or other advances did a civilization transmit to later world history?*
- what was the nature of its links with other civilizations - trade? war? - and what did these achieve by way of technological or cultural transmission?*
- Surely the most influential civilization was the Mesopotamian - but students might disagree (in which case they must marshal their arguments)*

Section 4: Plans of Action

Here in this section are possible strategies, plans of action you might like to follow (or adapt as you see fit) for using some of these activities.

Plan A:

This plan combines the presentation approach with the student-centered enquiry approach. Do this if you are doing this topic as a major topic with the class.

1. Complete Task 1: Geographical Background.
2. Introduce the topic by presenting the slide show to the class. Use the teacher's commentary as a guide.
3. The students complete Task 4 by answering one or more of the questions given there.

They use either the map pages or the slide show (plus student commentary) to answer the question(s).

They can do this task as individuals, for their own project work. Alternatively, they can do it in small groups.

All the students or groups can be asked to do the same questions, or all to do different ones.

4. The students then write up and submit their work in essay form for marking, or prepare a presentation for showing to the class.

Plan B:

This plan will take less time than Plan A to complete.

22. Complete Task 1: Geographical Background.
23. Show the slide show to the class, using the teachers' commentary as a guide. Tell the students that there will be a test at the end.
24. Ask the questions in Task 2 to the class as a whole, with the students calling out the answers (if they remember any!).
25. Give out the questions on printed sheets (for this, use the questions as given at the end of the students' commentary). Show the class the slide show again. This time they take notes in preparation for the same test again.
26. The students write their answers on this sheet and submit for marking.

Plan C:

This should take longer than Plan B to complete, but not as long as Plan A.

1. Preliminary work: Geographical Background.

2. The students are handed copies of the questions (use the questions as given at the end of the students' commentary).
3. The students then work their way through the map pages or the slide show (if the latter, using the students' commentary), and as they do so they note down the answers to the questions.
4. The teacher then shows the slide show to the class as a whole, using the teachers commentary as a guide. In the course of this presentation they will give the students the answers to the questions.

Section 5: Further Reading

A list of all TimeMaps articles for Period 1 can be found on the Encyclopedia home page. Here is a selected list of the key articles which students should find most helpful.

[Hunter-Gatherers](#)

[The Coming of Farming](#)

[Early Pastoralists](#)

[The Origins of Civilization](#)

[Ancient Mesopotamia](#)

[Ancient Egypt](#)

[The Hittites](#)

[Ancient Israel](#)

[Ancient India](#)

[Ancient China](#)

[Ancient Kush](#)

[The Phoenicians](#)

[The Assyrian Empire](#)

[The Babylonian Empire](#)

[The Persian Empire](#)