

Premium Timemaps

Early Civilizations

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Introduction

The Premium TimeMaps unit on Early Civilizations is a sequence of maps showing the emergence and spread of civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere, between 4000 BCE and 500 BCE. The sequence can be clicked through to gain a panoramic view of this area of world history.

Aims

This Timemap looks at the rise and spread of civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere from 4000 BCE to 500 BCE. Its aim is to quickly and clearly show students when and where each major civilization emerged, and how they relate to each other in time and place.

Students should finish up with a rounded overview of world history in this period.

For example, using the Timemap should provide students with an awareness that,

- The civilization of the Phoenicians appeared later than that of the Ancient Egyptians and Ancient Mesopotamians, but before that of the Ancient Greeks;
- Ancient China was comparatively isolated from the other centres of civilization, and so did not share in the network of influences to the same extent;
- The great belief systems which appeared in the period - Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism - did so in particular geographical and chronological contexts.

Students should also gain knowledge of the chief characteristics of the major civilizations of this period, including an outline understanding of their histories.

This Timemap does not cover any particular civilization in any depth. Another Premium Timemap, the *Ancient Middle East*, looks in more detail at the histories of ancient Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Phoenicia and Israel.

How to use the Timemap

This Timemap is a supplementary resource that can be slotted in whenever the teacher thinks fit. It is ideal for use as an introduction to this era of world history.

The unit can be used as

1. a whole-class presentation

and / or

2. the basis for student-based activities.

Section 1: Whole-class presentation

Using a projector/whiteboard system, you can show the map sequence to your class, talking through each map.

To help you do this, there are Presentation commentary notes (see below). These can be used as a full script, an *aide-memoire* or as a reference for more information if you need it.

It might be helpful to have these on a separate device for you to read from, or print out.

The notes mostly follow the same formula:

1. Date and introductory sentence(s)

The date to which the map refers, followed by a small introductory paragraph in **bold** which seeks to encapsulate in a sentence or two what the map is showing.

2. Bullet points

Some bullet points, covering different points of interest on the period the map covers. Most of these bullet points also reference further notes.

3. Additional notes

These give more in-depth support to the bullet points. If you are working to time constraints, skip these; they are simply there to sketch in some of the background.

Some key words or phrases are in **bold**; these are there to help you see at a glance the key points in a paragraph.

A suggestion

To keep your students more engaged (and, by the way, if your students are not engaged or benefitting from these maps, then let us know and we'll refund your money!), why not start each new map with a question: *How is this map different from the previous one?*

Another question for some maps is, *What happens next, do you think?*

Quiz

At the end of the commentary notes is a quiz to (cruelly) encourage the students to keep awake.

Commentary

4000 BCE

At this date farming is spreading around the Eastern Hemisphere, but there are as yet no urban, literate civilizations, and no large-scale states.

- Farming is spreading around the world (note 1).
- In the grasslands of the Middle East and central Asia, a pastoralist way of life is emerging (note 2).
- In large areas of the world farming is still absent and hunter-gatherers roam the landscape (note 3).
- In a few areas, civilization is on the way (note 4).

Additional notes:

1. Farming

By this date, **agriculture** covers most of the Middle East, East Asia, South Asia, Europe and North Africa.

2. Pastoralism

In the grasslands and highlands of the Middle East and central Asia, pastoralists follow a **nomadic** way of life. They regularly move from place to place in search for new grazing lands for their flocks and herds.

3. Hunter-gatherers

Agriculture has yet to reach many areas of the world - much of central Asia, the northernmost parts of Europe, most of Africa south of the Sahara, large parts of South Asia, nearly all of South East Asia, and almost the whole of North and South America. Here, **hunter-gatherers** live in small encampments. For food they hunt wild animals and search for nuts and berries.

4. Civilization is on the way

In some **river valleys**, civilization is on its way. (Those parts of the river valleys where civilizations grow up should more accurately be called **flood plains**. This is because the earliest civilizations did not develop in narrow valleys. Rather, they appeared where broad rivers flowed through large, flat plains).

Irrigation is playing a key role in this. This makes the land so fertile that it can support larger populations than ever before.

Just as importantly, farmers can produce more food than they need for themselves and their families. The **surplus** can be used to support a small section of the population to do things other than farming. Groups of full-time artisans, soldiers, priests and rulers are beginning to appear. As these groups enjoy different levels of status, power and wealth, society is becoming divided into different **social classes**.

These non-farming groups live in communities which are growing in size, from villages into towns (**urban settlements**).

3500 BCE

In the Middle East, the Sumerian civilization has appeared in Mesopotamia; this is the first civilization in world history.

- The Sumerians live in the first true cities, which form the centres of the earliest city-states (note 1).
- Their scribes and officials are developing the first system of writing (note 2).
- Their skilled workers are producing fine works of art (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Sumerian civilization

The Sumerian civilization is located on the flood plain of two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates. This plain forms the land of **Mesopotamia**. This is the most fertile portion of a larger area, known as the **Fertile Crescent**, which covers an arc of territory going (from east to west) from Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan (a “land of milk and honey”, according to the Bible).

Once **irrigation** is in place, the rivers bring their flood water and rich mud, or **silt**, to make the land very fertile.

A number of **cities** have now grown up here, each with tens of thousands of inhabitants. These cities have temples, palaces, craft workshops, wide streets and open spaces for public ceremonies. They are surrounded by defensive walls, built of stamped earth or dried brick.

These populations are divided into **classes**, with differing levels of status, wealth and power. Kings and their families are at the top, then high officials, nobles, priests, scribes, craftworkers and, at the bottom, ordinary farmers. The lower classes are required to do **forced labour** on irrigation works, temples, palaces and city walls.

The cities are independent from one another. They are the first **city-states** in world history. They are ruled by powerful **priest-kings**, assisted by priests and officials.

2. Writing

The temple officials are developing methods of **record keeping**, to help them manage the collection and distribution of food and other goods from the people. These are evolving into the earliest form of **writing**, which is called **cuneiform**.

They have also developed skills in mathematics to aid them in constructing buildings and canals.

3. Arts and craftwork

The production of refined art and craftwork is one of the key hallmarks of civilization. This is because their societies include a **division of labor** - no longer does everyone have to spend their tending crops. This in turn allows specialist craftworkers to develop their skills to a far higher level than was possible when everyone had to be farmers.

Sumerian **artisans** can produce more beautiful paintings, sculptures, metalwork, jewellery and other items than ever before. These are used to decorate temples and royal palaces, and for personal adornment.

2500 BCE

More major civilizations have appeared: Egypt in North Africa and the Indus Valley civilization in South Asia.

- Egyptian civilization is located along the banks of the river Nile, in North Africa (note 1).
- Another great civilization to appear is located in the Indus Valley, in South Asia (note 2).
- Ancient history has now entered the Bronze Age, and civilization is beginning to spread outwards from the river valleys (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. Egyptian civilization

From about 3000 BCE, the land of Egypt has been ruled as a single **kingdom**. This makes it very different from Mesopotamia, which is divided into numerous city-states.

The kingdom is ruled by a succession of kings called **pharaohs**. Like all peoples of the period, the Egyptians have a **polytheistic** religion, and they regard the pharaohs as the earthly **incarnations** of the chief god, Amun.

The pharaoh and his officials can order huge numbers of people to work on vast projects. Already by 2500 BCE the great **Pyramids of Giza** have been built. These are the magnificent burial-places for the kings.

The Egyptians have developed their own **hieroglyphic** writing system. This is for public proclamations. For more everyday use, the scribes write in a curved script (called **cursive**). Egyptian achievements in medicine, science and mathematics are very advanced for the time.

2. The Indus Valley civilization

More than a thousand miles to the east, in the Indus Valley, a number of large cities have emerged, notably at **Harrapa** and **Mohenjo-daro**. These cities are the first to be laid out on a **street plan** based on grids. This shows how well-organized their societies are. These cities also boast the earliest **sewage and piped-water systems** yet found.

The Indus Valley cities have a writing system, but modern scholars have not been able to decipher it. As a result, far less is known about their civilization than about those of the Egyptians and Sumerians.

3. The spread of civilization

The peoples of Mesopotamia and Egypt trade with many other lands, and **trade routes** now reach into **Asia Minor**, through **Syria** and **Canaan**, down into **Nubia** and even as far as Europe and India. This is the period known as the **Bronze Age**, and there is a brisk trade in copper and tin. These metals are both used in making bronze, from which beautiful objects as well as **weapons** are made.

Wherever trade goes, small trading **cities** spring up. Civilization is spreading out of the river valleys and into neighboring lands.

1700 BCE

New civilizations have now emerged to east and west - but one has vanished!

- The Mediterranean sees the rise of the first trading civilizations in world history (note 1).
- Far away to the east, a new civilization has appeared in the Yellow River region of China, but the Indus Valley civilization has vanished (note 2).
- In central Asia, nomadic peoples have developed the war chariot (note 3).
- Back in Mesopotamia, the Sumerian civilization has given way to Babylonian civilization. A king of Babylon, called Hammurabi, is famous for the law code he issues (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Mediterranean

Both the **Minoan civilization** on the island of Crete and the **Mycenaean civilization** on mainland Greece, are centres for traders who sail far and wide in the search for goods to buy and sell.

2. China and India

China

By this date, a well-organized kingdom with a Bronze Age civilization covers much of the **Yellow River** region. This is ruled over by kings of the **Shang dynasty**. They are the first of a long succession of dynasties to rule China.

The Chinese have already developed their **writing system**, which even at this early date is almost identical to the modern Chinese script.

India

By this date the **Indus Valley civilization** has vanished - for reasons scholars still do not properly understand. It may have been due to new peoples migrating into the area, or perhaps to climate change.

3. Central Asia

On the central Asian steppes, a nomadic people have already made a major impact on world history. Modern historians label them the **Indo-Europeans**, because they speak a language which will evolve into many modern languages stretching from India to Europe (including English, French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Persian and Hindi).

They were the first to domesticate **horses** (c. 3500 BCE) and later developed **wheeled vehicles** (c. 3000 BCE) - which, by c. 2000 BCE, had evolved into **war chariots**.

4. Mesopotamia

In Mesopotamia, the Sumerian city-states have now declined in importance. The city of **Babylon** now dominates the region. This is thanks to the conquests of the Babylonian king, **Hammurabi**. Hammurabi is also famous for the **law code** he issued.

The Babylonians base their art, architecture and literature firmly on that of the Sumerians.

1300 BCE

This era marks the high point of the Bronze Age world.

- In the Middle East, Egypt is at the height of its power. Its great rival is the warlike Hittite empire (note 1).
- In the Mediterranean, the Minoan civilization has been badly affected by natural disasters (note 2).
- Under the Shang dynasty, the Chinese are producing some of the most beautiful bronze vessels ever produced (note 3).
- In South Asia, tribes coming in from central Asia, who call themselves the Aryans, are developing their polytheistic religion into an early form of Hinduism (note 4).

Additional notes:

1. The Middle East

Egypt is at the height of its power, the centre of the largest **empire** ancient Egypt ever possessed. It rules much of **Canaan**, and has expanded its control deep into **Nubia**.

The **Hittite empire**, founded some centuries before by **Indo-European** rulers from central Asia, is Egypt's main rival. Egypt and the Hittites contest control of Canaan.

2. The Mediterranean

The **Minoan civilization** of the island of Crete was gravely affected by earthquakes and tsunami, in 1600 BCE and possibly again in 1400 BCE. The **Mycenaean civilization** has continued to flourish.

3. China

The kings of the **Shang dynasty** now rule a large part of northern China, and dominate an even larger area.

Under the Shang, the Chinese are manufacturing some of the most beautiful **bronze vessels** ever produced.

4. South Asia

Indo-European tribes have migrated from Central Asia into South Asia, and are now spreading across northern India. In South Asia they call themselves **Aryans** (which means "Noble Ones"). They are forming tribal kingdoms ruled by warrior **aristocracies**.

The Aryan religion is related to the belief-systems of the Ancient Greek, Persians and Germans. It shares with them a belief in many gods and goddesses.

Its priests, called the **Brahmins**, transmit their beliefs and practices **orally** (i.e. by word of mouth) from one generation to the next. This growing collection of prayers, hymns, rituals and other sacred verses are called the **Vedas**. These will form the foundation on which the great religion of **Hinduism** will later develop.

1000 BCE

This has been a time of great upheaval - civilizations have been damaged, or even destroyed - but also one of great progress.

- The past two centuries have seen much of the Middle East thrown into chaos by major migrations (note 1).
- The land of Canaan has been caught up in the turmoil; it has been invaded and occupied by the Israelites, who have brought with them their monotheistic religion (note 2).
- Apart from monotheism, this period sees other advances as the Bronze Age gives way to the Iron Age (note 3).
- In China, the Shang dynasty has been replaced by the Zhou dynasty (note 4).

Additional notes:

1. The Middle East and Mediterranean

In the eastern Mediterranean, the migrations of the mysterious “Sea Peoples” and other groups have destroyed the **Hittite** and **Mycenaean** civilizations. At the same time desert **nomads** have invaded Syria and Mesopotamia, throwing **Babylonia** and other ancient kingdoms into chaos. Only **Egypt** has succeeded in repelling invaders, but she too has become weak and divided.

2. The Israelites

Canaan has been invaded and occupied by the **Israelites**. They bring with them their monotheistic religion of the one God, **Yahweh**.

By this date their tribes have been united into a single kingdom, under their kings, Saul and then **David**.

The Israelites’ religion will be ancestral to the three great monotheistic faiths of the modern world, **Judaism, Christianity and Islam**.

3. Advances

This period sees a series of advances as the Bronze Age gives way to the Iron Age. The use of iron technology is spreading. This is a tougher, more plentiful and less expensive metal than bronze, so that iron **farming tools** and **weapons** are coming into common use. This leads to **agriculture** becoming more productive, and larger armies of metal-armed soldiers being raised.

Another major advance is the spread of **alphabets** in the Middle East. Alphabetic writing is much quicker to learn than the older cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts, and so makes **literacy** possible for many more people.

4. China

In China, the **Shang dynasty** in northern China has been replaced by the **Zhou dynasty** (c. 1046 BCE). Apart from this political change, Chinese civilization and society continues on much as before - though the tradition of making beautiful bronzes begins to wain.

700 BCE

New civilizations are appearing, old ones are changing.

- The Middle East has seen the rise of the first truly multinational state in world history, the Assyrian empire (note 1).
- The Phoenicians have had a huge influence on western peoples such as the Greeks (note 2).
- In China, the Zhou kingdom is fragmenting into many different states (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Assyrian empire

In the age of chaos (see notes for last map) the Assyrians managed to fend off invasions by turning themselves into a military power. They have built up a large **army** of well-armoured soldiers and, under a succession of able and ambitious kings, have conquered a huge empire. This now covers much of the Middle East.

If a conquered kingdom rebels against their rule, the Assyrians march in, take many of its people and settle them in another area of their empire, hundreds of miles away. In their place, they bring in other settlers. They thus wipe the kingdom and its culture from the map. The most famous instance of this is with the **Israelites**.

The original Kingdom of Israel had divided into two, forming the kingdoms of **Judah**, in the south, and **Israel**, in the north. The latter has been destroyed by the Assyrians (in 722 BCE). Judah remains in existence but only as a subject state of the Assyrians.

2. The Phoenicians and Greeks

The Phoenicians are a people of the Middle East who live in trading cities on the Mediterranean coast. They have pioneered **trade routes** right across the Mediterranean, and beyond. They have had a huge influence on western peoples, such as the Greeks, by spreading the use of the **alphabet** and other elements of ancient Middle Eastern civilization to them.

The **Greeks** live in hundreds of small **city-states**. Many of these are expelling their kings and setting up **republican** forms of government. They are active in sending out **colonies** right around the Mediterranean.

3. China

In China, the **Zhou** kingdom has expanded, but it is now fragmenting into many separate states as local lords set themselves up as independent rulers.

600 BCE

The Assyrian empire has now vanished.

- It has been replaced by three large states - the Babylonian empire, the Medean empire, and a revived Egypt (Note 1).
- Amongst the Greeks, the poet Homer has produced his great works (note 2).
- Literate, urban civilization once again flourishes in northern India (note 3).
- China is experiencing a time of great change as the princes assert their authority over the feudal lords (note 4).

Additional notes:

1. The end of the Assyrian empire

The **Assyrian empire** has collapsed as a result of internal revolt and external invasion.

The leading powers in the Middle East are now the **Babylonian empire**, under its famous king **Nebuchadnezzar**, the empire of the **Medes**, and a revived kingdom of **Egypt**.

The kingdom of **Lydia** is also powerful - and very wealthy. It is here that the first metal **coins** are minted. These make trade much easier.

2. The Greeks

The Greeks are seafarers and traders, and have established **colonies** right round the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. They now dominate the trade routes of the eastern Mediterranean. In the western Mediterranean they face competition from the Phoenician colony of **Carthage**, located in North Africa.

The great days of Greek civilization lie in the future, but already the oral **epics** attributed to the blind poet **Homer** have been composed. These are still today regarded as among the finest works in Western literature.

3. South Asia

Cities, writing and other features of civilization have returned to the Indian subcontinent. This is thanks largely to renewed trade links with the **Middle East**. These have brought **iron** technology for use in farming and war, and the **alphabetic** script.

Northern India is divided between several powerful states. Most are **kingdoms**, but some are apparently under councils of nobles. Some modern scholars see these as **republics**.

4. China

In China, the independent states into which the **Zhou kingdom** has now divided are constantly at war with one another. In order to raise larger and better organized armies, some rulers are establishing **bureaucracies** to collect taxes efficiently and to organize public projects such as irrigation systems better. This undermines the authority of the old feudal nobles.

500 BCE

This is a period when great religions and philosophies are being taught. These will help shape human history right up to the present day.

- The Persian empire now covers much of the Middle East (note 1).
- Greek civilization has continued to develop, and the first democracy in world history has appeared (note 2).
- In Asia, two great schools of thought are being developed: Buddhism and Confucianism. These still influence millions of people in the modern world (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Persians

Much of the Middle East is now ruled by the huge **Persian empire**.

The Persians are an Iranian people closely related to the Medes. Under their king **Cyrus** they rebelled against the **Medes** and took over their empire. Cyrus and his successors have then expanded its borders dramatically.

The Persian kings are much more merciful than the Assyrian and Babylonian rulers were. **Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon, had deported many **Israelites** from Judah to Babylon, in 585 BCE. The Persian kings Cyrus and **Darius** have ordered that these people be allowed to return to their homeland. There they will continue to develop of their monotheistic religion, **Judaism**.

2. The Greeks

Greek civilization is flourishing. The Greek city-states have already produced great mathematicians, thinkers, poets, sculptors and architects; in politics, the first **democracy** (at the city of Athens) has appeared.

The Greeks are now waking up to the threat posed by Persians to the east.

3. Two great schools of thought

In northern India the **Buddha** is teaching his disciples about the need to have compassion on all creatures. The great world religion of **Buddhism** will arise from these teachings.

In China, this is the period when the philosopher **Confucius** is active. He teaches that society will only know harmony when all people know their place within it and treat each other with kindness and respect. His teachings, **Confucianism**, will influence Chinese thinking right up to the present day.

Quiz:

1. The term "Mesopotamia" means "land between the rivers" - which two rivers are being referred to?
2. What river was vital to Egyptian civilization?
3. What is the name we give to Sumerian writing?
4. What were the political units into which Sumer was divided?
5. What is the name we give to Egyptian writing?
6. Which river gave its name to the earliest civilization in the Indian subcontinent?
7. In Mesopotamia, the Sumerian civilization gave way to which civilization?
8. Who was the king of Mesopotamia who issued a famous law code?
9. What is the first dynasty of Chinese history called?
10. After about 1700 BCE a people originally from central Asia began occupying northern parts of the Indian subcontinent - by what name are they known?
11. They brought with them a very early version of a religion which is still practiced by millions of people today, in India and around the world - what is this religion?
12. The religion of the Israelites was very distinctive for its time. Was this because it was a polytheistic religion, or because it was a monotheistic religion?
13. In China, what dynasty replaced the Shang shortly before 1000 BCE?
14. The ending of the Bronze Age was a time of great upheaval, especially in the Middle East - but it was accompanied by major advances. Name one of these.
15. In the centuries around 1000 BCE, a people located on the Mediterranean coast of Syria began trading far and wide across the Mediterranean Sea - who were they?
16. What great but ferocious empire conquered much of the Middle East in the centuries after 900 BCE?
17. When this empire fell, a new empire took over most of its territory. Its king is famous for taking many of the Jewish people into captivity. What was his name?
18. By 500 BCE a huge new empire covered much of the Middle East - who was the founder of this empire?
19. He and one of his successors, Darius the Great, are today particularly famous for allowing something to happen - what was this?
20. In the years around 500 BCE, two great thinkers in Asia are developing teachings which are still followed by millions of people today. Who were these two teachers?
21. By this time, a Mediterranean people have created a brilliant civilization and some of them have even developed the first democracy in history. Who are these people?

Section 2: Student-based Activities

Chose one or more of these activities for students to complete on their own, working either as individuals or in small groups.

They will obviously need to have access to the TimeMap *Early Civilizations* to do this.

Each activity should result in a piece of writing or a presentations (PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi or other).

These activities are designed to stimulate enquiry, thought and discussion. They address such critical thinking strands as cause and consequence, change over time, comparison and so on.

Some activities are more challenging than others, so be aware of the different ability levels that students will need to tackle them.

Activity 1. Presentations

Students divide into small groups.

Each group looks at one of the following civilizations:

Mesopotamian

Egyptian

Mediterranean (Canaan, Minoan, Aegean, Phoenician, Greek)

Indian (including the original Indus Valley civilization and the later Aryan civilizations)

Chinese

They go through the Timemap and note down (by information in the Timemap or inference from it)

- the causes for their civilization's rise - and fall, if appropriate;
- the important events and episodes in their civilization or region's history;
- links with, and influences from, other civilizations
- key changes in their civilization's society, technology, government and culture.

They present their findings to the class.

The class concludes by reviewing what was common to all or most civilizations, and in what ways they differed.

This activity reinforces knowledge and understanding of civilizations, as well as addressing cause and consequence, change over time and comparison.

Activity 2: Questions on early civilizations.

Describe what is meant by irrigation.

Give reasons why irrigation systems were developed in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, northern India and China.

Why were they key to the rise of the earliest civilizations in these regions?

OR (the same question put in a different way)

Why is division of labour an important feature of civilization? What made it possible in the early civilizations?

OR (a more general, and therefore perhaps more challenging question)

Why did the first civilizations develop in the river valleys of large rivers?

Activity 3: More questions

1. List the characteristics of early civilizations, compared with the village-based societies which came before.
2. What impact did the Phoenicians have on history? Explain how this came about.
3. Why was the invention of bronze important for the spread of civilization?
4. Why was the ending of the Bronze Age accompanied by some great advances?
5. What was the predominant belief system in the early part of this period, and which great religions or philosophies appeared during the period to change or modify this situation?
6. *[this is probably for more advanced students]:* Some modern historians put the civilizations covered in this unit into two groups, **primary civilizations** and **secondary civilizations**. On what grounds do you think they make this distinction, and can you identify which civilizations go into which group?
7. *[Also for more advanced students]:* Are the terms “Stone Age”, “Bronze Age” and “Iron Age” useful when looking at the Ancient World?

Appendix: TimeMaps articles for further reading

A list of all TimeMaps articles which might be of use to you in background reading for this topic.

[Hunter-Gatherers](#)

[The Coming of Farming](#)

[Early Pastoralists](#)

[The Origins of Civilization](#)

See also articles on

[Ancient Mesopotamia](#)

[Ancient Egypt](#)

[Ancient Israel](#)

[Ancient India](#)

[Ancient China](#)