

History Level 7

Chapter 1 — Overview: Levels 7 and 8

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Reading the deep past: evolution, migration and the first societies

Long before anyone wrote anything down, people were already on the move. In this section we follow the longest story there is: how our species began in Africa, how people reached the other regions of the world, and how the first settled societies grew. Nobody was alive to write it down, so the story has to be built from **evidence** — what remains from the past: things, bones, seeds, stories, DNA (the tiny set of instructions inside every living thing). And because the evidence comes in pieces, the story we tell is an **interpretation**: a reasoned explanation of what the evidence shows.

Teacher note. Two habits carry this section and the rest of the book. First, every claim about the deep past is an interpretation built on evidence, and new evidence can shift it — students should be able to say *why* historians hold an idea, not just *what* the idea is. Second, the two hypotheses — Out-of-Africa and multiregional — are both presented in their strongest form; assess on the quality of reasoning with evidence, not on which idea a student picks. The clause of this content description about the populating of Australia is dropped under TOC §2A and is not taught anywhere in this book; the footer records the handling.

Theory

What is an interpretation?

A **source** is anything from the past that we can learn from. For the last 5 000 years we have writing. For the deep past before writing, our sources are things: bones and teeth, stone tools, broken pots, seeds, layers of soil, and the DNA kept inside old bones. The study of the past through the things people left behind is called **archaeology**.

An **interpretation** is a reasoned explanation of what the evidence shows. Two careful historians can read the same evidence in different ways, and both can be reasonable. That is why historians speak of *stronger* and *weaker* interpretations: the stronger one fits more of the evidence, and explains it better. A **fossil** is the remains or traces of a living thing kept from long ago — a bone, a tooth, a footprint pressed into mud.

The words on these cards will do a lot of work in this section. Each one is defined again where it first appears.

Words we will use

interpretation a reasoned explanation of what the evidence shows	evidence what remains from the past: things, bones, seeds, stories, DNA	fossil the remains or traces of a living thing kept long ago	hominin humans and our close ancient relatives that walked upright
archaeology the study of the past through the things people left behind	excavation the careful digging of a site, layer by layer	stratigraphy reading the stacked layers of soil at a site	chronology putting events in order of time
genetics the study of DNA passed down through families	radiocarbon dating measuring the age of once-living material	migration the movement of people to a new home	society a group of people living together under shared rules and customs

Each of these words is defined again where it first appears in the section.

Twelve word cards, each with a key term and a short definition: *interpretation, evidence, fossil, hominin, archaeology, excavation, stratigraphy, chronology, genetics, radiocarbon dating, migration and society*

The long story of the hominins

Hominins are humans and our close ancient relatives that walked upright on two legs. The story begins in Africa.

- **About 7 million years ago** — the first hominins walk upright in Africa.
- **1924 and 1947** — the Taung Child, then Mrs Ples, are found in South Africa. Both are fossils of *Australopithecus*, an early upright-walking relative. The caves where Mrs Ples lay are part of the Cradle of Humankind, a UNESCO-listed heritage site.
- **1974** — ‘Lucy’ is found at Hadar in Ethiopia by a team led by Donald Johanson. She is about 3.2 million years old, and her bones show she walked upright.
- **About 2.4 million years ago** — the first stone tools appear, found at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania.
- **About 1.8 million years ago** — people reach West Asia. The skulls at Dmanisi in Georgia are the oldest known humans outside Africa.
- **About 300 000 years ago** — the first bones of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, appear at Jebel Irhoud in Morocco.

Two more finds show how alive this field is. In 2015 scientists announced a species nobody knew about, *Homo naledi*, from a deep cave in South Africa; in 2017 its bones were dated to between about 335 000 and 236 000 years ago. New finds do not only add to the story. Sometimes they redraw it.

Sources: Dart, 1925; Broom, 1947; Lordkipanidze and team, *Science*, 2013; Hublin and team, *Nature*, 2017; Berger and team, *eLife*, 2015; Dirks and team, *eLife*, 2017. All checked 24 August 2026.

The long road to us



Spaces are evened out so you can read them. The real gaps of time are much bigger.

A vertical timeline with nine milestones, oldest at top: first hominins about 7 million years ago, Lucy about 3.2 million, first stone tools about 2.4 million, Dmanisi about 1.8 million, first Homo sapiens about 300 000, out of Africa about 60 000, Europe about 45 000, the Americas about 15 000, farming villages about 12 000 years ago

How people reached the regions

From about 60 000 years ago, big groups of *Homo sapiens* moved out of Africa. Groups reached South and East Asia from about 60 000 years ago, and Europe by about 45 000 years ago. By about 17 000 years ago, people in Europe were painting animals on cave walls at Lascaux in France. The Americas were reached by at least about 15 000 years ago — charcoal and stones at Monte Verde in Chile show people were living there by then.

How long has each region been home?

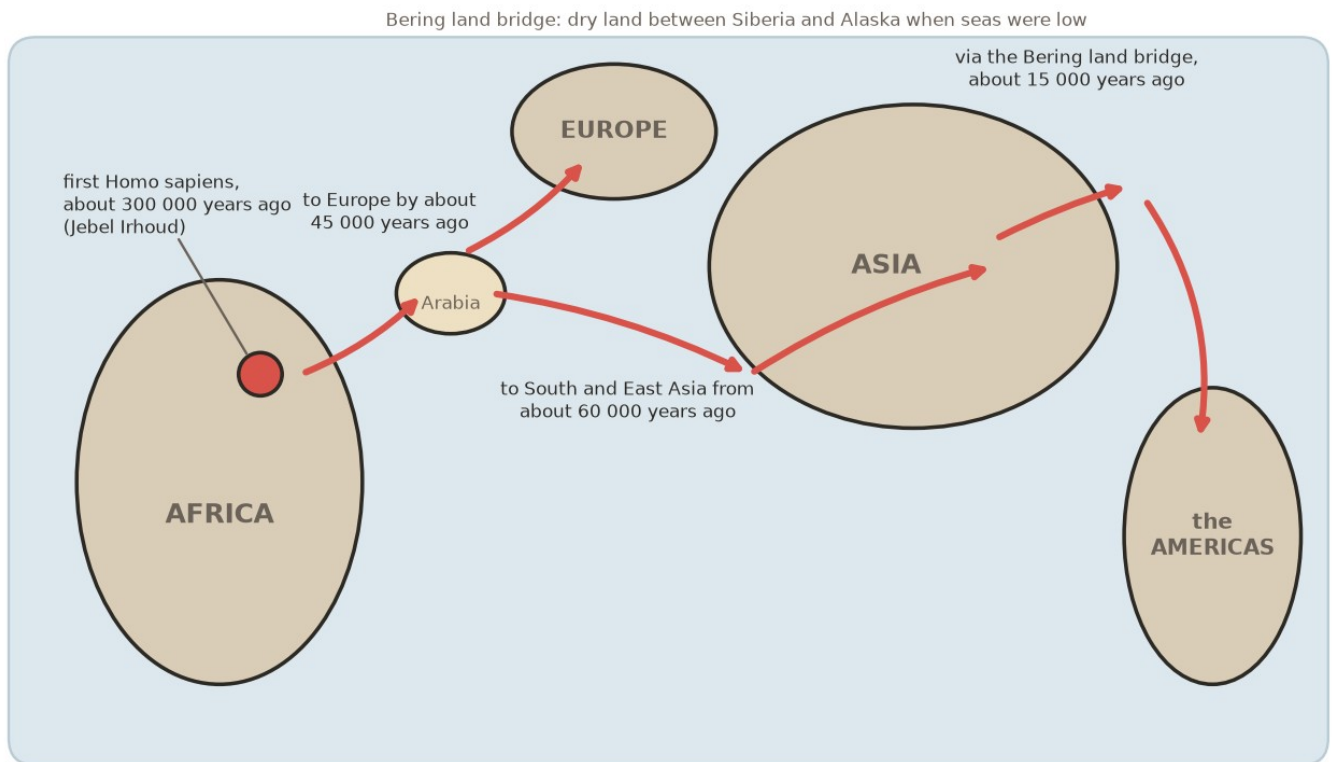
Oldest strong evidence of Homo sapiens in each region



A chart with one row per region. Africa: about 300 000 years ago at Jebel Irhoud. Asia: from about 60 000 years ago. Europe: from about 45 000 years ago, cave art at Lascaux by about 17 000. The Americas: at least about 15 000 years ago at Monte Verde, Chile

People did not move in a straight line, or all at once. They followed food, and the food followed the climate. When the world cooled, sea water was locked up in ice, the sea fell, and dry land appeared where there is sea today. When the world warmed, the sea rose and the paths drowned. The map of the past was not the map of today.

One story: out of Africa



Schematic map — shapes are not exact, and the journey reads left to right.

A simple map reading left to right: first Homo sapiens in Africa about 300 000 years ago at Jebel Irhoud, arrows through Arabia to Europe by about 45 000 years ago, to South and East Asia from about 60 000 years ago, and on to the Americas across the Bering land bridge about 15 000 years ago

By about 12 000 years ago, in several places, people began to grow food and stay in one place. Those first farming villages are the beginning of the first **societies** — groups of people living together under shared rules and customs. Later sections of this book pick up that story.

Two ideas about where we came from

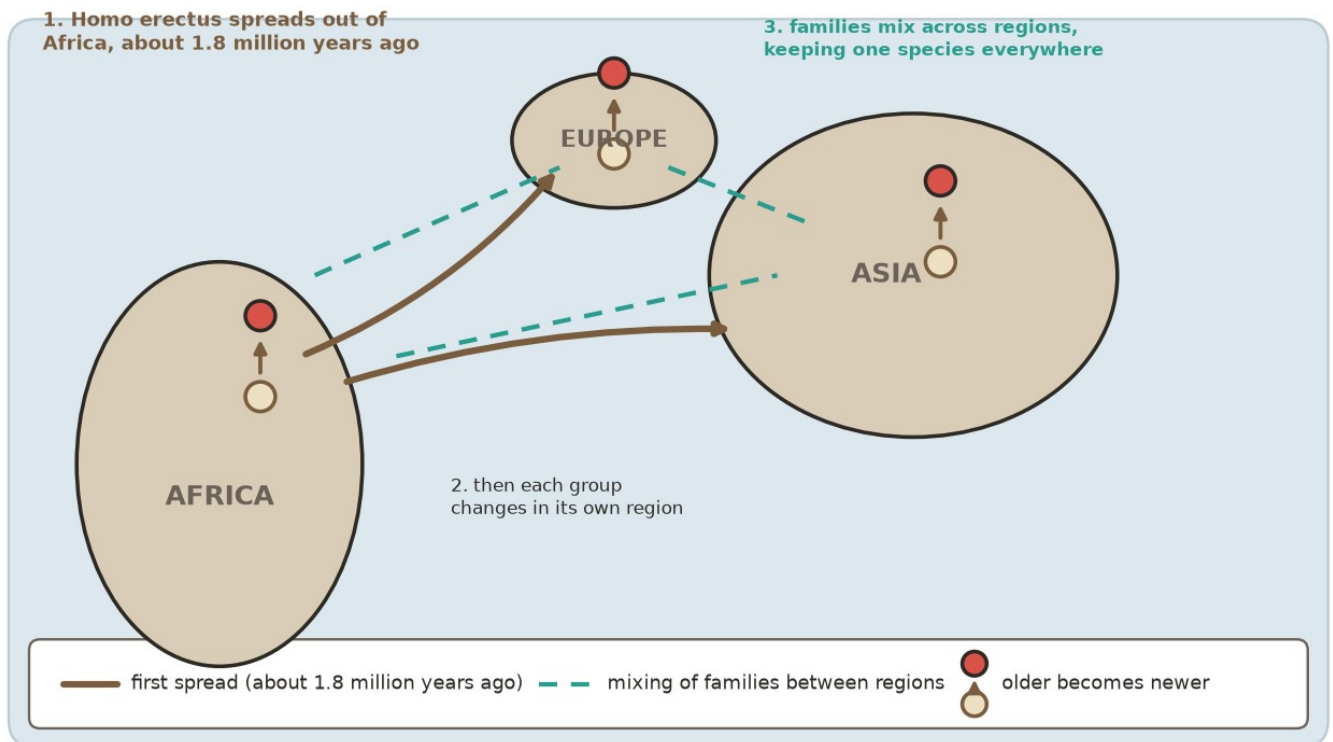
A **hypothesis** is a careful idea about how something happened, built so it can be checked against evidence. For the question ‘where did *Homo sapiens* come from?’, two hypotheses have shaped the debate.

Out of Africa (recent African origin). Our species began in Africa about 300 000 years ago. From about 60 000 years ago, groups spread into the other regions. Where they met older human groups, such as the Neanderthals of Europe and West Asia, they mainly replaced them, with a little mixing.

Multiregional (regional continuity). In its strongest form: the first humans, *Homo erectus*, left Africa about 1.8 million years ago, and their descendants in Africa, Europe and Asia slowly changed into *Homo sapiens* in all regions at the same time, kept as one species by families mixing across the regions. The modern form of this idea is linked with Milford Wolpoff.

The key differences are: **when** the spread that made us happened (about 60 000 against about 1.8 million years ago); **where** we began (one region, Africa, against many regions at once); and **how much mixing** each idea needs (a little against a lot). Both ideas agree that all humans are one family — they disagree about how that family came to cover the world.

The other story: change in every region



Schematic map — shapes are not exact. This is the claim in its strongest form.

*A simple map of the multiregional idea: brown arrows show *Homo erectus* spreading out of Africa about 1.8 million years ago, then in each region an older group changes into a newer group, with teal dashed lines showing families mixing across regions*

Two ideas about where we came from

Out of Africa (recent African origin)

The core idea

Homo sapiens evolved in Africa, then spread from about 60 000 years ago and replaced the other human groups.

Mixing between groups

Allows some mixing: small numbers of children born between the groups.

Strongest evidence

The oldest Homo sapiens fossils are in Africa. Everyone's mitochondrial DNA leads back to Africa.

Hardest to explain

Why some features look the same in regions that are far apart.

Multiregional (regional continuity)

The core idea

Homo erectus left Africa about 1.8 million years ago and changed into Homo sapiens in each region at the same time.

Mixing between groups

Needs steady mixing across all regions, so the groups stay one species.

Strongest evidence

Some skull and tooth features in each region seem to carry on over time.

Hardest to explain

Why the oldest Homo sapiens fossils are found only in Africa.

**Where most evidence now points:
an African origin, with some mixing with Neanderthals and Denisovans along the way.**

A two-column comparison of the two ideas, Out of Africa and multiregional: the core idea, mixing between groups, strongest evidence, and hardest thing to explain for each, with a verdict band reading that most evidence now points to an African origin with some mixing along the way

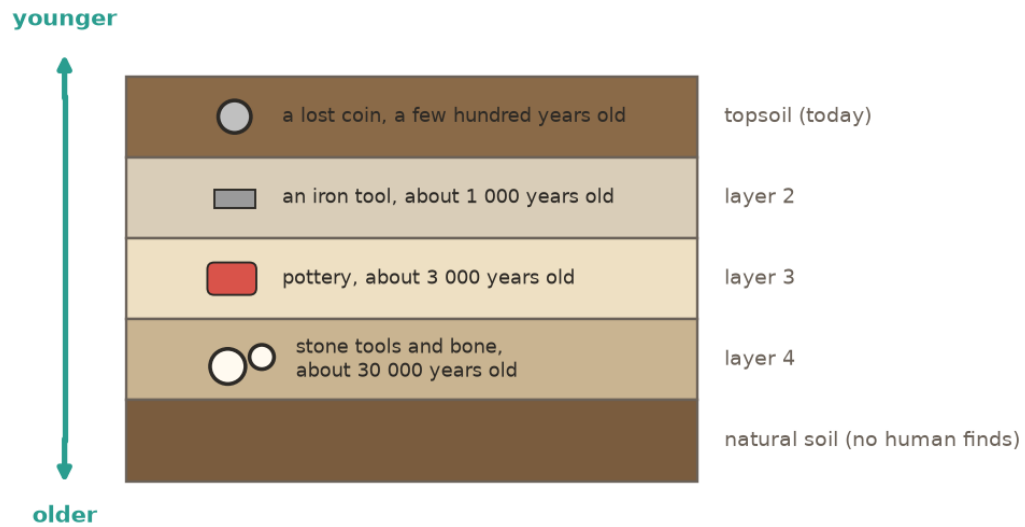
Where does the evidence point today? To an African origin, with some mixing along the way. Most people living outside Africa carry 1–4% Neanderthal DNA — that only makes sense if the two groups met and had children together (Green and team, *Science*, 2010). Some people carry DNA from another old group, the Denisovans, first known from a single finger bone from Denisova Cave in Siberia (Reich and team, *Nature*, 2010). Reading ancient DNA won Svante Pääbo the 2022 Nobel Prize. So the strongest picture today is Out of Africa, corrected: mainly replacement, but not complete.

Sources: Green and team, Science, 2010; Reich and team, Nature, 2010. Checked 24 August 2026.

How we know: five lines of evidence

1. Excavation and stratigraphy. Excavation is the careful digging of a site, layer by layer. **Stratigraphy** is reading the stacked layers of soil at a site. The rule is simple: in ground that has not been dug up or churned, each layer was laid down on top of the ones below it, so deeper means older. A find's layer tells you its rough age next to the other finds.

Reading the layers: a cut-away dig



How to read it

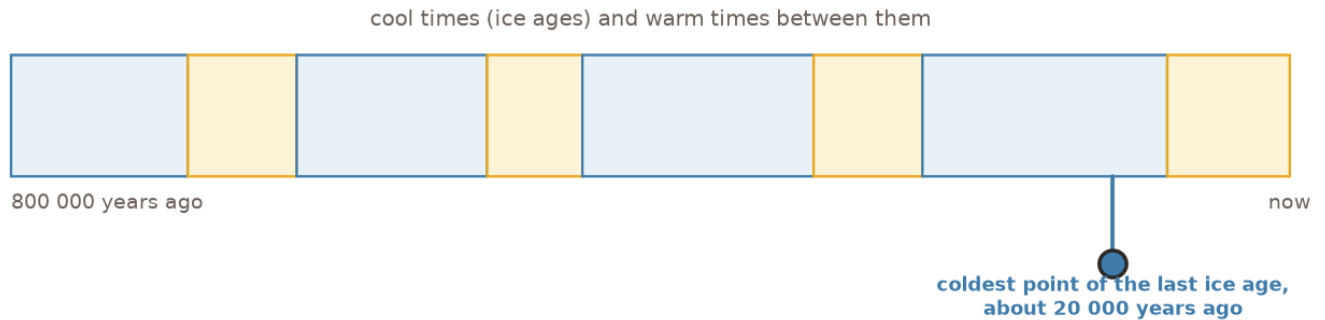
In ground that has not been disturbed, each layer was laid down on top of the ones below it.
So deeper layers are older — a find's layer tells you its rough age compared with other finds.

A real dig records every layer and every find's exact position before anything is lifted.

A cut-away dig with five soil layers: a coin in the topsoil, an iron tool about 1 000 years old in layer 2, pottery about 3 000 years old in layer 3, and stone tools and bone about 30 000 years old in layer 4, with younger-at-top and older-at-bottom arrows

2. Climatic and geological histories. The climate of the last 800 000 years has swung between cold times and warm times. At the coldest point of the last ice age, about 20 000 years ago, the sea stood about 120 metres lower than today. Dry land appeared where there is now sea — for example, Beringia between Siberia and Alaska — and people could walk into new lands. When the ice melted, the sea rose and covered the paths again. Climate shows the stage, not the actors: it shows *when* and *where* people could move.

Ice ages changed the map



What the cold changed

Huge sheets of ice locked up water, so the sea sat about 120 metres lower than today.

Dry land appeared where there is now sea — for example, Beringia between Siberia and Alaska.

People could walk into new lands. When the ice melted, the sea rose and covered the paths again.

Knowing when ice ages began and ended helps historians ask when and where people could move.

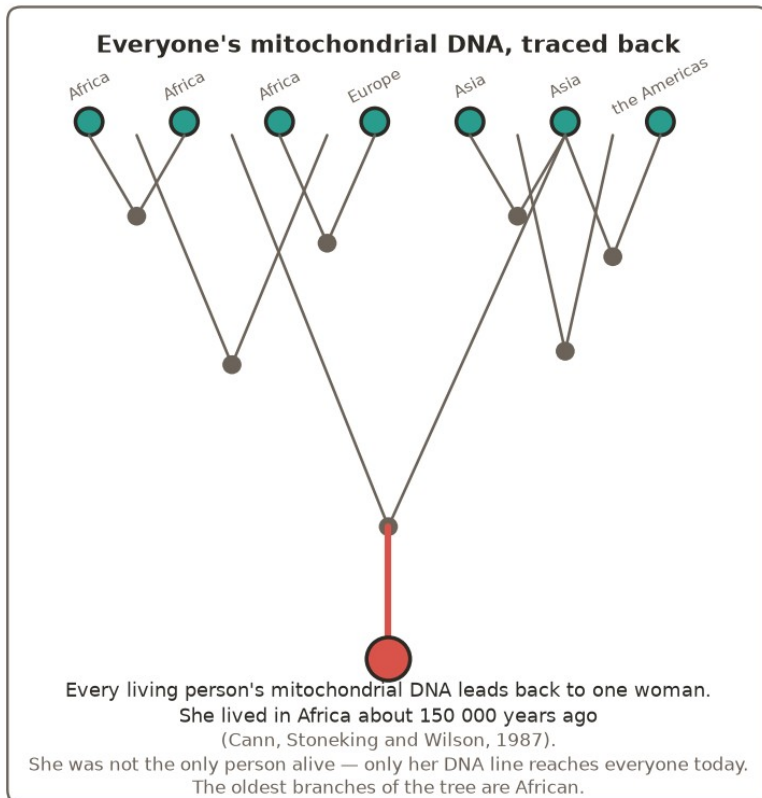
Schematic pattern — it shows the shape of the cycles, not exact temperatures.

A strip showing cool and warm periods across the last 800 000 years with the coldest point of the last ice age marked at about 20 000 years ago, and a box listing what the cold changed: sea about 120 metres lower, dry land such as Beringia, walkable paths later flooded

3. Oral histories. Some pasts are kept in words, not things. In West Africa, griots — trained people whose job is to keep the stories — have handed down the story of Sundiata, founder of the Mali empire, for about 800 years. **Oral histories** like this are memories kept as stories across generations. They reach back a few thousand years at most, so they cannot speak to the deep past — but they tell us what the past means to the people who carry it.

4. Genetics. **Genetics** is the study of DNA passed down through families, and it works like a family record. The oldest branches of the tree of mitochondrial DNA (the small package of DNA a child gets only from its mother) are African, and every living person's line leads back to one woman in Africa about 150 000 years ago (Cann, Stoneking and Wilson, 1987). She was not the only person alive — only her line reaches everyone today. Ancient DNA goes further: it can show meetings between groups that no fossil has shown.

What DNA tells us



Ancient DNA from fossils

Neanderthal bones

Many people outside Africa carry 1–4% Neanderthal DNA — the groups met and had children (Green and team, 2010).

A finger bone, Denisova Cave, Siberia

Its DNA revealed a whole new group: the Denisovans (Reich and team, 2010).

Why it matters

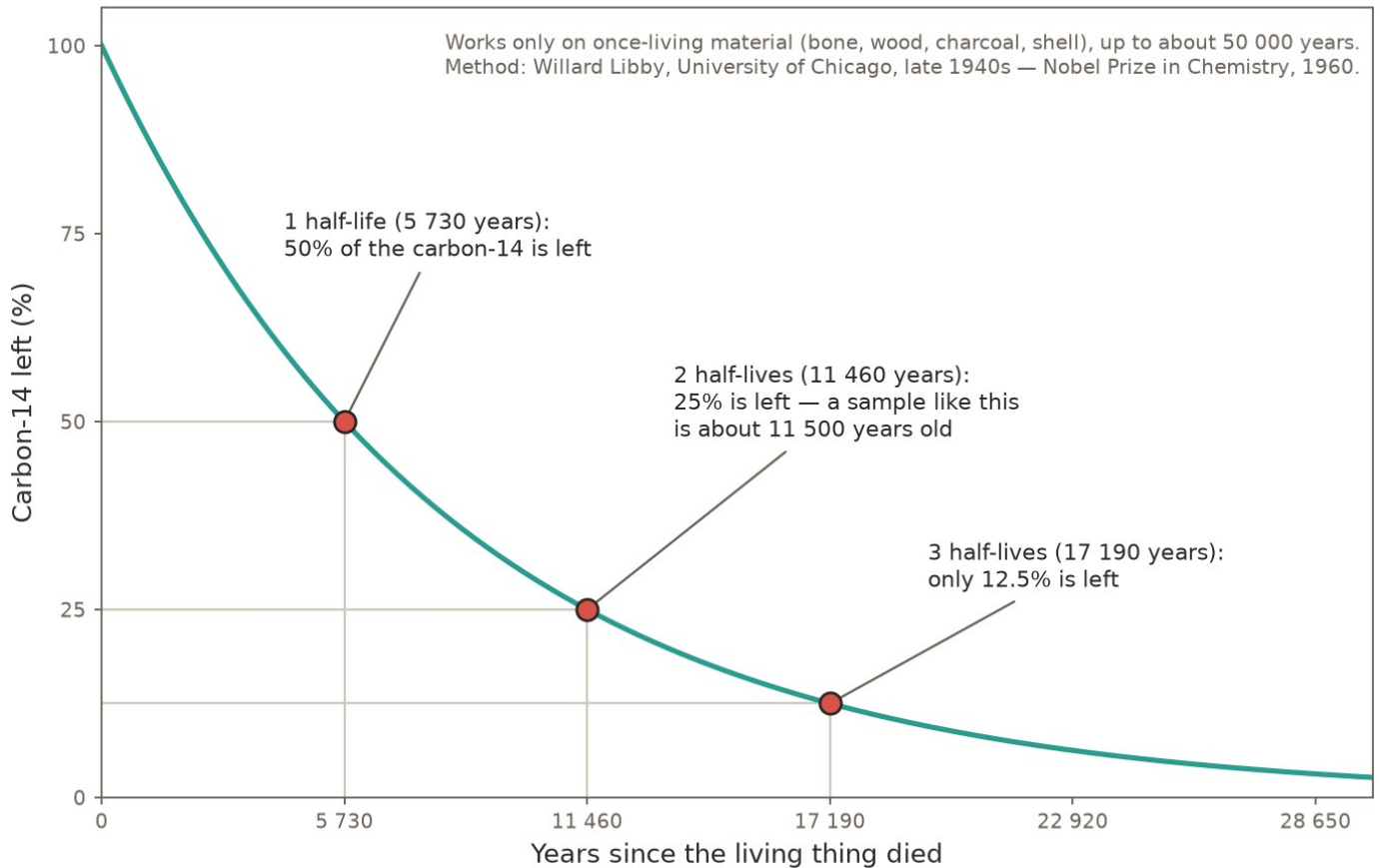
DNA can show meetings between groups that no fossil has shown yet.

Svante Pääbo won the 2022 Nobel Prize for reading DNA from ancient humans.

Left: a family tree of mitochondrial DNA whose branches join back to one woman in Africa about 150 000 years ago. Right: cards on ancient DNA, including 1–4% Neanderthal DNA in people outside Africa and the Denisovan finger bone, and a note that Svante Pääbo won the 2022 Nobel Prize

5. Radiocarbon dating. Once-living material — bone, wood, charcoal, shell — holds carbon-14, which halves every 5 730 years after death. Count how much is left, and you can read the years since the living thing died. **Radiocarbon dating** works up to about 50 000 years and is no use on stone. The method was built by Willard Libby at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, and won him the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1960.

Radiocarbon dating: how the clock runs



A decay curve of carbon-14 with markers at one, two and three half-lives: 50% left at 5 730 years, 25% at 11 460, 12.5% at 17 190, with a note that the method works on once-living material up to about 50 000 years

No single road reaches the whole journey. Stratigraphy orders the finds but gives no years; radiocarbon gives years but only to 50 000; climate shows open paths but not who walked them; genetics shows family links but not places; oral histories carry meaning but not the deep past. Historians cross-check one line of evidence against another, and where the lines agree, the interpretation is strong.

Five roads to the past — and how far each one goes

Approach	What it shows	Where it helps most	Its limits
excavation and stratigraphy	what people left behind, and the order of the layers it sits in	camps, burials, villages	only what survives and is dug; layers can be disturbed
climatic and geological history	ice ages, sea level, land bridges	when and where people could move	shows the stage, not the actors
oral histories	memories kept as stories across generations	the recent past, and what the past means to people	hardest to use for the deep past
genetics	family links, mixing between groups, time back to shared ancestors	who is related to whom	needs DNA that survived — cool, dry places help
radiocarbon dating	the age of once-living material	dating finds up to about 50 000 years old	no use on stone, or on very old finds

No single road reaches the whole journey. Historians cross-check one line of evidence against another.

A table of the five approaches - excavation and stratigraphy, climatic and geological history, oral histories, genetics, radiocarbon dating - with a column each for what the approach shows, where it helps most, and its limits

Why interpretations change

Interpretations change when the evidence does. A new find (*Homo naledi* in 2015, Jebel Irhoud in 2017), a new tool (reading ancient DNA, radiocarbon dating), or a new question can all shift the story. That is not a weakness of history. An interpretation is not a guess: it is the best explanation so far, and ‘so far’ is honest, not weak.

Worked examples

Example 1 (with help) — reading a radiocarbon result

A bone from a dig has 25% of its carbon-14 left. About how old is it?

Step 1 — Read the rule. Carbon-14 halves every 5 730 years. That span is called a half-life.

Step 2 — Count the halvings. 100% → 50% is one half-life. 50% → 25% is a second. So 25% left means **2 half-lives**.

Step 3 — Multiply. $2 \times 5\,730 = 11\,460$ years.

Step 4 — Check against the chart. The middle marker on the chart sits at 25% and 11 460 years, and the chart’s note says a sample like this is about 11 500 years old. ✓

Answer: about 11 460 years old (roughly 11 500 years).

Example 2 (with help) — sorting evidence between the two ideas

Three pieces of evidence are below. For each, say which idea it supports, and why.

(a) The oldest *Homo sapiens* fossils are found only in Africa (Jebel Irhoud, about 300 000 years ago). Supports **Out of Africa**. If our species began in many regions at the same time, the oldest bones should sit in several regions. They do not. One region holds the oldest bones, so one region is the likeliest starting point.

(b) Most people outside Africa carry 1–4% Neanderthal DNA. Supports **Out of Africa, with mixing**. The DNA shows two groups met and had children — so replacement was not complete. It still fits Out of Africa better than multiregional, because the meeting happened as one group moved into the home of another.

(c) Some skull and tooth features look the same in far-apart regions. Supports **multiregional** — at least, it is the evidence that idea explains best. Steady mixing across regions would keep shared features alive. (Out-of-Africa scientists answer that the features can also spread by small later mixings — which is why this one piece does not settle the debate alone.)

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. Three cards are described. Give the word for each. (a) the careful digging of a site, layer by layer; (b) putting events in order of time; (c) the movement of people to a new home.

Q2. Put these four events in order, oldest first: (a) the first stone tools at Olduvai Gorge; (b) ‘Lucy’ lives in Ethiopia; (c) people reach the Americas; (d) the first *Homo sapiens* at Jebel Irhoud.

Q3. Using the regions chart: (a) which region has the longest story of people? (b) which site shows people in the Americas by about 15 000 years ago? (c) the chart says new finds can push the dates further back. Why is that an honest thing to say?

Q4. Using the cut-away dig: (a) which find is the oldest? (b) how do the layers tell you that? (c) why does the coin sit near the top?

Q5. Using the radiocarbon chart: (a) a sample with 50% of its carbon-14 left is about how many years old? (b) a sample with 12.5% left has been through how many half-lives, and is about how old?

Q6. Give two of the key differences between the ideas known as Out-of-Africa and multiregional.

Practice on your own

Q7. Two historians look at the same finds and write two different accounts. Explain how that can happen, using the words *evidence* and *interpretation*.

Q8. ‘The evidence for Out of Africa is stronger than the evidence for multiregional.’ Do you agree? Use at least two pieces of evidence in your answer.

Q9. Choose two of the five lines of evidence. For each, give one thing it shows and one of its limits.

Q10. What did ancient DNA add to the story after 2010, and why did interpretations have to shift to fit it?

Source-based inquiry

Use the four source cards (A–D). Each card is a short summary of a real published finding.

Four sources for your inquiry

A FOSSIL REPORT

In 2017 a team led by Hublin reported Homo sapiens bones from Jebel Irhoud in Morocco, about 300 000 years old — the oldest known bones of our species so far.

Source: Hublin and team, *Nature*, 2017.

B DNA FINDING

Many people living outside Africa today carry 1–4% of their DNA from Neanderthals. That only happened if the two groups met and had children together.

Source: Green and team, *Science*, 2010.

C RADIOCARBON RESULT

Charcoal from an old campfire at Monte Verde in Chile gave a radiocarbon age of about 14 500 years — early proof that people had reached the Americas by then.

Source: Dillehay and team, *PLOS ONE*, 2015.

D LAYER RECORD

Stone tools and a skull from Dmanisi in Georgia lay in a layer about 1.8 million years old — the oldest known signs of people outside Africa.

Source: Lordkipanidze and team, *Science*, 2013.

Each card is a short summary of a real published finding. Full references are in the section.

*Four source cards: A, a fossil report on the Jebel Irhoud bones (Hublin and team, *Nature*, 2017); B, a DNA finding of 1–4% Neanderthal DNA in people outside Africa (Green and team, *Science*, 2010); C, a radiocarbon result of about 14 500 years on campfire charcoal at Monte Verde (Dillehay and team, *PLOS ONE*, 2015); D, a layer record placing stone tools and a skull at Dmanisi about 1.8 million years ago (Lordkipanidze and team, *Science*, 2013)*

1. For each source, note: (a) which line of evidence it is (fossils and digging, genetics, radiocarbon, or layers); (b) one fact it gives; (c) one question it cannot answer.
2. Then write 4–6 lines answering this question: **which of the two migration ideas do these four sources support, and why?** Give the source letters in your answer.

Answers

Q1. (a) excavation; (b) chronology; (c) migration.

Q2. b (about 3.2 million years ago), a (about 2.4 million), d (about 300 000), c (about 15 000).

Q3. (a) Africa. (b) Monte Verde, in Chile. (c) Because each date rests on the finds made so far; a new find can always be older than the oldest one we have.

Q4. (a) The stone tools and bone. (b) They sit in the deepest layer with human finds, and in undisturbed ground deeper layers are older. (c) It was dropped when the topsoil was forming, so it is the most recent find.

Q5. (a) About 5 730 years. (b) Three half-lives, about 17 190 years.

Q6. Any two of: when the spread that made us happened (about 60 000 against about 1.8 million years ago); where we began (Africa alone against many regions at once); how much mixing each idea needs (a little against a lot).

Q7. Evidence is what the past left; an interpretation is the story a historian builds to explain it. The same facts can sit inside different stories, so historians weigh the evidence in different ways. They disagree reasonably until new evidence tips the balance.

Q8. Agree (the expected case): the oldest *Homo sapiens* fossils sit only in Africa, and everyone's mitochondrial DNA leads back to Africa — both fit Out of Africa best. The 1–4% Neanderthal DNA shows some mixing, so the idea had to bend a little. A student who disagrees must still explain these two pieces of evidence, and that is what is being assessed.

Q9. Any two, correctly paired. Example: stratigraphy shows which finds are older or younger than others, but gives no years; radiocarbon gives years, but only for once-living things and only to about 50 000 years.

Q10. Ancient DNA showed meetings no fossil had shown: Neanderthal DNA in people outside Africa, and a whole new group, the Denisovans, known at first from one finger bone. Interpretations had to shift from 'replacement, no mixing' to 'mainly replacement, with some mixing'.

Inquiry (key points). A: fossils and digging — our species is about 300 000 years old, in Africa; cannot say where people later moved. B: genetics — groups met and had children; cannot say when or where. C: radiocarbon — people were in the Americas by about 14 500 years ago; cannot reach further back than about 50 000 years. D: layers — humans were outside Africa by about 1.8 million years ago (but those were *Homo erectus*, not our species). Together the four sit best with Out of Africa (with mixing): A and B directly, C and D by setting the older stage.

Worked answers

Example 1, fully worked. The bone has 25% of its carbon-14 left. Each half-life halves what is there: after one, 50%; after two, 25%. So the bone has been through two half-lives. One half-life is 5 730 years, so $2 \times 5\,730 = 11\,460$ years. The chart agrees: its middle marker sits at 25% above 11 460 years, and its note rounds this to about 11 500 years. The bone is about 11 460 years old.

Example 2, fully worked. (a) Oldest *Homo sapiens* fossils only in Africa → Out of Africa. Multiregional expects old *Homo sapiens* in several regions at once; the finds do not show that. One origin region is the better fit. (b) 1–4% Neanderthal DNA outside Africa → Out of Africa *with mixing*. The groups met and had children, so replacement was not complete; but the meeting happened as one group moved into another's home, which is the Out-of-Africa picture corrected, not the steady, everywhere mixing multiregional needs. (c) Shared skull and tooth features across far-apart regions → multiregional explains this piece best (steady mixing would keep shared features alive). Out-of-Africa answers it with small later mixings. One piece of evidence does not settle a debate alone — the weight of all the lines together is what counts, and that weight sits with an African origin plus some mixing.

VC2HH8K01

Taught with the First Peoples clause dropped per TOC §2A-B; the Australia referent in .E01 is taught as the neutral remainder (Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas only) per D3. Draws on: VC2HH8K01 .E01, VC2HH8K01 .E02, VC2HH8K01 .E03 (taught) · VC2HH8K01 .E04 (excluded entire per §2A-C — retained as linkage key only).

Building the first societies: tools, farming, trade, groups, beliefs and laws

Curriculum focus: this section owns VC2HH8K02 and develops elaborations .E01–.E06. Following this book’s coverage decisions, .E02 and .E05 are taught on Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe.

About 12,000 years ago, almost every human being on Earth lived the same way: in small groups, moving from place to place, hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. Then, slowly and in separate places, some groups began to farm. Farming changed everything. Villages grew into towns, new jobs appeared, trade routes stretched across maps, and rulers began to write laws down.

This section builds the words historians use to talk about that change, then looks at six features that appear in early societies all over the world: technologies, agriculture, trade, social groups, beliefs and laws.

About the key words. The Victorian Curriculum uses the key words below but does not define them, so this section defines every one at first use, and every question in this section can be answered on those definitions alone. Two points are worth knowing. First, the line between *history* and *pre-history* sits in a different place for different parts of the world, because writing began at different times in different places. Second, some terms, such as *city*, are contested: historians disagree about exactly where to draw the line. Where that matters in this section, it is said out loud.

Teaching sequence

Part 1 — Shared vocabulary (.E01)

These are the working definitions used throughout this section.

- **history** — the study of the past, based on evidence that has survived.
- **pre-history** — the long human past before writing existed, so there are no written records.
- **Palaeolithic** — ‘the old stone age’: the earlier, much longer part of the Stone Age, when people lived by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants.
- **Neolithic** — ‘the new stone age’: the later part of the Stone Age, when people began to farm.
- **nomadism** — a way of life in which people move from place to place to find food and water, instead of living in one spot.
- **settlement** — a place where people live, from a small village to a large city.
- **society** — a group of people who share a place, a way of life and rules for living together.
- **culture** — the shared beliefs, customs, art and ways of life of a society.
- **agriculture** — growing crops and raising animals for food.
- **technology** — the tools, methods and skills people use to solve problems and get things done.
- **trade** — swapping goods between people or places.
- **law** — the rules a society agrees everyone must follow, often with a punishment for breaking them.
- **religion** — beliefs about gods, spirits and what is sacred, and the rituals that go with them.
- **social groups** — the different positions and roles people hold in a society, such as rulers, priests, farmers and traders.

What every early society had

Six features appear again and again, in every part of the world.



The big change chain: why farming changed everything



Reading the chain: each step is a cause of the next. Historians call this a cause-and-consequence pattern -- you will use it all through this book.

Key words you will meet in this section:

Palaeolithic Neolithic pre-history history nomadism settlement society culture agriculture technology trade law religion social groups

Each word is defined where it first appears.

Concept map of the six features that appear in every early society — technologies, agriculture, trade, social groups, beliefs and laws — followed by the chain of change from the start of farming to towns, trade and laws, with the key words of this section listed at the bottom

Check: why does it matter that everyone studying a society uses the same definitions of these words?

Part 2 — The big change: from nomads to farmers

For most of the human past, people were **nomads**. They followed the animals they hunted and the plants they gathered, and they carried only what they could carry. That way of life worked well for tens of thousands of years — and in some places it kept working for a very long time. Change and continuity always sit together in history: while some groups took up farming, others continued nomadism for thousands of years.

Then, from about 10,000 years ago, some groups around the world began to sow seeds and keep animals. This was the start of **agriculture**, and it is one of the biggest turning points in the human story. Notice the cause-and-consequence chain it set off:

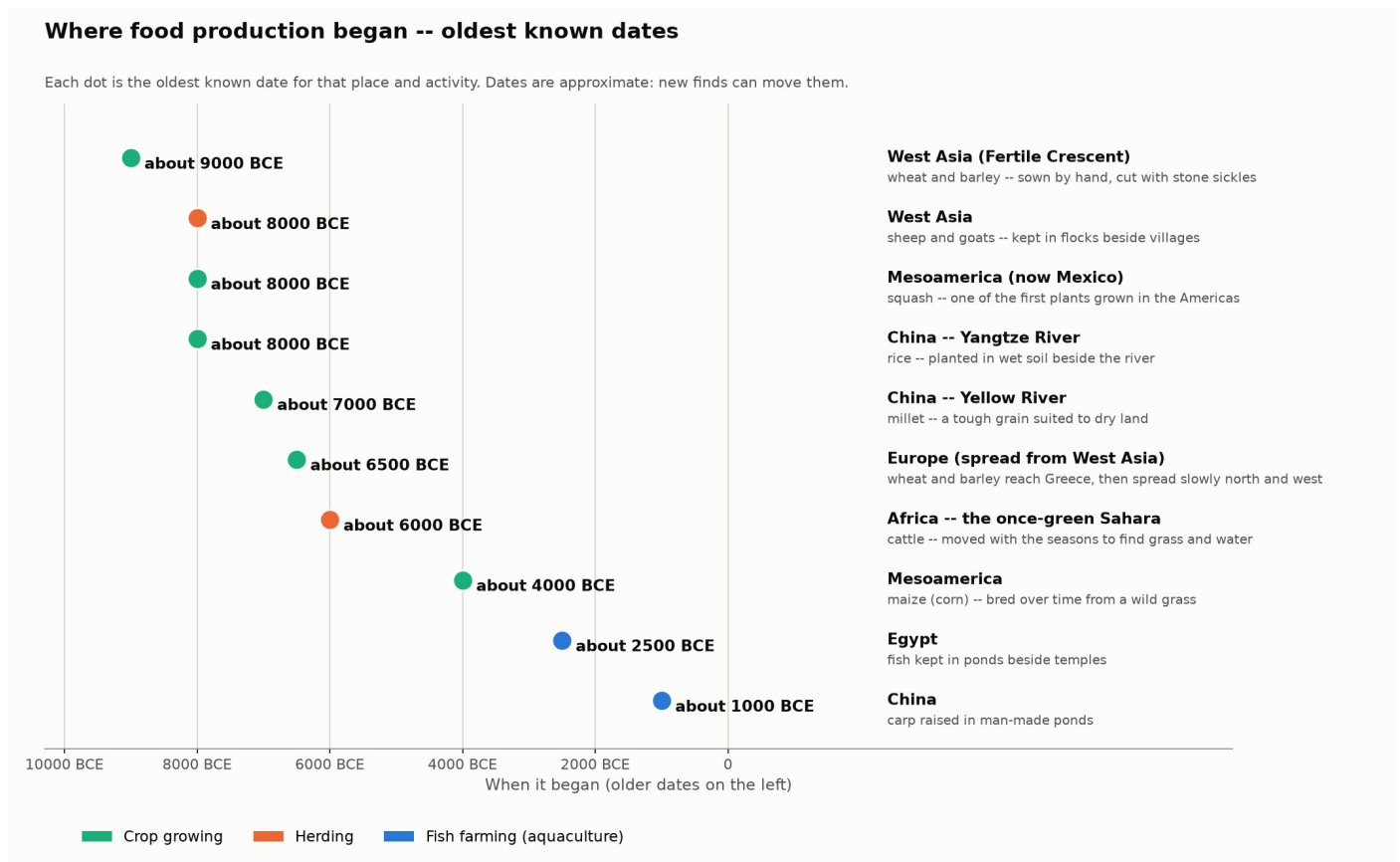
1. **Farming begins.** People sow seeds and keep animals near where they live.
2. **More food than needed.** A farm can produce a *surplus* — more food than the farmers' own families need. (In this section, a *surplus* is any amount produced beyond what is needed.)
3. **Villages grow.** More food supports more people, so settlements get bigger.
4. **New jobs appear.** Because not everyone has to farm, some people become potters, cloth makers, metal-workers, priests, scribes or rulers.
5. **Towns, trade and laws.** Bigger groups need rules everyone knows, and surpluses give them goods to swap with other places.

Each step is a **cause** of the next. Historians call this pattern cause and consequence, and you will use it all through this book.

Part 3 — Where and when food production began (. E03)

Agriculture did not begin once, in one place. It began separately in several parts of the world, at different times, because each region had its own plants, animals and climate. The figure below maps the oldest known dates for **crop**

growing, herding (keeping animals) and **aquaculture** — fish farming, where people raise fish in ponds rather than catching wild ones.



Timeline showing the oldest known dates for crop growing, herding and fish farming in West Asia, Mesoamerica, China, Europe, Africa and Egypt, with a note of the methods used in each place and time

Reading the figure:

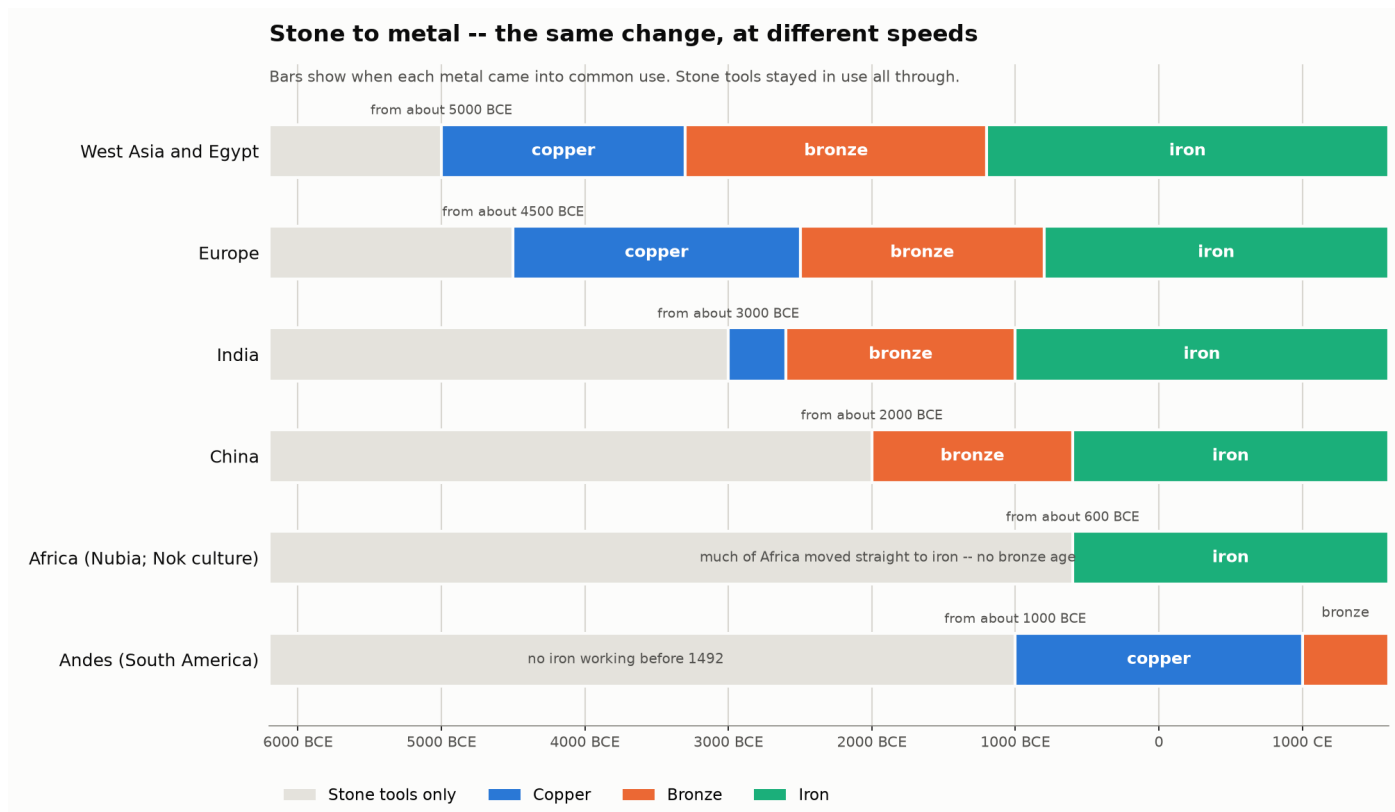
- In **West Asia** (a region historians call the Fertile Crescent), people were growing wheat and barley by about 9000 BCE, cutting the crops with stone sickles. By about 8000 BCE they were also keeping flocks of sheep and goats beside their villages.
- In **China**, rice was planted in wet soil beside the Yangtze River by about 8000 BCE, and millet — a tough grain suited to dry land — was grown near the Yellow River by about 7000 BCE.
- In **Mesoamerica** (now Mexico and the lands around it), squash was among the first plants grown, by about 8000 BCE. Maize (corn) came later — by about 4000 BCE people had bred it, over many generations, from a wild grass.
- In **Europe**, farming spread from West Asia: wheat and barley reached Greece by about 6500 BCE and moved slowly north and west, carried by moving people and by shared knowledge.
- In **Africa**, herders kept cattle in the once-green Sahara by about 6000 BCE, moving with the seasons to find grass and water.
- **Aquaculture** appears later: fish were kept in ponds beside temples in Egypt by about 2500 BCE, and carp were raised in man-made ponds in China by about 1000 BCE.

Two habits of mind matter here. The dates are the **oldest known** dates — new finds can move them. And the *methods* are part of the story: how people farmed (sowing, herding, digging ponds) is just as important as when.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Origins of agriculture”; FAO, “A history of aquaculture”; accessed 24 August 2026.

Part 4 — Technology: from stone to metal (.E05)

For most of the past, the hardest material people could shape was stone. Then, one by one, societies learned to work metals: first **copper**, then **bronze** (a mix of copper and tin), and finally **iron**. The figure below compares the timing in different regions. Notice how uneven it is — that unevenness is the point.



Timeline of stone, copper, bronze and iron working in West Asia and Egypt, Europe, India, China, Africa and the Andes, showing that each technology began at different times in different places

- **West Asia and Egypt** moved through all three stages: copper by about 5000 BCE, bronze by about 3300 BCE, iron by about 1200 BCE.
- **Europe** followed the same order but later, with iron spreading from about 800 BCE.
- In **India**, bronze-working began early in the Indus cities, and iron followed by about 1000 BCE.
- **China** began bronze by about 2000 BCE and iron by about 600 BCE.
- Much of **Africa** skipped bronze altogether: societies such as Nok in West Africa and the kingdom of Kush in Nubia moved straight from stone to iron by about 600 BCE.
- In the **Andes**, people worked copper by about 1000 BCE and bronze later, but there was no iron working before 1492.

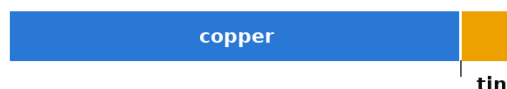
Why did the changes happen at different rates? Historians suggest several explanations, and more than one can be true at once:

- **What was nearby.** Metal has to come out of rocks that contain it. Places rich in copper or iron rock could start earlier; places without it had to trade for metal.
- **Contact.** Skills spread along trade routes and by people moving. Regions close to West Asia picked up metal-working sooner than regions far away or cut off by deserts, mountains and seas.
- **Need.** A society with good stone tools, or one where farming mattered more than weapons, might adopt a new metal slowly — or not at all.

Bronze explains why trade and technology pull each other along. Bronze is about nine parts copper to one part tin. Copper is found in many places — tin is rare, and sometimes had to be carried thousands of kilometres. So the search for tin pushed trade routes further across the map.

The recipe for bronze -- and why it made trade grow

Bronze is a mix of two metals:



Why bother mixing them?

Bronze is harder than copper, so tools keep their edge and weapons hold their shape.
Farmers with bronze-tipped ploughs could work tougher soil.

The catch: tin is rare

Copper can be found in many places.
Tin comes from only a few places, sometimes thousands of kilometres away.

So bronze-workers had to trade for it:
they swapped grain, cloth, pots and other goods to get the tin they needed.

More bronze meant more trade -- and trade routes reached farther across the map.

By about 3300 BCE people in West Asia were making bronze; the idea spread along trade routes.

Diagram of the bronze recipe, nine parts copper to one part tin, and a panel explaining why tin being rare forced bronze-workers to trade over long distances

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Bronze Age” and “Iron Age”; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, essays on the Bronze Age and iron technology; accessed 24 August 2026.

Part 5 — Trade

Trade is one of the features that appears in every early society, and farming is what made it possible. A village with a surplus could feed people who made things — pots, cloth, tools, ornaments — and those goods could be swapped with other places.

Most early trade was **barter**: swapping goods directly, with no money. Caravans carried goods by land, and ships carried them by sea. The **Phoenicians**, who lived in coastal cities on the eastern Mediterranean (now Lebanon), became famous sailors and traders, and their alphabet became the ancestor of the Greek one. Traders on the Indus River used standard cube-shaped weights, so everyone in the market measured goods the same way — fairness you can hold in your hand.

Trade never carried only goods. It carried **ideas** too: metal-working, crops, styles of art, ways of writing and beliefs all moved along trade routes. That is why a change in one region often shows up in another region centuries later.

Part 6 — Laws: before and after writing (. E04)

Every society in this section had rules — but rules do not need writing to exist. Before writing, laws lived in **memory**. Elders recited the rules and judged disputes, and among the Celts the **druids** acted as priests, judges and teachers, keeping the laws in memory instead of writing them down. A society can have law for thousands of years before it has written law.

So why write laws down? As settlements grew into towns, more and more people lived among strangers. Written laws could be copied, shared and pointed to: the same rule, the same words, every time. Rome’s **Twelve Tables** (about 450 BCE) are a famous later example of laws being written down and displayed in public so citizens could know them.

The figure below compares three early written codes from three different regions and times. An **edict** is a public order or message from a ruler — the word matters here, because one of the three codes is a set of edicts.

Three early sets of written laws

Same idea, three very different answers: what are laws for?

Law code	When	Where	Written on	What it did
Code of Ur-Nammu	about 2100-2050 BCE -- the oldest law code that survives	Sumer, in the city of Ur (now southern Iraq)	clay tablets, in wedge-shaped cuneiform writing	Listed offences and what each cost the offender. Many injuries were paid for with silver to the victim, not punished 'an eye for an eye'.
Laws of Moses	written and gathered over many centuries; tradition traces them to Moses	ancient Israel	scrolls, as part of the Hebrew Bible (Torah)	Mixed rules about worship with rules about daily life, including the Ten Commandments -- for example, do not steal, do not murder.
Edicts of Ashoka	about 260 BCE	the Maurya Empire, across the Indian subcontinent	carved into rock faces and stone pillars	An emperor's public rules: be kind, do no harm, care for the old and for animals, and respect other people's beliefs.

Think about: who made each set of laws, and who had to follow them? What does each code tell you about what that society valued?

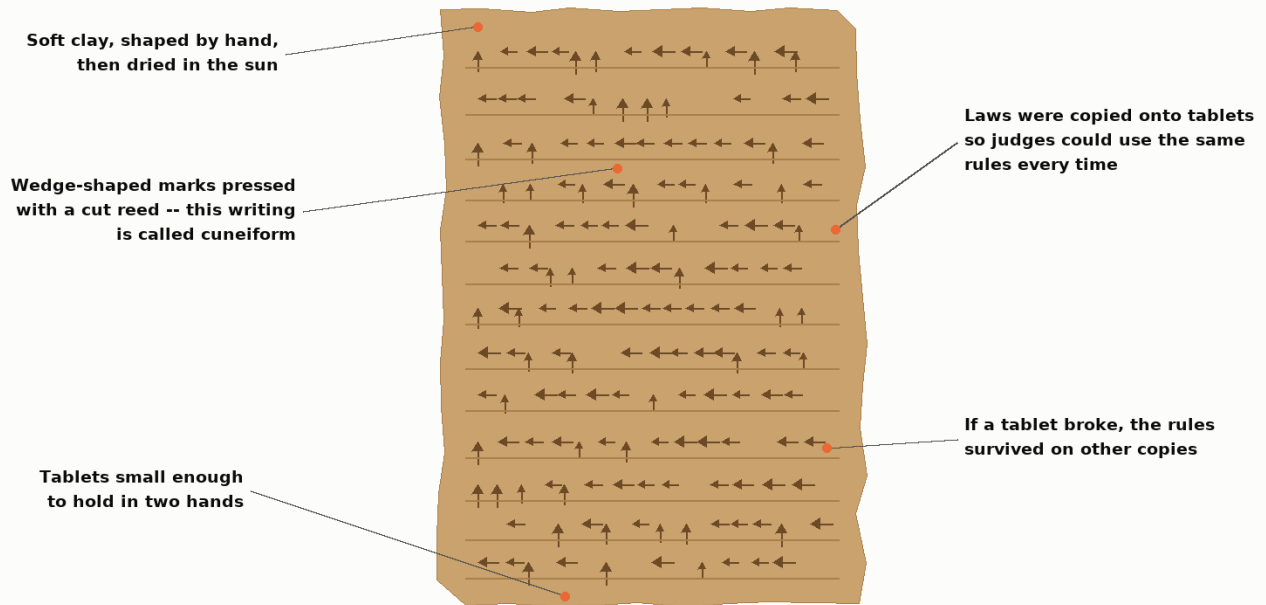
Table comparing the Code of Ur-Nammu, the Laws of Moses and the Edicts of Ashoka by date, place, what they were written on and what the laws did

- The **Code of Ur-Nammu** (about 2100–2050 BCE) comes from the city of Ur in Sumer, in today's Iraq. It is the oldest law code known to survive, written in cuneiform on clay tablets. Many of its laws set payments — often in silver — that a wrongdoer owed to the person they had harmed.
- The **Laws of Moses** mix rules about worship with rules for daily life, and include the Ten Commandments. They were gathered over centuries, written on scrolls, and tradition traces them back to Moses.
- The **Edicts of Ashoka** (about 260 BCE) are different again. Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya Empire had his edicts carved onto rock faces and stone pillars across his empire. They are less about punishments and more about how to behave: be kind, do no harm, respect other people's beliefs.

Look for the pattern: all three codes told people how to live together, all were backed by someone in power, and all had consequences for breaking the rules. But they differ in what the laws were *for* — settling disputes, guiding worship, or teaching conduct. Worked example 2 shows how to write that comparison.

How a law code was written down in Ur, about 4,100 years ago

An original drawing of a clay tablet like the ones that carried the Code of Ur-Nammu.



Drawing made for this book. Real tablets from Ur are kept in museums such as the British Museum and the Penn Museum.

Labelled drawing of a clay tablet like those that carried the Code of Ur-Nammu, with callouts explaining the soft clay, the wedge-shaped cuneiform marks pressed with a cut reed, and why copies mattered

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Code of Ur-Nammu” and “Ashoka”; The British Museum, collection records for tablets from Ur; accessed 24 August 2026.

Part 7 — Social groups and who ruled (.E06)

Every society has **social groups** — different positions and roles — and every society has to decide who is in charge. But there was no single pattern. The figure below compares six early peoples from across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Six early peoples, six ways of organising a society

There was no single pattern. Compare who ruled, and what groups made up each society.

People	Where and when	How they were organised
Celts	Iron Age Europe, from about 800 BCE; described by Greek and Roman writers	Many separate tribes led by chiefs and famous warriors. Druids acted as priests, judges and teachers, and kept the laws in memory instead of writing them down.
Persians	The Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great about 550 BCE; the largest empire the world had seen to that time	One king ruled many different peoples. The empire was split into provinces, each looked after by a governor, and a royal road carried messages, soldiers and trade.
Phoenicians	Coastal cities of the eastern Mediterranean (now Lebanon), about 1500-300 BCE	Not one country but separate city-states such as Byblos, Sidon and Tyre, each with its own ruler. Sea traders whose alphabet became the ancestor of the Greek one.
Nubians	Along the Nile south of Egypt (now Sudan), kingdoms from about 2500 BCE	Kingdoms such as Kush, which once conquered and ruled Egypt as its 25th dynasty. They built steep-sided pyramids, and their city of Meroe became a centre for making iron.
Indus Valley peoples	Indus River plain (now Pakistan and north-west India), about 2600-1900 BCE	Carefully planned cities -- Mohenjo-daro and Harappa -- with straight streets, brick drains and standard weights for trade. No palaces or royal tombs have been found, so who ruled is still an open question; their writing has not been read.
Early Andean cultures	Andes mountains and Pacific coast (now Peru), from about 3500 BCE	Caral is one of the oldest known cities in the Americas, with large pyramid mounds. Later cultures such as the Chavin built big temple centres, and later still the Inca ruled an empire with knots instead of writing.

Spot the difference: some societies were ruled by one king, some by chiefs or councils, and some were split into city-states. What stayed the same: every one of them had social groups, rules, and ways of deciding who was in charge.

Table comparing how the Celts, Persians, Phoenicians, Nubians, Indus Valley peoples and early Andean cultures were organised socially and politically

- The **Celts** of Iron Age Europe lived in many separate tribes led by chiefs and famous warriors. Their druids were priests, judges and teachers in one.
- The **Persians** built the largest empire the world had seen to that time, founded by Cyrus the Great about 550 BCE. One king ruled many different peoples: the empire was split into provinces, each looked after by a governor, and a royal road carried messages, soldiers and trade.
- The **Phoenicians** were not one country but separate city-states — Byblos, Sidon and Tyre — each with its own ruler, linked by sea trade rather than by a king.
- The **Nubians** built kingdoms along the Nile south of Egypt, such as Kush, which once conquered and ruled Egypt itself as its 25th dynasty. Their city of Meroe became a centre for making iron.
- The **Indus Valley peoples** built carefully planned cities with straight streets, brick drains and standard weights — but no palaces or royal tombs have been found, so who ruled them is still an open question.
- The **early Andean cultures** include Caral, one of the oldest known cities in the Americas (from about 3500 BCE), the later temple centre of Chavin, and, much later, the Inca, who ruled an empire using knots instead of writing.

Compare them as historians do: *who ruled* (one king? chiefs? councils? city-states?), and *what groups made up the society* (rulers, priests, warriors, farmers, traders). Also try perspective: the same empire looked very different to the king who taxed it, the governor who ran a province, and the farmer who grew the grain.

Part 8 — Beliefs and religion

Religion was part of every feature above, so it gets the last word in this sequence. Early societies used religion to answer the big questions — why the seasons turn, why people die, what happens next — and belief shaped daily life in practical ways:

- **Buildings.** Temples were often the largest structures a society raised. In Sumer, some were tall stepped towers; in Egypt, temples and tombs were built for the dead and for the gods.

- **The afterlife.** Many societies, including the Egyptians, believed life continued after death, and they buried the dead with goods for the journey.
- **Priests and rituals.** Priests ran the temples, kept the calendars of festivals, and led the rituals that tied a community together.
- **Law and belief.** The Laws of Moses mix worship and daily rules, and Ashoka's edicts teach respect for other people's beliefs — religion and law often worked as one.

Perspective matters here too: a festival looked like joy to the people dancing in it, like duty to the priests organising it, and like power to the ruler who paid for it.

Part 9 — Three lenses: economic, political, cultural (.E02)

When historians describe an early society, they often sort the evidence into three lenses:

- **Economic** — how people got and made what they needed: food, work, trade.
- **Political** — who made decisions, and how power was organised.
- **Cultural** — what people believed, valued and made: religion, art, writing, customs.

The lenses overlap — a temple is a religious building, but it also employs people (economic) and shows who is in charge (political). Sorting evidence into lenses is the method behind Worked example 1. In this book, following its coverage decisions, the societies you describe with these lenses come from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe.

Three lenses for looking at any early society

Ask these three questions and you can describe how a society worked.

Economic	Political	Cultural
How did people get and use what they needed? - growing food and herding animals - craft work: metal, cloth, pots, building - trade: swapping goods near and far - storing and sharing the surplus	Who was in charge, and how? - rulers: kings, chiefs, councils of elders - laws and courts to settle disputes - armies to defend the group or expand it - collecting tribute: grain, labour, goods	What did people share and believe? - religion: gods, priests, temples and rituals - stories, art, music and festivals - writing, if the society developed it - ways of dressing, eating and burying the dead

Every society has all three at once -- the lenses just help you see each part clearly. You will use them in Worked example 1.

Three cards, one for each lens — economic, political and cultural — each with its guiding question and the kinds of evidence that fit it

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: describing an early society (.E02)

Task. Describe the Indus Valley civilisation's economic, political and cultural features (about 2600–1900 BCE), one of the early societies of Asia, using the city of Mohenjo-daro (in today's Pakistan) as your focus.

Evidence you can use:

- Streets were laid out in a grid, and houses were built from standard-sized bricks.

- Many houses had their own bathrooms and wells, and waste water ran into covered drains that served the whole city.
- The city's largest structures include a huge granary and the Great Bath, a large watertight pool.
- Traders used standard cube-shaped weights, and Indus goods have been found in far-off cities of Mesopotamia.
- Seals carved with pictures and signs survive, but no one has yet learned to read the script.
- No palaces and no grand royal tombs have been found.

Worked response.

Lens	Question to ask	What the evidence shows
Economic	How did people get and make what they needed?	Farmers on the fertile Indus river plain grew food for the city. Standard weights show trade was measured carefully, and Indus goods found in Mesopotamia show trade reached very far.
Political	Who made decisions, and how was power organised?	Grid streets, shared drains and standard bricks point to strong, organised rule — yet no palace or royal tomb has been found, so who ruled is still an open question among historians.
Cultural	What did people believe and value?	The Great Bath suggests ritual washing and cleanliness mattered. Carved seals with signs show writing and record-keeping — though the script has not been read.

Close with one sentence that joins the lenses: *Mohenjo-daro was a wealthy trading city whose careful planning shows strong rule, even though who ruled — and what its writing says — remains unknown.*

Sources: UNESCO, "Moenjodaro"; Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Indus civilization"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Worked example 2 — model response: comparing two law codes (.E04)

Task. Compare the Code of Ur-Nammu and the Edicts of Ashoka: what is similar, what is different, and what was each code for in its society?

Worked response.

First, set the two codes side by side:

Point of comparison	Code of Ur-Nammu	Edicts of Ashoka
When and where	About 2100–2050 BCE, the city of Ur in Sumer	About 260 BCE, the Maurya Empire in India
Written on	Clay tablets, in cuneiform	Rock faces and stone pillars
What the laws did	Set payments a wrongdoer owed to the person harmed	Taught conduct: kindness, no harm, respect for other beliefs
Who backed them	The ruler of Ur	Emperor Ashoka

Now write the comparison. Similarities first:

Both codes were backed by the most powerful person in their society, and both aimed to keep order so that large groups of people could live together. Each also made the rules public in the technology of its time — Ur-Nammu on copied clay tablets, Ashoka on carvings placed where people gathered.

Then the differences, and what the codes were *for*:

The difference is in purpose. The Code of Ur-Nammu is mainly about disputes: if someone harms you, the law says what they must pay you. Ashoka's edicts are mainly about behaviour: they tell people how to live, and they ask people to respect beliefs other than their own. One code settles arguments after they happen; the other tries to shape how people treat each other every day.

Sources: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Code of Ur-Nammu" and "Ashoka"; Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (1961); accessed 24 August 2026.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. (.E01) Copy and complete each sentence with one key word from Part 1. Word bank: *surplus, nomadism, settlement, aquaculture, barter, culture*.

- (a) A way of life in which people move to find food and water is called _____.
- (b) Food produced beyond what a family needs is a _____.
- (c) Swapping goods without money is called _____.
- (d) Raising fish in ponds is called _____.

Q2. (.E01) The five steps of the change chain from Part 2 are listed below out of order. Write them in the correct order, then draw an arrow between each step.

New jobs appear · Farming begins · Towns, trade and laws · More food than needed · Villages grow

Q3. (.E03) Using Figure 1b_agri, copy and complete the table. The first row is done for you.

Development	Where	About when	Crop, herd or fish?
Maize	Mesoamerica	4000 BCE	Crop
Rice	_____	_____	_____
Sheep and goats	_____	_____	_____
Carp in ponds	_____	_____	_____

Q4. (.E05) Using Figure 1b_metals: (a) which region began bronze working first? (b) about how many years earlier did iron working begin in West Asia than in China? (c) which regions in the figure did not have a bronze age, or did not work iron before 1492?

Q5. (.E04) Copy and complete the table. The first row is done for you.

Code	About when	Written on
Code of Ur-Nammu	2100–2050 BCE	Clay tablets
Laws of Moses	_____	_____
Edicts of Ashoka	_____	_____

Q6. (.E06) Using Figure 1b_social, name the people described.

- (a) Split their empire into provinces, each run by a governor. _____
- (b) Built steep-sided pyramids and made iron at the city of Meroe. _____
- (c) Separate city-states such as Byblos, Sidon and Tyre. _____
- (d) Planned cities but no palaces found; their writing has not been read. _____

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E03) Agriculture began at different times in different regions. Explain why, using two examples from Figure 1b_agri to support your answer.

Q8. (.E05) Propose two explanations for why the move from stone to metal happened at different rates in different societies.

Q9. (.E04) Choose two of the law codes from Part 6. Write one paragraph comparing them: what is similar, what is different, and what was each code for in its society?

Q10. (.E06) Choose one of the six peoples from Figure 1b_social. Describe its social and political organisation, then explain one way it was similar to, and one way it was different from, one other people in the figure.

Source-based inquiry

Q11. (.E04) Read the extract below, then answer the questions that follow.

“The Beloved of the Gods honours all religious orders, both those who live at home and those who have left home for a religious life. But he does not value gifts and honours as much as this — that growth in right conduct should take place in all orders. ... Whoever praises their own order, and condemns the order of others ... in fact harms their own order. Therefore harmony alone is to be wished for.”

*Adapted from Major Rock Edict 12 of Ashoka, about 260 BCE, translated by Romila Thapar in *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford University Press, 1961). Ashoka had this edict carved onto rock faces and pillars across the Maurya Empire.*

- (a) **Origin.** Who issued this edict, when, and how was it made public? (2 marks)
 - (b) **Content.** According to the extract, what does Ashoka value more than gifts and honours? (2 marks)
 - (c) **Infer.** What can you infer about religion in the Maurya Empire from this source? Give one detail from the extract that supports your answer. (2 marks)
 - (d) **Perspective and limits.** This source is the emperor’s own words, carved in stone where many people could see them. What does that make the source good at showing — and what can it not show? (3 marks)
-

Answers

Q1. (a) nomadism (b) surplus (c) barter (d) aquaculture. **Q2.** Farming begins → More food than needed → Villages grow → New jobs appear → Towns, trade and laws. **Q3.** Rice: China — Yangtze River, about 8000 BCE, crop. Sheep and goats: West Asia, about 8000 BCE, herd. Carp in ponds: China, about 1000 BCE, fish. **Q4.** (a) West Asia (and Egypt, shown together). (b) About 600 years (about 1200 BCE versus about 600 BCE). (c) Much of Africa moved straight to iron — no bronze age; the Andes had no iron working before 1492. **Q5.** Laws of Moses: gathered over centuries, with tradition tracing them to Moses; scrolls. Edicts of Ashoka: about 260 BCE; rock faces and stone pillars. **Q6.** (a) Persians (b) Nubians (c) Phoenicians (d) Indus Valley peoples. **Q7.** See model response — regions had different plants, animals and climates, so the same change happened at different times. **Q8.** See model response — for example, which metals were nearby, and how much contact a region had along trade routes. **Q9.** See model response — similarities, differences and the purpose of each code. **Q10.** See model response — one people described, one similarity and one difference named. **Q11.** (a) Emperor Ashoka, about 260 BCE; carved onto rock faces and pillars across his empire. (b) Growth in right conduct in all religious orders. (c) For example, that the empire contained many religious orders. (d) See model response.

Model responses

Q7. Agriculture began at different times because each region had different plants, animals and climates to work with, and people could only farm what was around them. In West Asia, wild wheat and barley grew well, so people were farming by about 9000 BCE. In Mesoamerica, the local plants were different: squash was grown by about 8000 BCE, but maize had to be bred from a wild grass over thousands of years, so it only became a major crop by about 4000 BCE. The same skill — farming — spread at different rates because each region had a different starting point.

Q8. Two explanations. First, access to materials: metal comes from rocks that contain it, so societies sitting near copper or iron rock could begin earlier, while societies without it had to wait for trade — bronze also needs tin, which is rare. Second, contact: metal-working skills spread along trade routes and by people moving, so regions near West Asia, where metal-working began early, picked up the skills sooner than regions separated by distance, deserts, mountains or seas. This is why some societies, like the Nok, moved straight to iron without a bronze age, while the Andes had no iron working before 1492.

Q9. The Code of Ur-Nammu and the Edicts of Ashoka are similar because both were backed by the most powerful person in their society, and both aimed to keep order among large numbers of people. They differ in purpose and in how they were shared. The Code of Ur-Nammu, about 2100–2050 BCE, was written on clay tablets and mainly settles disputes: it says what a wrongdoer must pay the person they harmed. Ashoka's edicts, about 260 BCE, were carved onto rock faces and pillars, and they teach behaviour — kindness, doing no harm, and respect for other people's beliefs. One code looks backward to punish a harm already done; the other looks forward to shape how people treat each other every day.

Q10. The Persians built the largest empire the world had seen to that time, founded by Cyrus the Great about 550 BCE. Politically, one king ruled many different peoples, and the empire was split into provinces, each looked after by a governor, with a royal road carrying messages, soldiers and trade. Its social groups formed layers of power: king, governors, soldiers and officials, then farmers and traders. This is similar to the Nubians, who also organised their society around a powerful kingdom, Kush. It is different from the Phoenicians, who were never one kingdom at all: they lived in separate city-states such as Byblos, Sidon and Tyre, each with its own ruler, linked by sea trade rather than by a single king.

Q11.

- (a) The edict was issued by Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya Empire, about 260 BCE. It was made public by being carved onto rock faces and stone pillars placed across the empire, so people in many regions could hear or see it.
- (b) Ashoka says he values growth in right conduct in all religious orders more than gifts and honours. He wants good behaviour to increase everywhere, not just gifts to him or his priests.
- (c) You can infer that the Maurya Empire contained many different religious orders living side by side — otherwise Ashoka would not need to tell people to respect each other’s beliefs. The supporting detail is that he honours “all religious orders, both those who live at home and those who have left home for a religious life”, and warns against condemning the order of others.
- (d) Because the source is the emperor’s own public words, it is good at showing what Ashoka wanted people to believe about him — a fair ruler who respected all beliefs — and it shows that the empire had many religious orders. But it has limits: it shows the ruler’s point of view, not how ordinary people actually treated each other, and an instruction carved in stone does not prove that people followed it. To find out what really happened, historians need other sources, such as the remains of temples and settlements.

How we know about early societies — and keeping the past safe

What we teach here

VC2HH8K03

In our words: How do we know what life was like thousands of years ago, long before anyone wrote it down? In this section we learn the methods historians and archaeologists use — reading the layers of a dig, reading DNA, and studying the things people left behind — and we ask why the remains of the past are worth saving when dams, roads and time itself put them in danger.

Theory

Two ways into the past

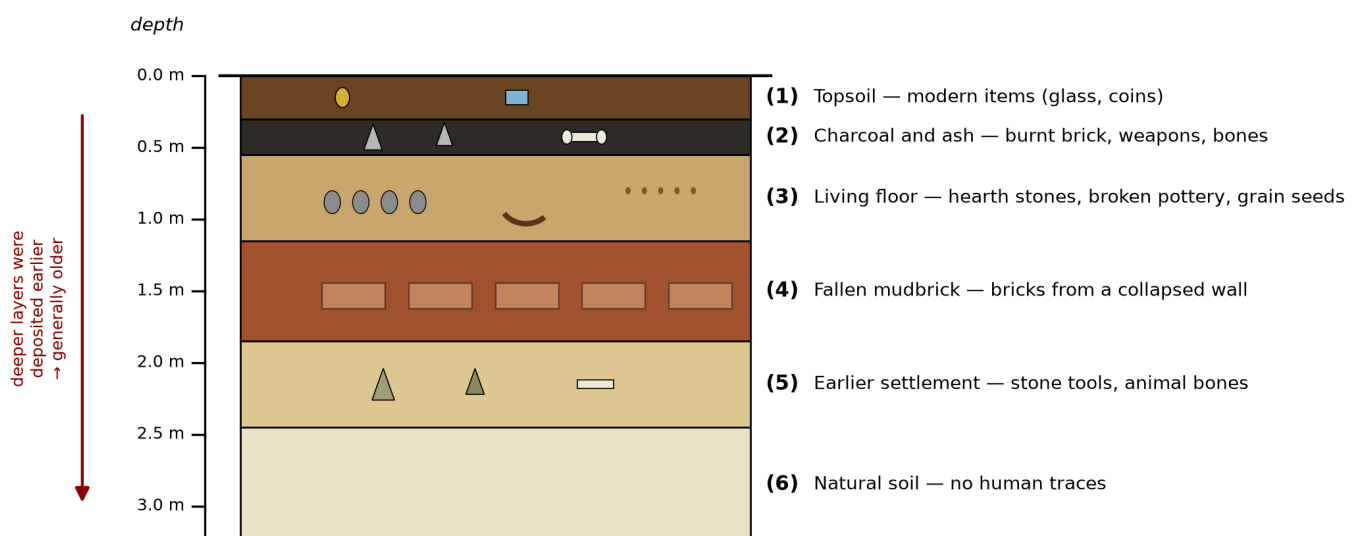
Historians study the past using **sources** — the traces people left behind. For the last few thousand years, many sources are written: letters, laws, lists of kings. But for **early societies** — societies before writing — most of the **evidence** is not paper. It is things: pots, tools, bones, walls, and buried layers of soil. **Archaeology** is the study of the past from these things; the people who do it are **archaeologists**. The objects people made or used, from pots to tools, are called **artefacts**, and taken together — the pots, tools, buildings and food scraps of a society — they are its **material culture**. A careful dig is an **excavation**.

All of this is part of our **heritage** — what the past hands on to us — and **conservation** is the work of keeping it safe for people not yet born.

Method 1 — Stratigraphy: reading the layers

When people live in one place for a long time, rubbish, dust and fallen buildings pile up, and new towns are built on top of old ones. The ground becomes a layer cake. Each layer is a **stratum** (more than one: **strata**), and the study of these layers is **stratigraphy**. The big rule is: *deeper layers were laid down earlier, so they are usually older*. To record the strata and their finds, an archaeologist draws a **cross-section** — a picture of the face of the trench, with a depth ruler in metres.

A model stratigraphic cross-section: reading the layers of a dig



Model section drawn for this workbook — not a real excavation site.

A model cross-section of a dig with six labelled strata and their finds, a depth ruler in metres, and a red arrow showing that deeper layers are generally older

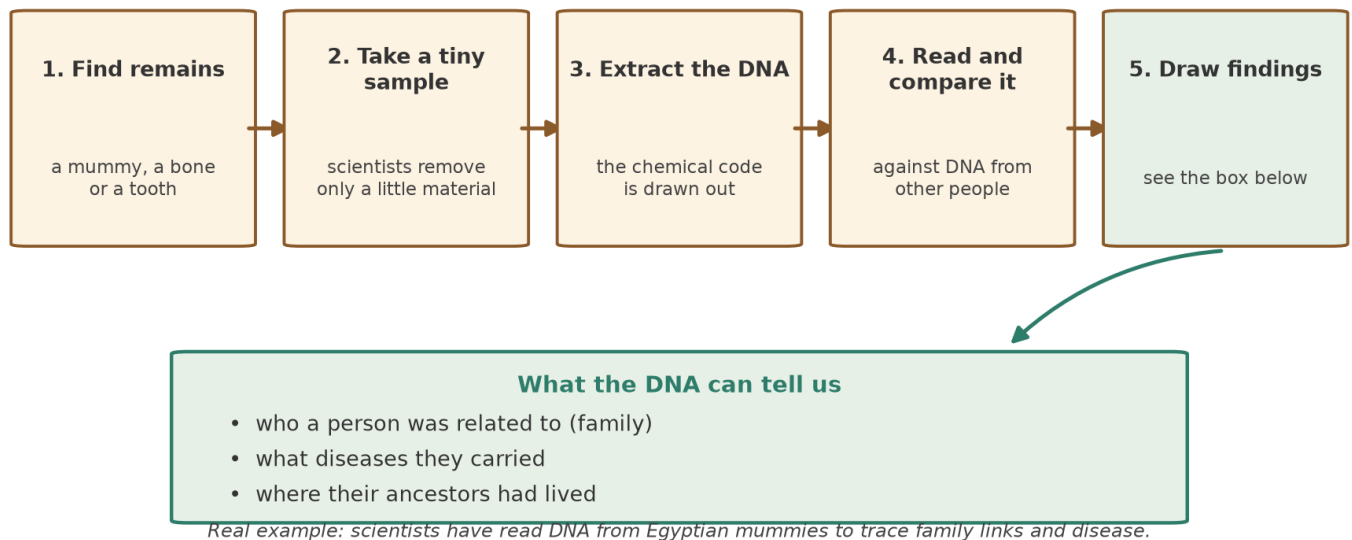
A layer of **charcoal** and ash is a gift to the digger: it marks a fire — a cooking hearth, or a town burnt down — and charcoal can be dated in a lab, which gives the layer an age in years.

The rule has a careful edge. Deeper = older is *usually* true, not always. A later pit, well or grave can be dug down through older strata, so the things inside the pit are younger than the layers around them. Good archaeologists record exactly what cuts what.

Method 2 — DNA and other scientific tests

Bones and teeth carry **DNA** — the body’s code. Today, scientists can read that code from ancient **remains**. The picture below shows the pipeline, from a mummy to an answer.

DNA testing: from a mummy to an answer

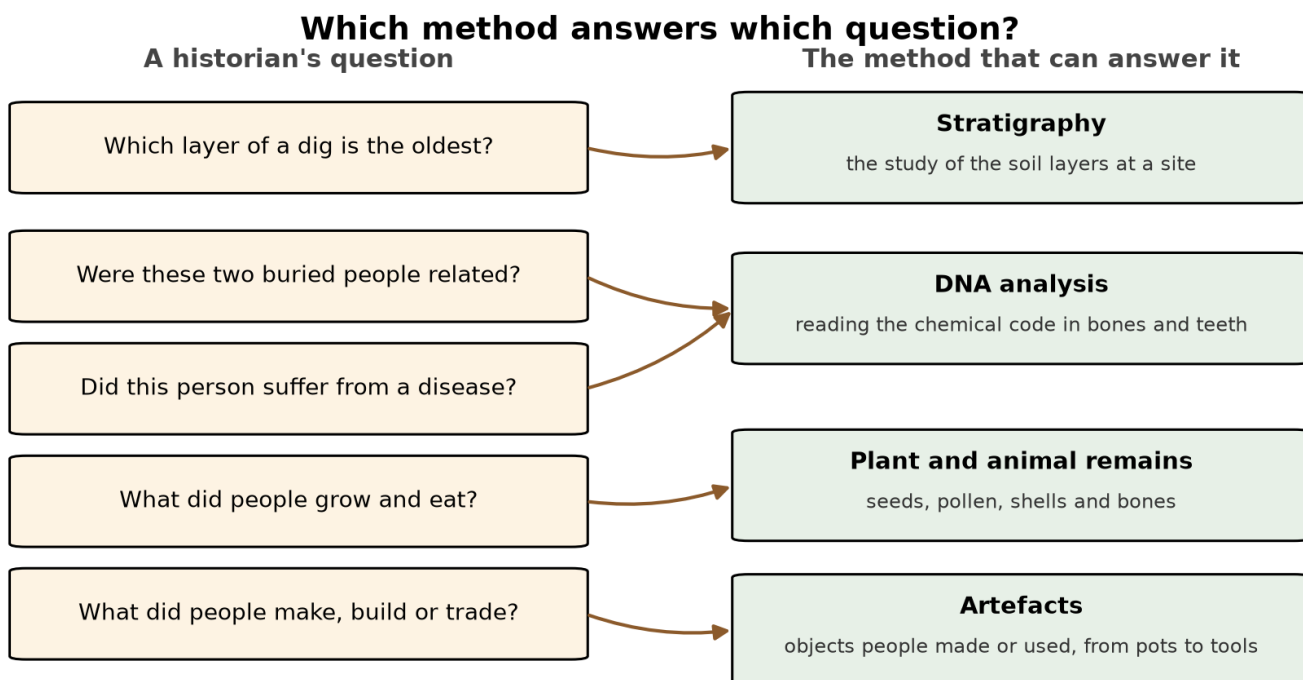


A five-step flow chart of DNA testing: find remains, take a tiny sample, extract the DNA, read and compare it, draw findings; a box lists what DNA can tell us: family links, diseases carried, and where ancestors lived

Two real cases from Egyptian mummies:

- **Family links.** In 2010, a team led by **Zahi Hawass** and **Albert Zink** read DNA from the royal mummies of Thebes. They showed that the mummy in tomb KV55 was the father of the boy-king **Tutankhamun**, and that a mummy known as the “Younger Lady” was his mother.
- **Disease.** The same team found signs of **malaria** in several mummies, Tutankhamun among them.
- **Ancestors and continuity.** In 2017, a team led by **Johannes Krause** and **Verena Schuenemann** read DNA from mummies buried at **Abusir el-Meleq** over about 1 300 years. The people buried there stayed closely related to one another across that whole span — an example of **continuity**, what stays the same over time.

DNA is only one method among many. The figure below matches each kind of question to the method that can answer it.



One method can answer more than one question — and historians usually use several together.

A matching diagram: which layer is oldest goes to stratigraphy; were two buried people related and did a person suffer a disease go to DNA analysis; what did people grow and eat goes to plant and animal remains; what did people make, build or trade goes to artefacts

Source: Hawass, Zink and others, *JAMA*, vol. 303 (2010); Schuenemann, Krause and others, *Nature Communications*, vol. 8 (2017) — retrieved 24 August 2026.

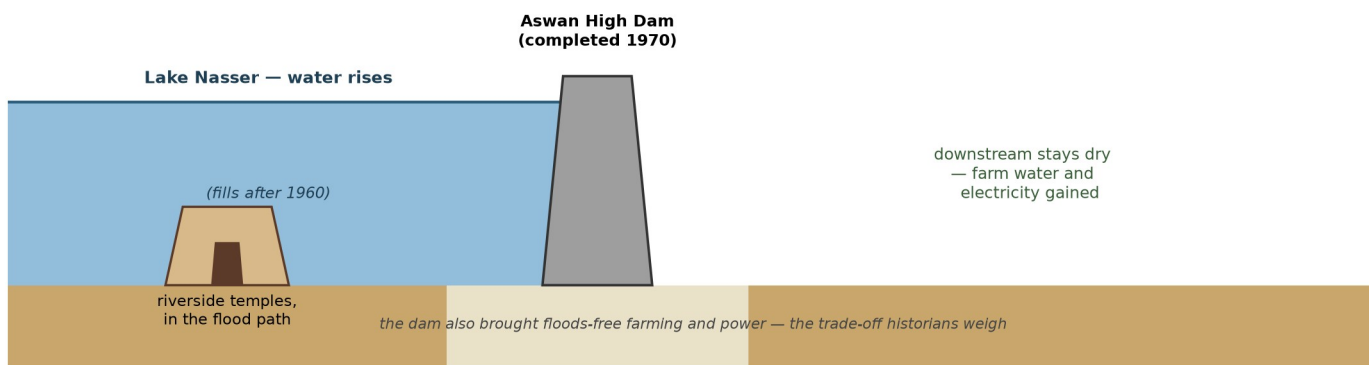
When modern works put the past in danger

Not all threats to the past are slow. Sometimes they are planned, and planned for good reasons.

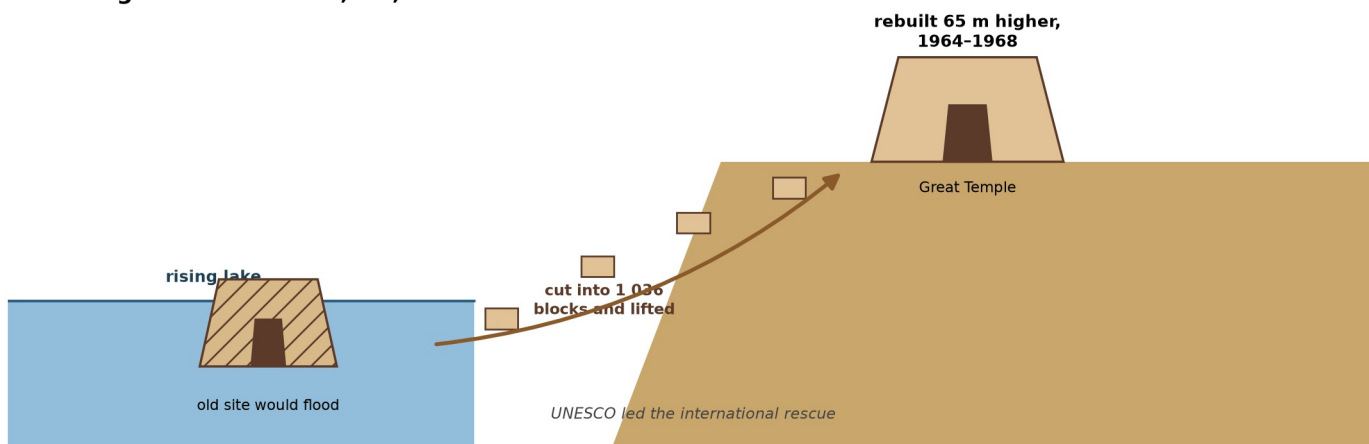
Case 1 — The Aswan High Dam, Egypt. Egypt needed power and flood-free farming for a growing population. The **Aswan High Dam**, started on 9 January 1960 and completed on 21 July 1970, delivered both: it held back the Nile to form **Lake Nasser**, storing water and driving turbines. But the rising lake also flooded the ancient river valley of **Nubia**, full of temples and tombs.

Modern works can threaten the past — the Aswan High Dam and the rescue of Abu Simbel

1. A new dam floods the valley



2. Saving Abu Simbel: cut, lift, rebuild

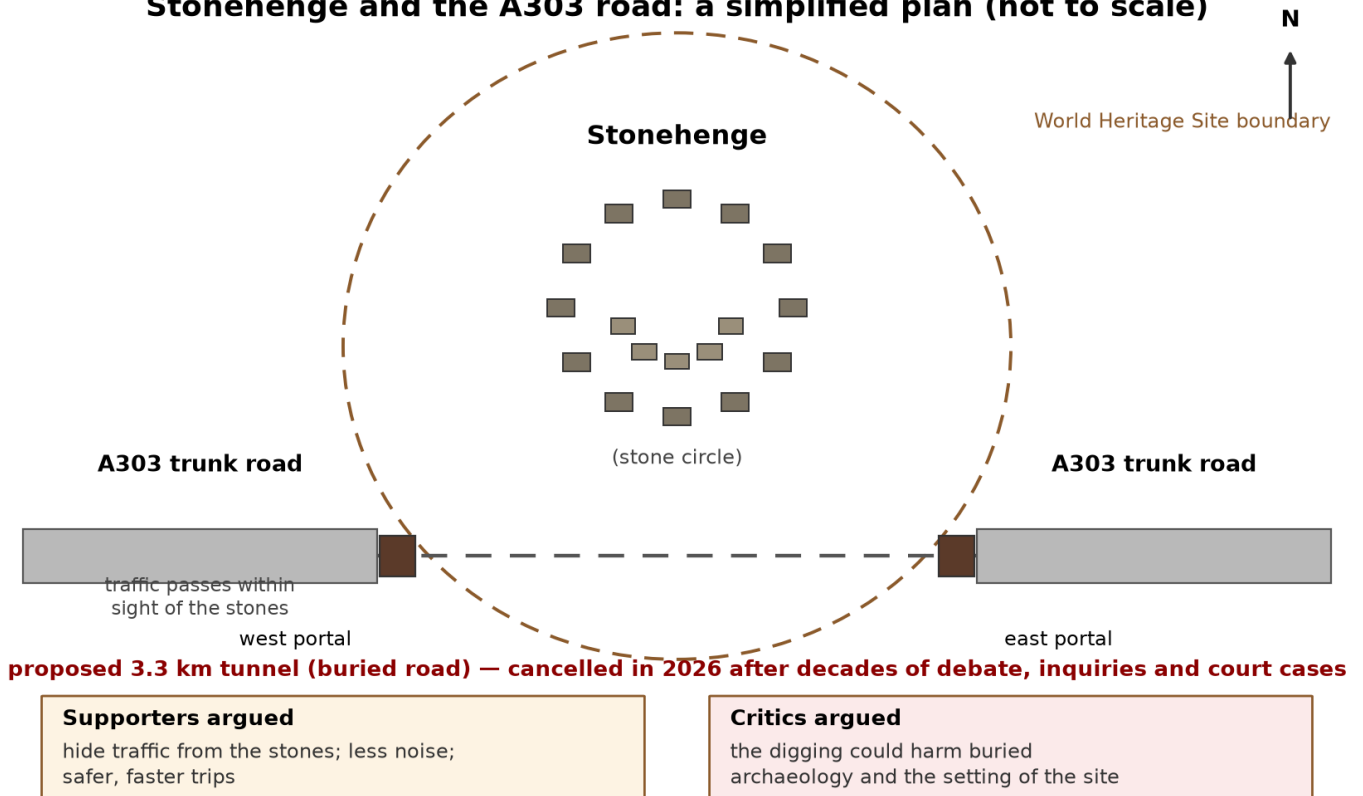


Two panels: panel 1 shows the Aswan High Dam holding back the rising Lake Nasser with riverside temples in the flood path; panel 2 shows the temple of Abu Simbel cut into blocks and rebuilt 65 metres higher between 1964 and 1968, with UNESCO leading the rescue

The world's response became the great story of conservation in the twentieth century. In 1959, UNESCO launched an international **campaign** to save the monuments of Nubia. The biggest task was **Abu Simbel**, two temples cut into the rock face for the pharaoh **Ramesses II**. Between 1964 and 1968, engineers cut the temples into 1 036 blocks, lifted them, and rebuilt them 65 m higher, safe above the new lake. In all, 22 temples and tombs were moved or saved. Not everything could be rescued: some forts and graves — the old fort of **Buhen** among them — now lie under the lake, known to us only from the drawings and photos made during the rescue digs. That loss is part of the story too: conservation matters because once a site is gone, its evidence is gone with it.

Case 2 — The A303 road at Stonehenge, England. **Stonehenge** is a stone circle begun about 5 000 years ago, at the heart of a World Heritage Site full of buried **archaeology** — hundreds of unseen features in the soil. The busy **A303 trunk road** passes within sight of the stones. For decades, governments argued over a plan to bury that stretch in a 3.3 km tunnel.

Stonehenge and the A303 road: a simplified plan (not to scale)



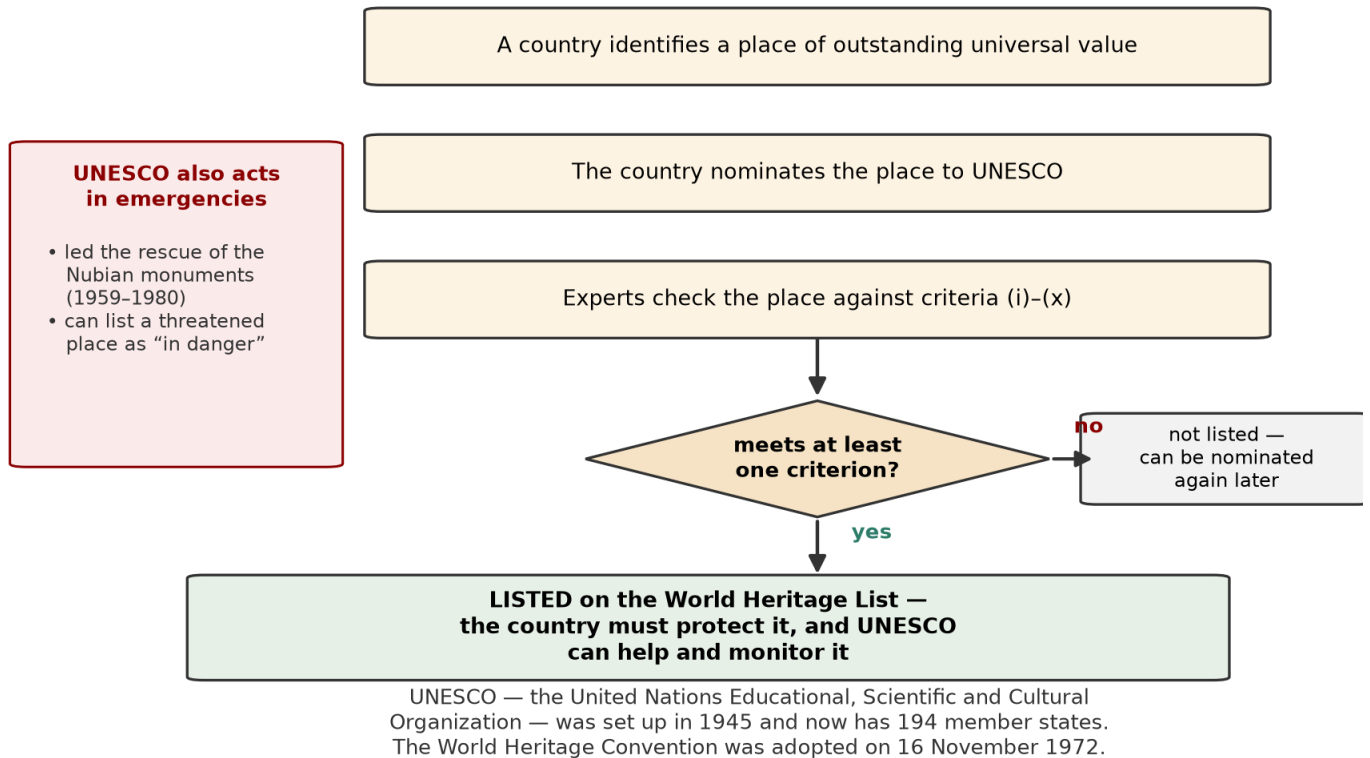
A simplified plan of Stonehenge: the stone circle inside the dashed World Heritage Site boundary, the A303 road passing south of it with two tunnel portals, the proposed 3.3 km tunnel marked as cancelled in 2026, and two boxes giving the supporters' and critics' arguments

The debate ran for decades, through public **inquiries** and court cases. Supporters of the tunnel argued it would hide the traffic from the stones, cut the noise, and make trips safer and faster. Critics argued the digging could harm buried archaeology and the **setting** of the site — the quiet, open view the ancient builders chose. In 2026 the scheme was cancelled. Both sides were arguing about the same question we meet at Aswan: *how do we weigh what people need today against what the past hands on to us?*

Who protects the past? UNESCO and the World Heritage List

Most protection is national: governments make laws that guard sites and control digging. For places of world importance, the key body is **UNESCO** — the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, set up in 1945 and now with 194 member states. In 1972, UNESCO's members agreed to the **World Heritage Convention**, and with it the **World Heritage List**: a list of places of such value that they belong, in a sense, to all people.

How World Heritage protection works

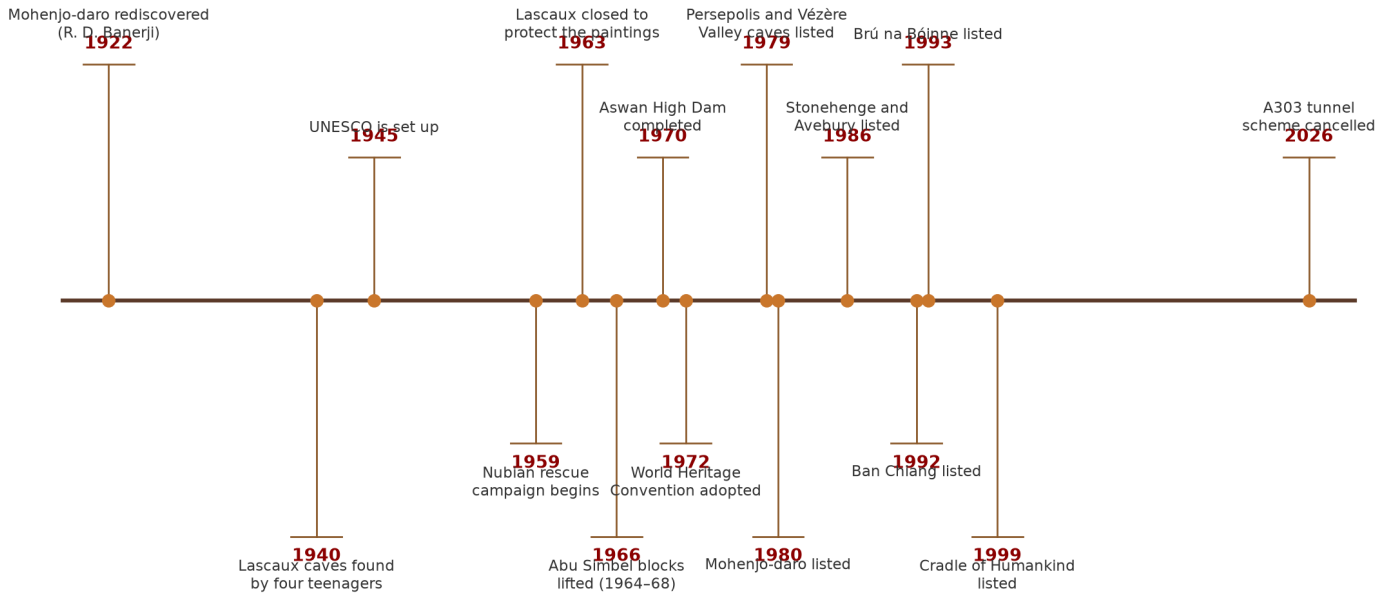


Criteria (i)–(vi) are cultural; criteria (vii)–(x) are natural.

A flow chart of World Heritage protection: a country identifies a place of outstanding value, nominates it to UNESCO, experts check it against criteria (i) to (x), and if it meets at least one criterion it is listed and must be protected; a side box notes that UNESCO also acts in emergencies, as in the Nubian rescue of 1959 to 1980

Listing is a promise, not just an honour: the country must protect the place, and UNESCO can help, monitor, and — if a place is under threat — list it as “in danger”. The Nubian campaign shows UNESCO acting before the List even existed, and the A303 debate shows it still watching over listed sites today. The timeline below joins the story together.

Finding and protecting the past, 1922–2026



Dates: R. D. Banerji surveyed Mohenjo-daro in 1919–20; Lascaux was found on 12 September 1940; the Aswan High Dam was completed on 21 July 1970.

A timeline from 1922 to 2026: Mohenjo-daro rediscovered 1922; Lascaux found 1940; UNESCO set up 1945; Nubian rescue campaign begins 1959; Lascaux closed 1963; Abu Simbel blocks lifted 1966; Aswan High Dam completed 1970; World Heritage Convention adopted 1972; Persepolis and the Vézère caves listed 1979; Mohenjo-daro listed 1980; Stonehenge and Avebury listed 1986; Ban Chiang listed 1992; Brú na Bóinne listed 1993; Cradle of Humankind listed 1999; A303 tunnel scheme cancelled 2026

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Nubia campaign* and *World Heritage Convention* (adopted 16 November 1972); UNESCO, 194 member states — retrieved 24 August 2026.

The World Heritage criteria, site by site

To be listed, a place must meet at least one of ten **criteria** — tests of its value. Criteria (i)–(vi) are cultural; (vii)–(x) are natural. The six sites below are listed for cultural reasons. Study the table, then the grid, and notice the pattern in criterion (iii).

Six ancient sites on the World Heritage List

Site	Country	Listed	Criteria	Known for
Persepolis	Iran	1979	(1), (3), (6)	royal capital of the Persian kings, c. 515 BCE
Lascaux caves (Vézère Valley)	France	1979	(1), (3)	cave paintings up to about 22 000 years old
Mohenjo-daro	Pakistan	1980	(2), (3)	planned Indus Valley city, built c. 2500 BCE
Ban Chiang	Thailand	1992	(3)	prehistoric village with painted pottery
Newgrange (Brú na Bóinne)	Ireland	1993	(1), (3), (4)	winter-solstice passage tomb, c. 3100 BCE
Cradle of Humankind	South Africa	1999	(3), (6)	caves holding fossils of early human ancestors

All six are listed under cultural criteria. Natural criteria (vii)–(x) apply to places such as forests, reefs and landforms.

Source: UNESCO World Heritage List (checked 24 August 2026).

A table of six ancient sites on the World Heritage List: Persepolis, Iran, listed 1979, criteria (1), (3), (6), royal capital of the Persian kings about 515 BCE; Lascaux caves, France, 1979, (1), (3), cave paintings up to about 22 000 years old; Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan, 1980, (2), (3), planned Indus Valley city built about 2500 BCE; Ban Chiang, Thailand, 1992, (3), prehistoric village with painted pottery; Newgrange, Ireland, 1993, (1), (3), (4), winter-solstice passage tomb about 3100 BCE; Cradle of Humankind, South Africa, 1999, (3), (6), caves holding fossils of early human ancestors

Which cultural criteria does each site meet?

	(i) masterpiece of creative skill	(ii) exchange of values	(iii) witness to a civilisation	(iv) example of a building type	(v) traditional links with settlement	(vi) links with events or beliefs
Persepolis	●		●			●
Lascaux caves (Vézère Valley)	●		●			
Mohenjo-daro		●	●			
Ban Chiang			●			
Newgrange (Brú na Bóinne)	●		●	●		
Cradle of Humankind			●			●

● = the site meets this criterion. Each listed site must meet at least one of the ten criteria.

Notice: every one of these six sites meets criterion (iii) — each is a witness to a civilisation.

A grid showing which of the cultural criteria (i) to (vi) each of the six sites meets; every site meets criterion (iii), witness to a civilisation

A few notes on the sites themselves:

- **Persepolis** (Iran) was the ceremony capital of the Persian kings, begun about 515 BCE; its palaces were burnt by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE.
- The **Lascaux caves** (Vézère Valley, France) were found on 12 September 1940 by four teenagers; their paintings of horses, deer and bulls are up to about 22 000 years old. So many visitors changed the cave's air that it was closed to the public in 1963 to protect the paintings — conservation again.
- **Mohenjo-daro** (Pakistan) was a planned brick city of the Indus Valley, built about 2500 BCE, with straight streets and drains. It was rediscovered in 1922, when **R. D. Banerji** followed up surveys he had made in 1919–20.
- **Ban Chiang** (Thailand) is a prehistoric village mound famous for its painted pottery.
- **Newgrange**, part of **Brú na Bóinne** (Ireland), is a passage tomb built about 3100 BCE; at sunrise on the winter **solstice**, light climbs the passage and lights the inner chamber.
- The **Cradle of Humankind** — a chain of caves in South Africa — holds fossils of some of the oldest human ancestors yet found.

Source: UNESCO World Heritage List, site entries and criteria (checked 24 August 2026).

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — Reading the model cross-section (with help)

Use the model cross-section (first figure in the Theory). Work through parts (a)–(d).

Working	Comment
(a) The deepest layer with human traces is (5) <i>Earlier settlement</i> ; only (6) <i>Natural soil</i> lies below it.	The rule: deeper layers were laid down earlier. Layer (6) has <i>no</i> human traces, so (5) is the oldest layer <i>with</i> evidence of people.
(b) Layer (3) <i>Living floor</i> — hearth stones, broken pottery, grain seeds.	Cooked food (hearth), stored food (seeds) and everyday pots: this layer shows people <i>living</i> there, not just passing through.
(c) The weapon points in (2) are younger than the stone tools in (5).	(2) sits above (5), so it was laid down later. The change from stone tools to metal weapons is change over time; the fact that people kept living on the site is continuity .
(d) The caption says “model section drawn for this workbook — not a real excavation site”.	A model teaches the method. Real sections are messier: layers tip, merge, and get cut by pits — which is why the “usually” in the rule matters.

Worked example 2 — Deciding about Abu Simbel, 1959 (with help)

Imagine it is 1959. The dam will bring flood-free water and electricity to millions; the lake will flood the temples of Nubia. Use the Aswan figure and the Theory to work through (a)–(c).

Working	Comment
(a) Benefit: reliable water and power for a growing country. Cost: the ancient valley of Nubia, temples included, would flood.	This is a consequence question: one choice, two effects. Historians weigh both, not just one.
(b) Option 1 flood the valley and record what can be recorded; option 2 stop the dam; option 3 build the dam <i>and</i> move the temples. Egypt and UNESCO chose option 3.	Option 3 kept both the future and the past. Abu Simbel was cut into 1 036 blocks and rebuilt 65 m higher (1964–1968); 22 temples and tombs in all were moved or saved.
(c) The rescue was led by UNESCO, with money and workers from many countries.	Conservation is rarely one country’s job alone. The campaign (1959–1980) is also why the World Heritage Convention of 1972 exists: the world had seen what it could save — and what (like the fort of Buhen) it could not.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. Match each historian’s question to the best method, using the matching diagram in the Theory: (a) *Did this person suffer from a disease?* (b) *What did people grow and eat?* (c) *Which layer of the dig is the oldest?* (d) *What did people make, build or trade?*

Q2. A dig finds four strata: **W** — a layer of ash and burnt brick; **X** — topsoil with modern coins; **Y** — a floor with hearth stones and seeds; **Z** — a pit cut down from the topsoil, holding a plastic button. List W, X, Y in order from youngest to oldest, and explain why Z breaks the deeper = older rule.

Q3. Name two things the DNA studies in the Theory could tell us about the Egyptian mummies, and say which team found each (Hawass and Zink, 2010, or Schuenemann and Krause, 2017).

Q4. In your own words, define: (a) **artefact**; (b) **stratigraphy**; (c) **material culture**; (d) **conservation**. Start each with the word itself, e.g. “An artefact is ...”.

Q5. The Aswan High Dam: give one benefit and one cost from the Theory, then finish the sentence: “Historians judge the dam by weighing ...”

Q6. Put these steps of World Heritage protection in the correct order (see the UNESCO flow chart): **A** experts check the place against criteria (i)–(x); **B** the country nominates the place to UNESCO; **C** the place is listed and the country must protect it; **D** a country identifies a place of outstanding value.

Practice on your own

Q7. “Deeper means older — usually.” Explain one situation in which something found deep in the ground is *younger* than the layers around it.

Q8. The A303 tunnel at Stonehenge was argued over for decades and cancelled in 2026. Give the strongest argument *for* the tunnel and the strongest argument *against* it, then give your own view with a reason.

Q9. Choose one of the six sites in the table. Using its “known for” column and at least one criterion it meets, explain in three or four sentences why the site belongs on the World Heritage List.

Q10. “Conserving the past is important.” Give two different reasons why, drawing on at least two examples from this section (for instance: Lascaux, Abu Simbel, Buhen, the A303).

Source-based inquiry

Q11. Study the sources and answer (a)–(c).

Source A — a summary of what the Egyptian government argued when the Aswan High Dam began (9 January 1960): “*The dam will hold back the Nile, end the bad floods and the bad droughts, and give Egypt electricity and water for new farms. A country may love its past, but it must feed its living people first.*”

Source B — facts about the rescue: *In 1959 UNESCO launched an international campaign to save the monuments of Nubia. More than 50 countries gave money or experts. Between 1964 and 1968 the temples of Abu Simbel were cut into 1 036 blocks and rebuilt 65 m higher. In all, 22 temples and tombs were moved or saved; some sites, like the fort of Buhen, were flooded and are known only from rescue records.*

Source C — model source written for this workbook, an archaeologist’s diary, Nubia, 1964: “*We draw fast and photograph everything before the water rises. What we save on paper may be all that is left. Some of what we record today, no one will ever see again.*”

- (a) Whose point of view does Source A give, and what does it value most?
 - (b) What does Source B show the world doing in answer to the problem?
 - (c) Using all three sources and your own knowledge from this section: was building the dam the right choice? Give one argument from each side, then your own view with reasons.
-

Answers

Q1. (a) DNA analysis. (b) Plant and animal remains. (c) Stratigraphy. (d) Artefacts.

Q2. Youngest to oldest: X, W, Y. Z is younger than the layers it cuts through because it was dug *down* from the topsoil later — a pit is made after the strata it cuts.

Q3. Any two of: family links (Tutankhamun's father and mother) — Hawass and Zink, 2010; disease (malaria) — Hawass and Zink, 2010; ancestors and 1 300 years of continuity at Abusir el-Meleq — Schuenemann and Krause, 2017.

Q4. (a) An artefact is an object people made or used, like a pot or a tool. (b) Stratigraphy is the study of the layers of soil at a dig, used to put finds in order from older to younger. (c) Material culture is the things a society left behind, taken together — pots, tools, buildings, food scraps. (d) Conservation is the work of protecting and keeping the remains and heritage of the past safe.

Q5. Benefit: flood-free farming and electricity (water and power). Cost: the flooding of ancient Nubia, including sites that could not be saved. Finish: "... weighing what people needed *then* against the heritage lost and saved."

Q6. D, B, A, C.

Q7. A pit, well or grave dug down from a later level: the things in it are younger than the older strata it cuts through. (Any clear example of a later cut.)

Q8. For: hides the traffic from the stones, less noise, safer and faster trips. Against: the digging could harm buried archaeology and the setting of the site. Own view: reasoned, either side.

Q9. Answers vary; must name one site, use its "known for" fact, and link it to a criterion it meets (e.g. Lascaux: paintings up to about 22 000 years old — a masterpiece of creative skill, criterion (i), and a witness to a civilisation, criterion (iii)).

Q10. Any two reasoned motives, e.g.: (1) sites are evidence — once destroyed (Buhen under the lake) the evidence is gone forever; (2) heritage gives people identity and belonging — the world helped Egypt save Abu Simbel because it belonged, in a sense, to everyone.

Q11. (a) The Egyptian government's view; it values feeding and powering living people first. (b) The world acting together through UNESCO: money and experts from more than 50 countries; Abu Simbel moved; 22 temples and tombs saved; honest about the losses too. (c) See model response below.

Fully-worked / model solutions

Model for Q8 (on your own): *For the tunnel:* the A303 passes within sight of the stones, so burying it would hide the traffic, cut the noise, and return the setting to something like the quiet landscape the builders knew — and it would make a dangerous road safer and faster. *Against the tunnel:* the World Heritage Site is full of buried archaeology, and digging the tunnel portals could harm remains we have not even found yet; a place of this value should not be a building site. *My view:* I would not build the tunnel. The buried archaeology cannot be replaced, and the sources in this section show that once a site is destroyed its evidence is gone forever (as at Buhen), whereas traffic can be managed in other ways. (A view for the tunnel, with reasons, is equally acceptable.)

Model for Q11(c): Source A gives the case for the dam: a growing country needed flood control, water and power, and "must feed its living people first". Source C gives the cost in one voice: even with rescue digs, "some of what we record today, no one will ever see again" — Buhen now lies under the lake. Source B shows the middle path the world actually chose: build *and* save, with more than 50 countries paying to lift Abu Simbel 65 m above the water. My view: building the dam was the right choice *only because* the rescue happened — the same choice without the campaign would simply have drowned the past. That is the lesson for every case since, including the A303 at Stonehenge: modern needs are real, but so is the heritage, and the dam shows that with enough care and money the two can sometimes both be served.

The world remade, 600–1750: empires, faiths and ideas

Content description: VC2HH8K04

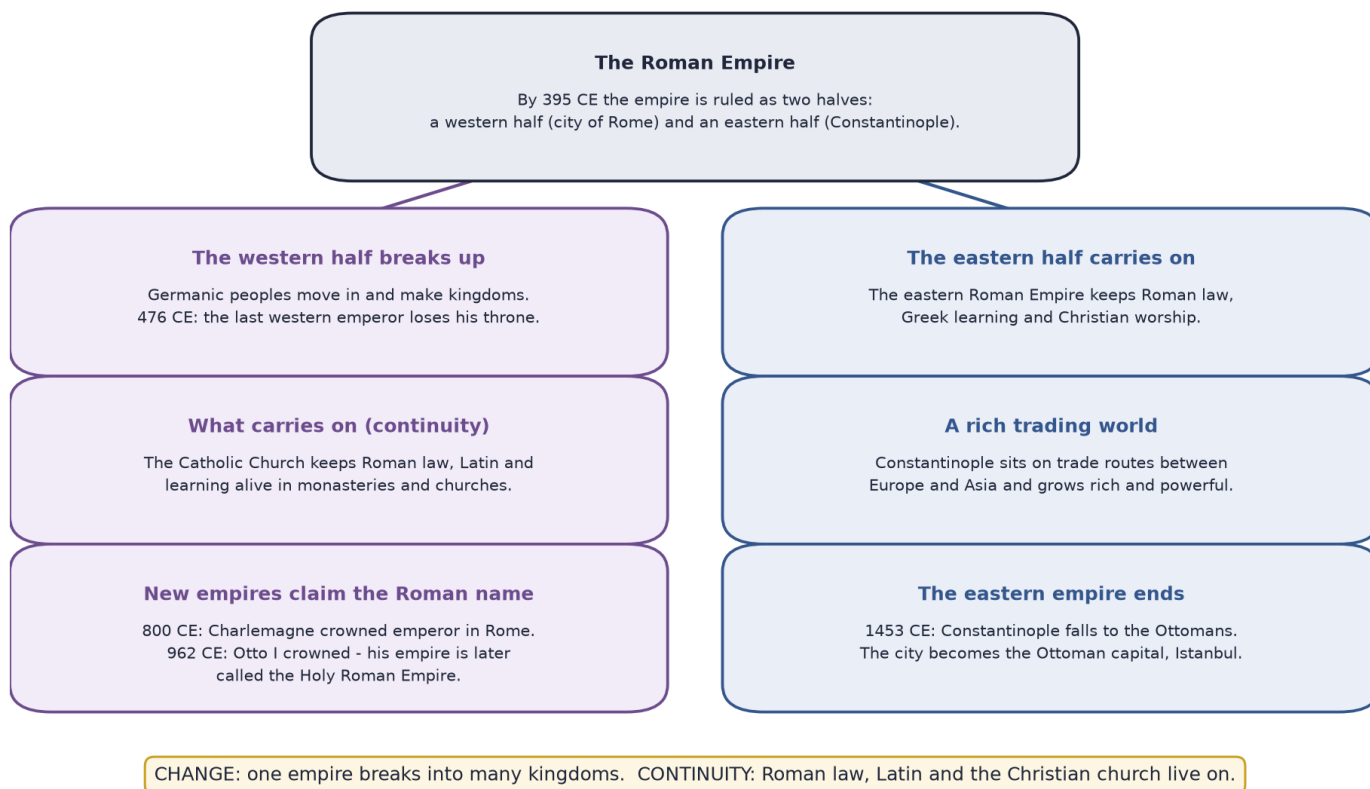
This section draws on elaborations VC2HH8K04.E01–VC2HH8K04.E05.

In history, a **change** is something new or different in a society, and a **continuity** is something that carries on, even while other things change. From 600 to 1750 CE the world changed enormously — empires rose and fell, worldviews spread, and new ideas appeared — yet much also carried on. Historians look for the **patterns**: not just what changed, but what changed *and* what stayed the same, and how significant each change was.

Theory

1. How the Roman world was transformed (VC2HH8K04.E02). An **empire** is a group of lands and peoples ruled by one ruler. In 300–400 CE the Roman Empire ruled most of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. By 395 CE it was ruled as two halves: a western half (ruled from the city of Rome) and an eastern half (ruled from Constantinople). In 476 CE the last western emperor lost his throne, and the western half slowly broke into kingdoms. Yet much carried on: the Catholic Church kept Roman law, the Latin language and learning alive in monasteries and churches. In 800 CE Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome, and in 962 CE Otto I was crowned — his empire was later called the Holy Roman Empire. The eastern half carried on for nearly a thousand more years, growing rich on trade, until Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453 CE. So the Roman world was not destroyed all at once — it was **transformed**: changed in the west, continuous in the east.

How the Roman world was transformed, 395-1453 CE



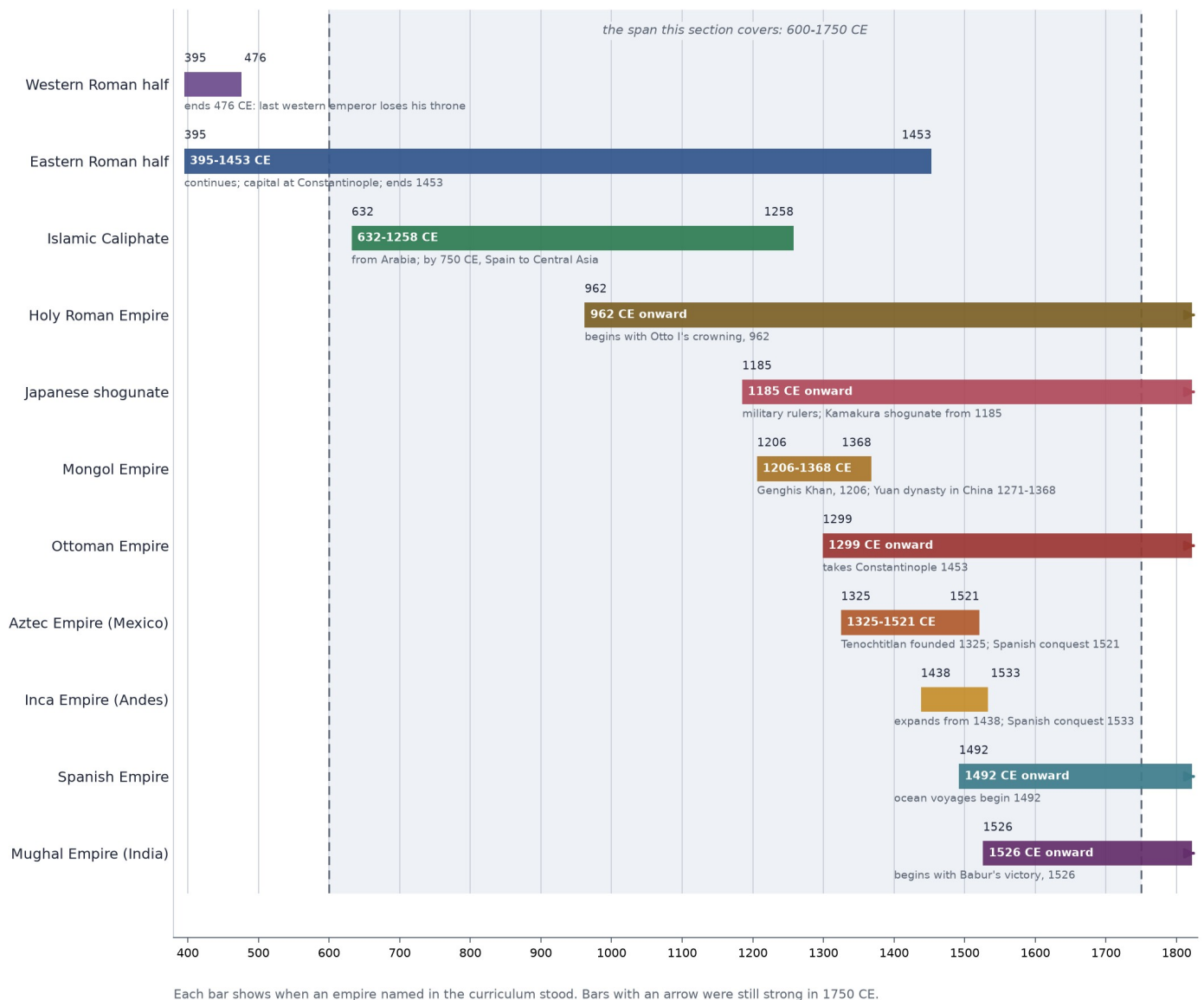
The fall of Rome's western half in 476 CE happened before 600 CE - it is the starting point of this section's span.

Flow diagram of how the Roman world was transformed: one empire ruled as two halves by 395 CE; the western half breaks into kingdoms after 476 CE while the Church keeps Roman law and Latin; Charlemagne crowned 800 CE and Otto I 962 CE; the eastern half carries on as a rich trading world until Constantinople falls to the Ottomans in 1453 CE.

Sources: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Ancient Rome', 'Charlemagne', 'Holy Roman Empire' and 'Ottoman Empire', retrieved 24 August 2026.

2. Empires rising and falling (VC2HH8K04.E01). Across the whole span, empires rose and fell on every continent. The Islamic Caliphate began in Arabia in 632 CE and by 750 CE reached from Spain to Central Asia. The Holy Roman Empire began in 962 CE. In Japan, military rulers called shoguns held power: the first shogunate began in 1185 CE. Genghis Khan united the Mongols in 1206 CE and built the largest land empire in history. The Ottoman Empire began around 1299 CE and took Constantinople in 1453 CE. In the Americas, the Aztec Empire grew from 1325 CE and the Inca Empire from 1438 CE; both were conquered by the Spanish after 1492 CE. The Mughal Empire began in India in 1526 CE with Babur's victory at Panipat. In class, you may build this timeline as a group — one empire each, then join your bars into a single class timeline of the world.

Empires rising and falling, 600-1750 CE



Horizontal bar timeline of empires between 400 CE and 1800 CE: the western Roman half 395-476 CE; the eastern Roman half 395-1453 CE; the Islamic Caliphate 632-1258 CE; the Holy Roman Empire from 962 CE; the Japanese shogunate from 1185 CE; the Mongol Empire 1206-1368 CE; the Ottoman Empire from 1299 CE; the Aztec Empire 1325-1521 CE; the Inca Empire 1438-1533 CE; the Spanish Empire from 1492 CE; and the Mughal Empire from 1526 CE, with the span 600-1750 CE shaded.

Sources: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Islamic world', 'Holy Roman Empire', 'Kamakura period', 'Mongol Empire', 'Ottoman Empire', 'Aztec', 'Inca', 'Spain' and 'Mughal dynasty', retrieved 24 August 2026.

3. Feudalism in western Europe (VC2HH8K04.E01). After the western half of the Roman Empire broke up, kings found it hard to defend and rule their lands. In the Middle Ages (about 500–1500 CE), a way of ruling called

feudalism (the feudal system) grew up: the king gave land to lords, and in return the lords gave the king soldiers, advice and loyalty. Society sat in a hierarchy, like a pyramid: at the top the king; then lords (nobles and bishops); then soldiers on horseback; and at the bottom the farmers, who were most people. Land and protection were given down the pyramid; work, crops and loyalty were given up.

The feudal order in western Europe



Feudalism (the feudal system): a way of ruling in which the king gave land to lords, and lords gave the king soldiers, advice and loyalty.

It grew up in western Europe during the Middle Ages, as kings needed help to defend and rule their lands.

Pyramid diagram of the feudal order in western Europe: king at the top, then lords (nobles and bishops), then soldiers on horseback, then farmers (most people); land and protection given down, work, crops and loyalty given up.

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Feudalism', retrieved 24 August 2026.

4. The spread of major worldviews (VC2HH8K04.E01–E02). A **worldview** is a picture of the world and how to live in it. Four worldviews named in the curriculum spread widely in this span. Christianity was already the faith of the Roman Empire by 600 CE; missionaries carried it across Europe, and after 1492 to the Americas; in 1054 CE the church split into the western Catholic and eastern Orthodox churches. Islam began in Arabia in 622 CE, when Muhammad began teaching; by 750 CE it reached from Spain to Central Asia, and traders carried it further into Africa, India and South-East Asia. Hinduism grew with kingdoms and trade in South and South-East Asia. Buddhism spread along trade routes such as the Silk Road, into China, Korea, Japan, Tibet and South-East Asia. Each is still part of life today — in Australia we keep festivals from all four: Christmas and Easter, Eid, Diwali and Vesak.

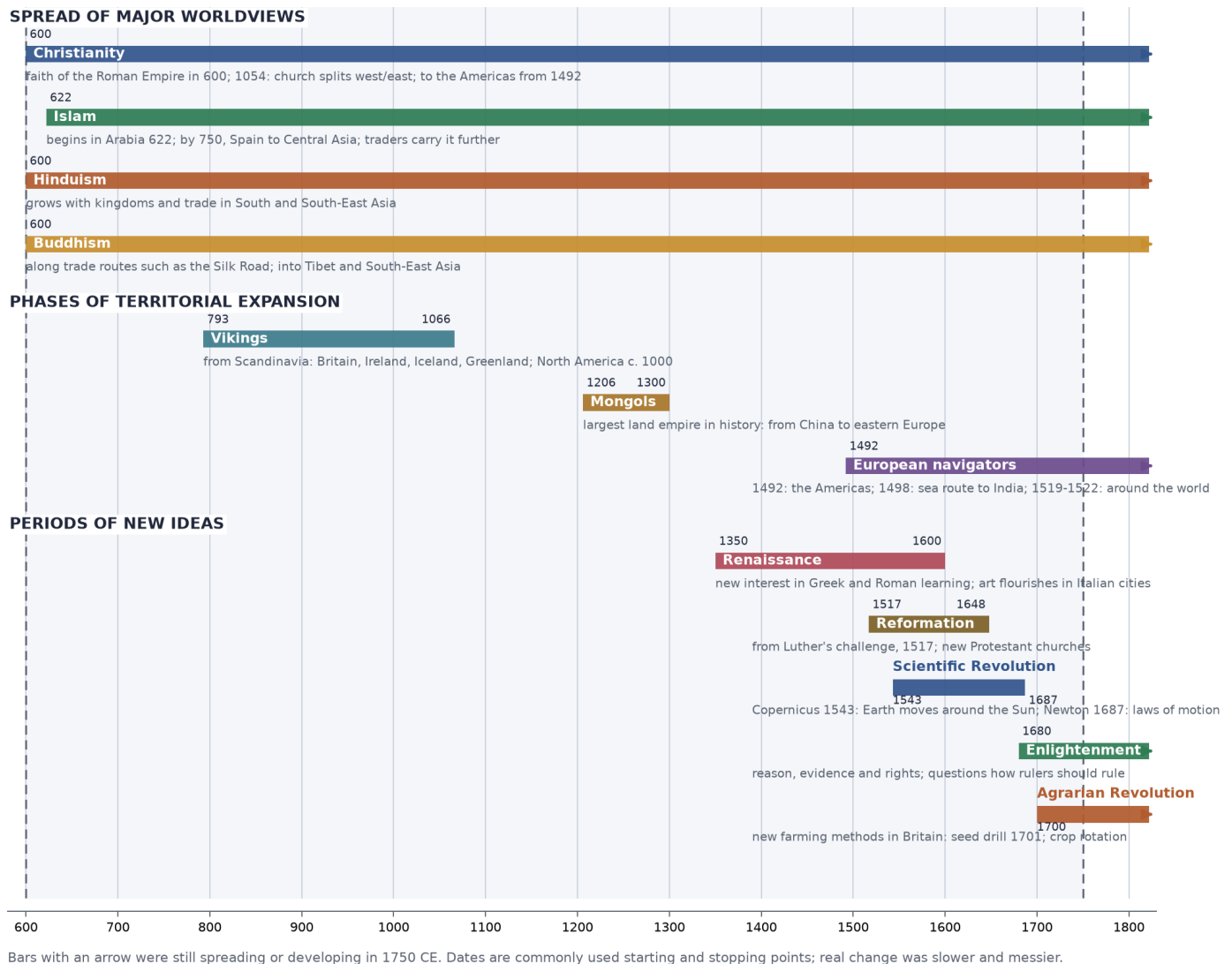
Four worldviews on the move, 600-1750 CE

Worldview	Where and when it began	How it spread, 600-1750 CE	Still part of life today
Christianity	1st century CE, in Roman-ruled Judea	By 600 CE it was the faith of the Roman Empire. Missionaries carried it across Europe, and after 1492 to the Americas. In 1054 the church split into the western Catholic and eastern Orthodox churches.	Christmas and Easter holidays; churches on every continent
Islam	Early 600s CE, in Arabia; Muhammad began teaching around 610 CE	Spread out of Arabia from 622 CE. By 750 CE it reached from Spain to Central Asia. Traders carried it further into Africa, India and South-East Asia.	Eid festivals; mosques on every continent
Hinduism	Ancient India; no single founder	Grew with kingdoms and trade in South and South-East Asia. Temple worship and loving devotion to the gods spread widely.	Diwali festival; one of the world's largest faiths
Buddhism	Northern India, c. 5th century BCE; Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha)	Carried along trade routes such as the Silk Road. By 600 CE it was in China, Korea and Japan; it spread further into Tibet and South-East Asia.	Vesak festival; temples across Asia

A worldview is a picture of the world and how to live in it. These four are the ones the curriculum names.

Table of the four worldviews named in the curriculum (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism): where and when each began, how it spread from 600 to 1750 CE, and how it is still part of life today through festivals such as Christmas and Easter, Eid, Diwali and Vesak.

Worldviews, expansion and new ideas, 600-1750 CE



Swim-lane timeline for 600-1750 CE showing the spread of the four major worldviews; phases of territorial expansion (the Vikings 793-1066 CE, the Mongols from 1206 CE, and European navigators from 1492 CE); and periods of new ideas (the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the Agrarian Revolution).

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism', retrieved 24 August 2026.

5. Phases of expansion (VC2HH8K04.E01). **Expansion** means one people spreading their rule or settlements into new lands. Three phases stand out. The Vikings, seafarers from Scandinavia, raided then settled from c. 793 to c. 1066 CE — Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, and even North America (Vinland) around 1000 CE. The Mongols, horse-riding herders united under Genghis Khan, built an empire from China to eastern Europe. European navigators sailed from 1492 CE: across the Atlantic to the Americas (Columbus, 1492), around Africa to India (Vasco da Gama, 1498), and around the world (Magellan's voyage, 1519–1522). Expansion connected the world — but conquest also brought great suffering to peoples already living in those lands, and that is part of the pattern too.

Three phases of expansion, 600-1750 CE

	The Vikings	The Mongols	European navigators
Who?	Seafarers from Scandinavia	Horse-riding herders of the Asian steppe, united under Genghis Khan	Sailors from Spain and Portugal first; later other European countries
When?	c. 793 to c. 1066 CE	1206 to c. 1300 CE	1492 onwards
Where did they go?	From Scandinavia to Britain, Ireland, France, Iceland and Greenland; reached North America (Vinland) around 1000 CE	The largest land empire in history: from China across Asia to eastern Europe	Across the Atlantic to the Americas; around Africa to India and Asia; around the world, 1519-1522
How?	Fast ships; raiding at first, then settling and trading	Skilled horsemen and armies; then laws, safe roads and protection for trade	Ocean-going ships, better maps and weapons
What happened as a result?	New towns and trade routes; languages and names mixed	Europe and Asia connected: goods, people and ideas moved along the Silk Road	World trade began to link every continent - but conquest also brought great suffering to peoples already living there

Expansion means one people spreading their rule or settlements into new lands.

Comparison table of three phases of expansion (the Vikings, the Mongols and European navigators): who they were, when they expanded, where they went, how they did it, and what happened as a result, including the suffering conquest brought to peoples already living there.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Vikings', 'Mongol Empire' and 'Age of Discovery', retrieved 24 August 2026.

6. Periods of new ideas (VC2HH8K04.E01, VC2HH8K04.E05). Historians give names to times of big change in thinking. The **Renaissance** (c. 1350–1600 CE) began in the rich cities of Italy: a new interest in Greek and Roman learning, with art and science flourishing — Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) is its most famous artist and inventor. The **Reformation** began in 1517 CE when Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church; new Protestant churches grew up across Europe. The **Scientific Revolution** (1543–1687 CE) saw scholars test ideas about the natural world with observation and experiment: Copernicus (1543) showed the Earth moves around the Sun, and Newton (1687) described the laws of motion. The **Enlightenment** (late 1600s–1700s CE) argued that reason and evidence — not tradition alone — should guide ideas about rule and rights. The **Agrarian Revolution** (from c. 1700 CE) brought new farming methods in Britain, such as Jethro Tull's seed drill (1701). These are labels historians use: the periods overlapped, and not everyone experienced them.

Five periods of new ideas, 1300-1750 CE

Renaissance 1300s-1500s CE	Reformation from 1517 CE	Scientific Revolution 1543-1687 CE	Enlightenment late 1600s-1700s CE	Agrarian Revolution from c. 1700 CE
A new interest in Greek and Roman learning. Art and science flourished in the rich cities of Italy.	Martin Luther questioned the Catholic Church. New Protestant churches grew up across Europe.	Scholars tested ideas about the natural world with observation and experiment, instead of accepting old answers.	Thinkers argued that reason and evidence - not tradition alone - should guide ideas about rule and rights.	New farming methods in Britain, such as the seed drill and crop rotation. More food meant growing towns.
NAMED EXAMPLE Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), artist and inventor	NAMED EXAMPLE Luther's 95 theses, 1517	NAMED EXAMPLE Copernicus (1543): the Earth moves around the Sun. Newton (1687): laws of motion	NAMED EXAMPLE Ideas about limits on rulers' power, used later in new constitutions	NAMED EXAMPLE Jethro Tull's seed drill, 1701

These periods overlapped, and not everyone experienced them. They are labels historians use to talk about big changes in thinking.

Five cards for the periods of new ideas 1300-1750 CE: the Renaissance with Leonardo da Vinci; the Reformation with Luther's 95 Theses of 1517; the Scientific Revolution with Copernicus (1543) and Newton (1687); the Enlightenment with ideas about limits on rulers' power; and the Agrarian Revolution with Jethro Tull's seed drill of 1701.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Renaissance', 'Reformation', 'Scientific Revolution', 'Enlightenment' and 'Agricultural Revolution', retrieved 24 August 2026.

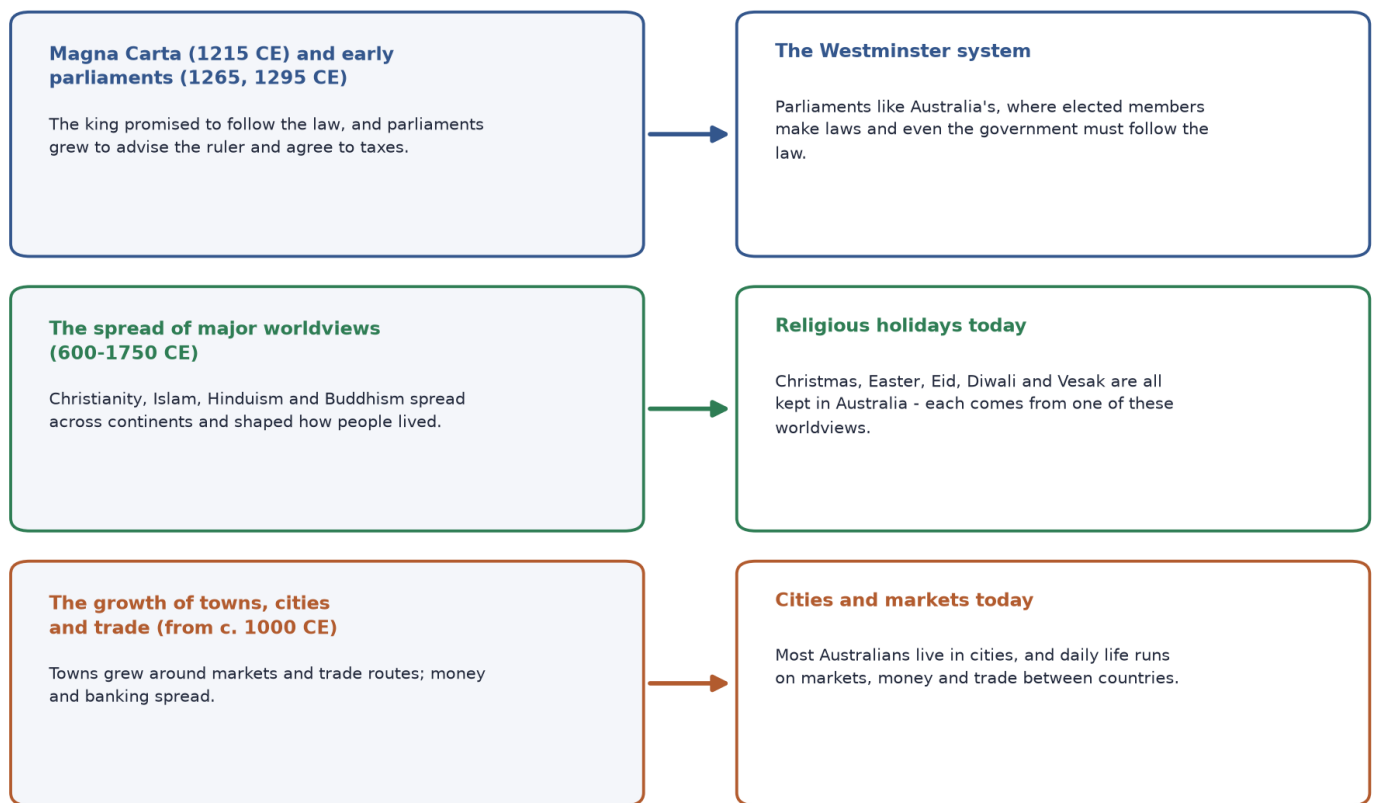
7. Ranking significance (VC2HH8K04.E03). Not every change matters equally. Historians judge the **significance** of a development with criteria such as: how many lives it changed at the time; how long its effects lasted; whether it still matters today; and how much change it caused. There is no single right order — what matters is using the criteria and giving reasons. Example 2 shows how.

8. Connections to today (VC2HH8K04.E04). The past is not locked away: many features of life in Australia today grew out of this span. In 1215 CE King John of England agreed to Magna Carta at Runnymede, promising to follow the law; early parliaments (1265 and 1295 CE) grew from the same idea — that even the ruler is under the law. That idea lives on in the **Westminster system**, the way parliaments like Australia's make laws today. The worldviews that spread in this span give us religious holidays kept in Australia today. The growth of towns, cities and trade from c. 1000 CE leads to the cities and markets we live with now.

How 600-1750 CE links to life today

THEN: 600-1750 CE

NOW: modern-day life



History is not just about the past. Many features of daily life in Australia today grew out of this span.

Connections diagram: Magna Carta (1215 CE) and early parliaments lead to the Westminster system today; the spread of major worldviews leads to religious holidays kept in Australia today (Christmas, Easter, Eid, Diwali, Vesak); and the growth of towns, cities and trade leads to cities and markets today.

Sources: British Library, 'Magna Carta' (translation of the 1215 text); UK Parliament, 'History of Parliament'; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Westminster system'; retrieved 24 August 2026.

Worked examples

Example 1 — with help

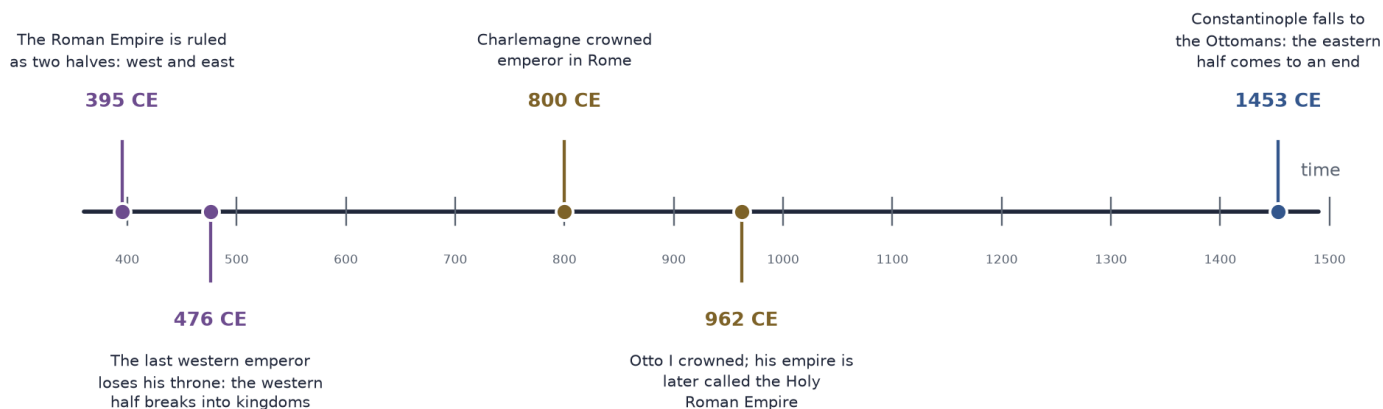
Build a timeline of the Roman world's transformation using these five dated moments: 395 CE, the empire is ruled as two halves; 476 CE, the last western emperor loses his throne; 800 CE, Charlemagne crowned emperor in Rome; 962 CE, Otto I crowned; 1453 CE, Constantinople falls to the Ottomans.

Working	Comment
Draw a line and mark it from 300 CE to 1500 CE, with a tick every 100 years.	Equal spacing matters: 100 years = the same gap, every time.
Place 395 CE: the empire is ruled as two halves.	395 sits just before the 400 tick.
Place 476 CE: the last western emperor loses his throne.	A change : the western half breaks into kingdoms.
Place 800 CE and 962 CE: Charlemagne, then Otto I, crowned emperor.	New empires claim the Roman name — a change with continuity in it.
Place 1453 CE: Constantinople falls to the Ottomans.	The eastern half comes to an end — 977 years after 476 CE.
Label each moment change or continuity, title the	Check: $395 < 476 < 800 < 962 < 1453$. ✓

timeline, and check the order.

The finished timeline looks like this:

Worked Example 1 - five moments in the transformation of the Roman world



Finished timeline for Worked Example 1 with five dated moments in the Roman world's transformation: 395, 476, 800, 962 and 1453 CE, labelled above and below the line.

Example 2 — with help

Rank these three developments for historical significance: the spread of Islam (from 622 CE); the printing press (c. 1450 CE); Magna Carta (1215 CE). Use the four criteria from Theory step 7.

How many lives did it change at the time? Spread of Islam: high. Printing press: medium. Magna Carta: low (it first protected only free men in one kingdom).

How long did its effects last? All three: high.

Does it still matter today? All three: high.

How much change did it cause? Spread of Islam: high. Printing press: high. Magna Carta: medium.

Rank with reasons: 1st the spread of Islam, 2nd the printing press, 3rd Magna Carta.

Judge each development against each criterion.

Each still shapes the world more than 500 years on.

Festivals and faith; books and schools; parliaments and law.

Weigh change as well as reach and lasting power.

"I rank the spread of Islam first. It changed the lives of millions of people across three continents, its effects lasted the whole span and beyond, and they can still be seen today in law, festivals and daily life."

A model of the finished ranking looks like this. Another student could put these in a different order and still argue well — the reasons are what count.

Ranking the significance of developments - a model

Criteria for judging significance	The spread of Islam (from 622 CE)	The printing press (c. 1450 CE)	Magna Carta (1215 CE)
How many lives did it change at the time?	high	medium	low
How long did its effects last?	high	high	high
Does it still matter today?	high	high	high
How much change did it cause?	high	high	medium
Rank (with reasons)	1st	2nd	3rd

Model sentence: "I rank the spread of Islam first. It changed the lives of millions of people across three continents, its effects lasted the whole span and beyond, and they can still be seen today in law, festivals and daily life."

There is no single right order. What matters is using the criteria and giving your reasons. Another student could put these in a different order and still argue well.

Model ranking table scoring the spread of Islam, the printing press and Magna Carta against four significance criteria (lives changed at the time, lasting effects, still matters today, amount of change), ranked 1st, 2nd and 3rd with a model reasons sentence.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. Say whether each statement shows a **change** or a **continuity** in the Roman world. (a) In 476 CE the last western emperor loses his throne. (b) Monasteries and churches keep Latin and learning alive. (c) In 800 CE Charlemagne is crowned emperor in Rome. (d) The eastern half keeps using Roman law.

Q2. Use the empires timeline figure. (a) Which empire began in 632 CE? (b) Two empires in the figure were conquered by the Spanish in the 1500s. Name them and the year each fell. (c) Name one empire from the figure that was still standing in 1750 CE.

Q3. Match each worldview to a festival kept in Australia today: (1) Christianity, (2) Islam, (3) Hinduism, (4) Buddhism — (a) Eid, (b) Vesak, (c) Christmas, (d) Diwali.

Q4. Use the feudal pyramid figure. (a) Who sits at the top of the pyramid? (b) What do the farmers give? (c) What is given *down* the pyramid?

Q5. Put these moments in order, from first to last: (a) Charlemagne crowned emperor in Rome; (b) Constantinople falls to the Ottomans; (c) the Roman Empire is ruled as two halves; (d) the last western emperor loses his throne; (e) Otto I crowned.

Q6. Use the expansion figure. (a) Which phase crossed the Atlantic in ocean-going ships? (b) Which phase began when Genghis Khan united his people in 1206 CE? (c) Give one thing the figure lists as a result of expansion.

Practice on your own

Q7. Describe two changes *and* one continuity in the Roman world between 395 CE and 1453 CE.

Q8. Rank the printing press (c. 1450 CE) and Magna Carta (1215 CE) for historical significance. Use at least two criteria, and give reasons for your order.

Q9. Choose one development from this section and describe its connection to life in Australia today.

Q10. Choose one period of new ideas from this section. Explain what was new about it, and name one person or invention from it.

Inquiry task (source-based)

Study Source A, then answer parts (a)–(d).

Reading a primary source from 1215 CE

SOURCE A

Magna Carta, clause 39 - agreed at Runnymede, England, 15 June 1215 CE

"No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land."

Translation of the 1215 text by the British Library.

royal seal
of King John

WHAT IT SAYS

In plain words: the king promised that no free man would be punished except by the law and a fair judgement.

WHAT KIND OF SOURCE IS IT?

It was made in 1215 CE, at the time of the events it records - so it is a primary source. King John issued it under pressure from rebellious barons, so it shows what the barons wanted the king to promise.

Source card: Magna Carta, clause 39, agreed at Runnymede, England, 15 June 1215 CE — "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land." Translation of the 1215 text by the British Library. The card notes that it is a primary source, issued by King John under pressure from rebellious barons.

Q11. (a) What kind of source is Source A — primary or secondary? Give one reason. (b) In your own words, what does clause 39 promise? (c) Who put pressure on King John to issue it? (d) Describe one connection between the promise in Source A and the Westminster system in Australia today.

Answers

Q1. (a) Change. (b) Continuity. (c) Change. (d) Continuity. **Q2.** (a) The Islamic Caliphate. (b) The Aztec Empire, 1521 CE; the Inca Empire, 1533 CE. (c) Any one of: the Holy Roman Empire, the Japanese shogunate, the Ottoman Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Mughal Empire. **Q3.** 1–(c), 2–(a), 3–(d), 4–(b). **Q4.** (a) The king. (b) Work on the land and a share of the crops. (c) Land and protection. **Q5.** c, d, a, e, b (395, 476, 800, 962, 1453 CE). **Q6.** (a) The European navigators. (b) The Mongols. (c) Any one listed result, e.g. new towns and trade routes; goods, people and ideas moving along the Silk Road; world trade linking the continents. **Q7.** Any two changes and one continuity from Theory step 1, e.g. changes: the western half broke into kingdoms after 476 CE; Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453 CE; continuity: Roman law, Latin and the Christian church carried on. **Q8.** Any order with reasons tied to at least two criteria. **Q9.** Any development with a true modern link, e.g. Magna Carta and early parliaments → the Westminster system in Australia; the spread of worldviews → Christmas, Easter, Eid, Diwali and Vesak kept in Australia. **Q10.** Any period with its new idea and a named referent, e.g. the Scientific Revolution: testing ideas with observation and experiment; Copernicus (1543) or Newton (1687). **Q11.** (a) Primary — it was made in 1215 CE, at the time of the events it records. (b) The king promised that no free man would be punished except by the law and a fair judgement. (c) Rebellious barons. (d) In Australia's Westminster system too, even the government must follow the law — the same idea as clause 39.

Fully-worked solutions

Q1. A change is something new or different; a continuity is something that carries on. (a) An emperor losing his throne ends the western half's line of emperors — **change**. (b) Latin and learning carrying on from the Roman world — **continuity**. (c) A new emperor crowned in the west, centuries after the last one — **change**. (d) Roman law still in use in the east — **continuity**.

Q2. (a) The bar starting at 632 CE is the Islamic Caliphate. (b) The Aztec Empire (1325–1521 CE) and the Inca Empire (1438–1533 CE) — both bars end with the Spanish conquest, 1521 and 1533 CE. (c) Bars with an arrow were still standing in 1750 CE: for example, the Ottoman Empire.

Q3. Christianity keeps Christmas (1–c); Islam keeps Eid (2–a); Hinduism keeps Diwali (3–d); Buddhism keeps Vesak (4–b).

Q4. (a) The king sits at the top. (b) The farmers work the land and give work and a share of the crops. (c) Land and protection are given down the pyramid (from the king to the lords, and from the lords to the soldiers and farmers).

Q5. From first to last: (c) 395 CE, two halves; (d) 476 CE, the last western emperor loses his throne; (a) 800 CE, Charlemagne crowned; (e) 962 CE, Otto I crowned; (b) 1453 CE, Constantinople falls. So c, d, a, e, b.

Q6. (a) The European navigators — ocean-going ships, from 1492 CE. (b) The Mongols — Genghis Khan united them in 1206 CE. (c) For example: Europe and Asia connected, with goods, people and ideas moving along the Silk Road.

Q7. *Change 1:* in 476 CE the last western emperor lost his throne, and the western half broke into kingdoms. *Change 2:* in 1453 CE Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, ending the eastern half. *Continuity:* through both, Roman law, Latin and the Christian church carried on — in churches and monasteries in the west, and in the eastern Roman Empire itself.

Q8. Model answer (one of many): rank the printing press first. *Criterion 1 (lives changed at the time):* printing made books far cheaper, so learning spread to thousands of people across Europe — high. *Criterion 2 (still matters today):* cheap printed words lead straight to our books, schools and newspapers — high. Magna Carta also scores high for lasting effects, but at the time it protected only free men in one kingdom, so its reach at the time was smaller. Reasons, not the order, are what count.

Q9. Model answer: Magna Carta (1215 CE) promised that even the king must follow the law. Early parliaments (1265 and 1295 CE) grew from the same idea. In Australia today, the Westminster system works the same way: elected members make laws in parliament, and even the government must follow the law.

Q10. Model answer: the Scientific Revolution. What was new was testing ideas about the natural world with observation and experiment, instead of accepting old answers. Named referents: Copernicus (1543), who showed the Earth moves around the Sun, and Newton (1687), who described the laws of motion.

Q11. (a) Source A is a **primary source**: it was made in 1215 CE, at the time of the events it records. (b) In plain words, clause 39 promises that no free man will be punished except by the law and a fair judgement. (c) King John issued it under pressure from rebellious barons, so it shows what the barons wanted the king to promise. (d) The promise that even the ruler is under the law carries on in Australia's Westminster system today: parliament makes the law, and the government itself must follow it.

Life in the pre-modern world: structure, contact and conflict

Section 1E · Strand: Historical Knowledge and Understanding · Sub-strand: Overview: Levels 7 and 8 **Owens:** VC2HH8K05 **Draws on:** .E01 .E02 .E03 .E04 .E05 (all five taught in this section; the mapping is tagged in each part of the teaching sequence)

Teaching sequence

1. Two words to define before we start

Contested terms, defined before use.

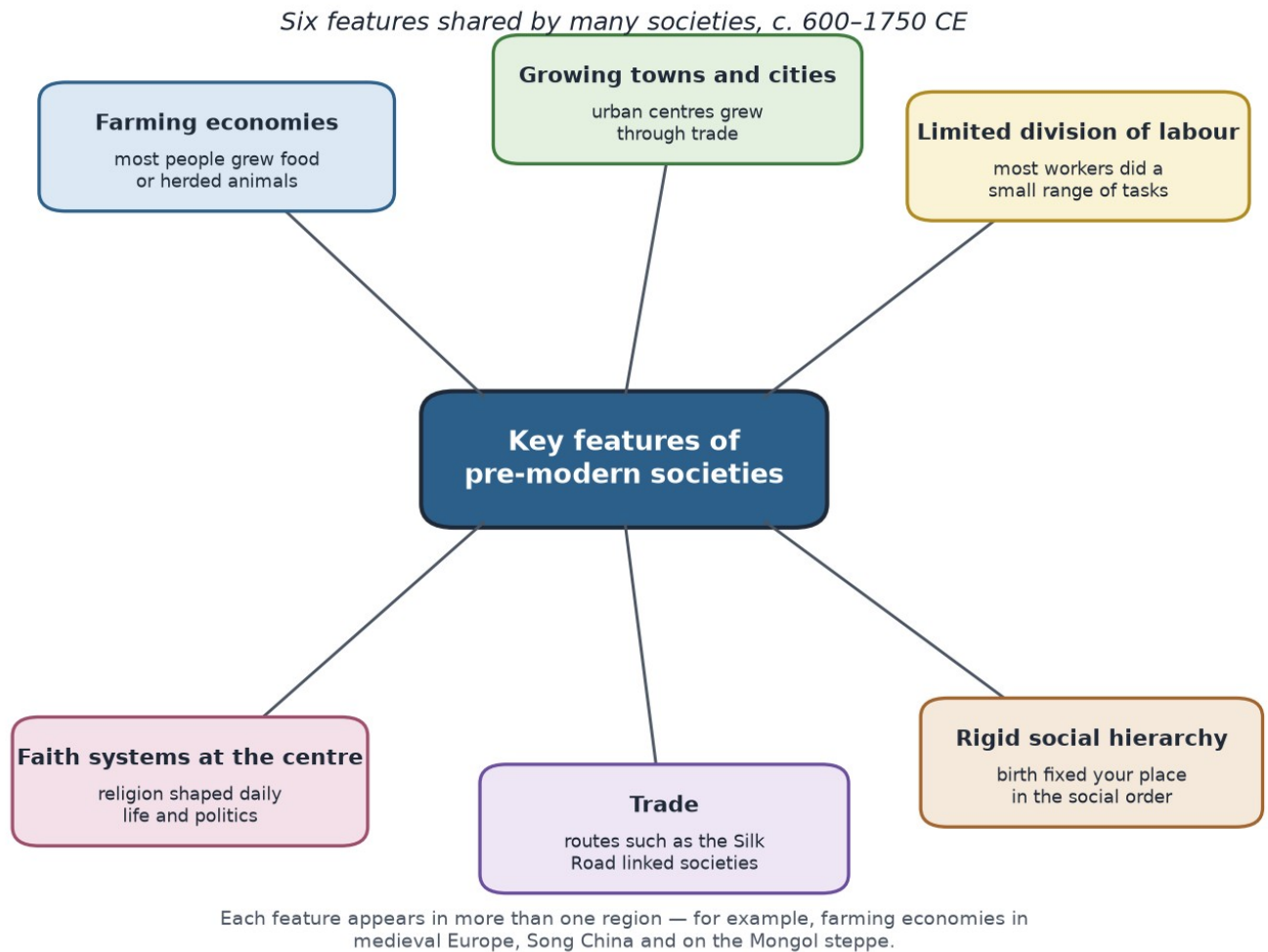
- **Pre-modern** — the Victorian Curriculum uses this term but does not define it. This section therefore treats it as **the period from about 600 CE to about 1750 CE** — after the ancient societies you meet in Chapter 2, and before the modern world you meet in Years 9 and 10. Every question here can be answered using that definition alone.
- **Medieval** — from Latin words meaning “the middle age”. Historians use it for Europe’s middle period, roughly **500 CE to 1500 CE**.
- **Feudal / feudalism** — in its usual sense, a way of running society in which kings and lords hand out land in return for service and loyalty, and most people work that land in return for protection. Be aware that historians **contest** this word: Elizabeth A. R. Brown, in *The Tyranny of a Construct* (1974), argued that “feudalism” is a label invented centuries later that hides how varied real medieval arrangements were; historians who keep using it answer that it still usefully names the land-for-service ties that appear all through medieval records. Both views are serious ones. This section uses the word in its usual sense, stated above.

Sources: E. A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe” (1974), on the debate over the word feudalism: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feudalism; accessed 24 August 2026.

In this section you will look across many societies — medieval Europe, the Mongol steppe, Song China — and find the **features they shared**, the **structures that sorted people into ranks**, the **contact and conflict** between them, and the **legacies** they left in your world today.

2. Six features of pre-modern societies .E01

Historians who compare societies between 600 and 1750 CE keep meeting the same patterns. Figure 1 shows six of them.



Concept web of the six features shared by pre-modern societies: farming economies, growing towns and cities, rigid social hierarchy, limited division of labour, trade, and faith systems at the centre

Figure 1. Six features shared by many societies, c. 600–1750 CE.

Farming economies. These were *agrarian* economies — “agrarian” simply means based on farming. The Domesday Book, a survey of England’s land and people ordered by King William I and finished in 1086, shows most people at work as farm workers, not as traders or crafts workers.

Growing towns and cities. Where trade was busy, *urban* centres grew. Around 1300 CE the Venetian trader Marco Polo wrote his *Travels* of his time in China, where he called Hangzhou “the finest and noblest city in the world”. By then Hangzhou was one of the largest cities on Earth.

Limited division of labour. *Division of labour* means splitting work into different jobs. Pre-modern societies had little of it: most workers did the same few tasks — growing food, herding animals — while only a small number were specialists, such as smiths, cloth-makers and scribes.

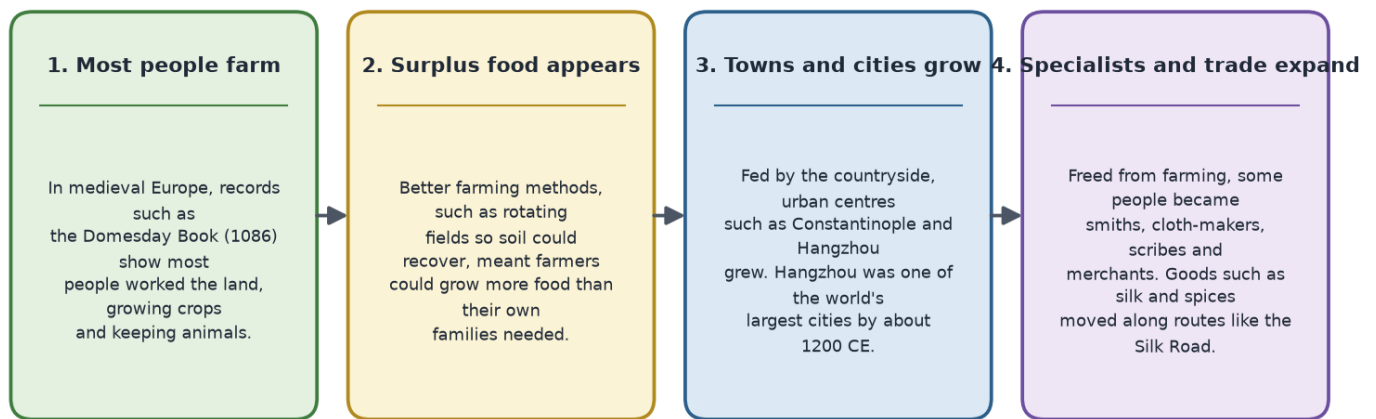
Rigid social hierarchy. A *hierarchy* is a ranking in which some people stand above others. In most pre-modern societies your rank was fixed at birth: a farm worker’s child became a farm worker.

Trade. Long routes linked far-apart regions. The Silk Road carried silk, spices and ideas between China, India, the Islamic world and Europe, and ships crossed the Indian Ocean with similar cargo.

Faith systems at the centre. Religion shaped law, learning, art, the calendar and politics. Rulers often claimed their right to rule came from God — an idea later called the *divine right of kings*.

Figure 2 shows how these features fitted together: everything began with the farm.

How a farming economy supported towns, specialists and trade



Historians describe these economies as agrarian: wealth began with the land, and every other part of society rested on the food farmers produced.

Flow diagram in four steps: most people farm, surplus food appears, towns and cities grow, specialists and trade expand, with real examples such as the Domesday Book and Hangzhou

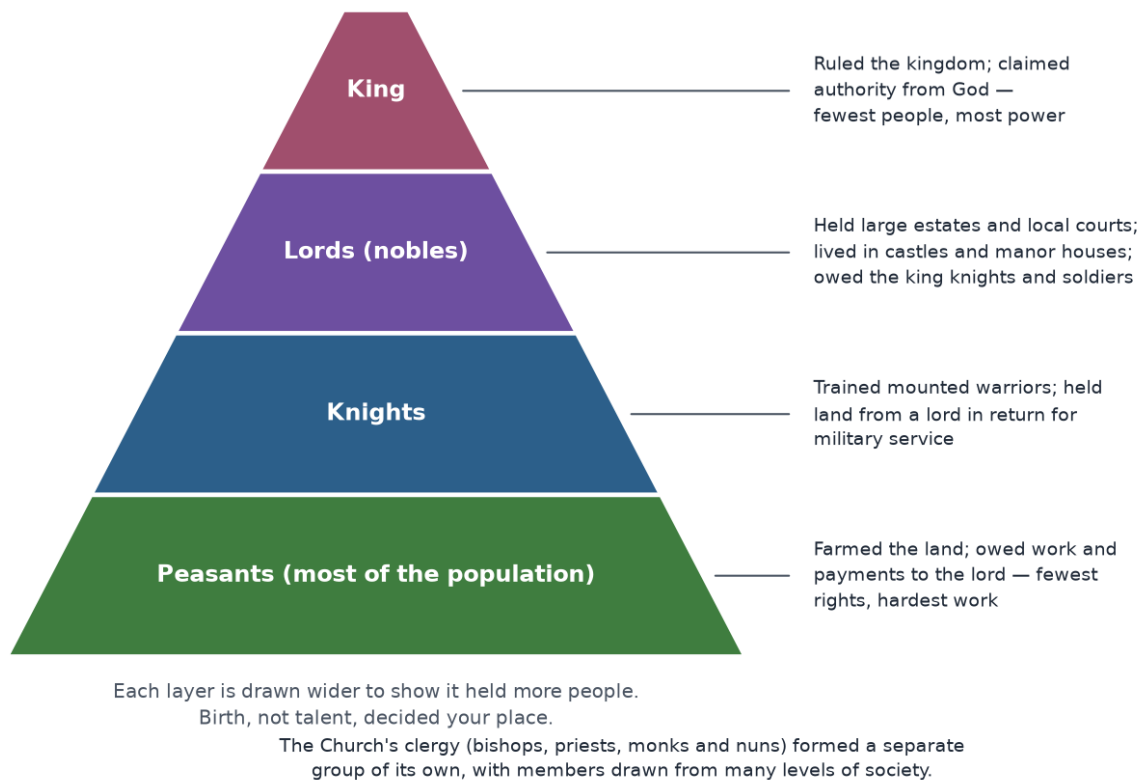
Figure 2. How a farming economy supported towns, specialists and trade.

Sources: the Domesday Book survey of 1086: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domesday_Book; Marco Polo's Travels and Hangzhou: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Travels_of_Marco_Polo and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hangzhou; accessed 24 August 2026.

3. Social structures: a world sorted by birth .E02

Medieval Europe. Adalbero, a French bishop writing around 1025 CE, sorted everyone he knew into three groups: “some pray, some fight, some work”. His three-way split is a famous early picture of Europe’s social **hierarchy** (Figure 3).

The social pyramid of medieval Europe



Labelled pyramid of medieval Europe's social hierarchy with the king at the narrow top, then lords, then knights, and peasants as the wide base, with notes on each group's role and status

Figure 3. The social pyramid of medieval Europe.

Roles and **status** differed sharply between groups. A *lord* held a large estate and his own local court; a *knight* was a trained mounted warrior who held land from a lord in return for fighting; a *peasant* farmed the land and owed the lord work and payments. At the bottom, a *serf* was a peasant bound to the land, not free to leave the estate without the lord's leave. The Church's clergy — bishops, priests, monks and nuns — formed a group of their own, with members drawn from many ranks.

The Mongol steppe. After 1206 the Mongols built the largest land empire the world had yet seen — an *empire* is a group of lands and peoples ruled by one strong ruler. Rank there followed skill and loyalty more than birth. The *khan* led; below him were tribe leaders and then herders, who were free but lower in standing. While men were at war, women ran the camps and herds, and several women held real power — Sorghaghtani Beki, mother of Kublai Khan, was one of the most respected rulers of her age.

Song China (960–1279 CE). Rank could be earned: men who passed the state examinations became *scholar-officials*, the empire's governors. Farmers stood low in rank yet were praised in theory as the backbone of the empire.

Figure 4 compares these three societies side by side. Notice what is the same (everywhere, a few people held most power) and what differs (how far a person could rise).

Society	Social group	Role	Status
Medieval Europe (c. 500-1500)	Lord (noble)	Ran a large estate; kept order and held local court	High — owned land, led in war
	Peasant	Grew crops and kept animals; owed work to the lord	Low — few rights, little land
Mongol Empire (1206-1368)	Khan	Led the empire; made laws and led armies	Highest ruler
	Herder	Moved with flocks of horses, sheep and camels	Free but lower than leaders
Song China (960-1279)	Scholar-official	Governed provinces; passed state examinations	High — chosen by exam, not birth
	Farmer	Grew rice and other crops; paid tax in grain	Low — most of the people

In medieval Europe your place was fixed at birth; in Song China the examinations let some men rise, and on the Mongol steppe skill and loyalty could raise a person's standing.

Table comparing social groups, their roles and their status in three societies: medieval Europe, the Mongol Empire and Song China

Figure 4. Social groups, roles and status in three pre-modern societies.

Sources: Adalbero's three-group picture (c. 1025 CE): en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estates_of_the_realm; Mongol rule and Sorghaghtani Beki: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol_Empire and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorghaghtani_Beki; Song China's state examinations: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination; accessed 24 August 2026.

4. Contact and conflict: why societies fought .E03

Contact between societies meant trade and travel — and often war. Historians sort the causes of pre-modern conflict into three kinds: **religious**, **economic** and **dynastic** (Figure 5).

Cause	What it means	Example
Religious	Groups clash over beliefs, holy places or the spread of a faith	The Crusades (from 1095): armies from Christian Europe marched to take Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians, Muslims and Jews
Economic	Groups clash over land, wealth, trade routes or taxes	England's Peasants' Revolt (1381): heavy new taxes helped drive ordinary people to march on London
Dynastic	Rival families clash over who has the right to rule	The Norman Conquest (1066): William of Normandy and Harold Godwinson both claimed the English throne after King Edward died

Most real conflicts mixed several causes: the Crusades also involved land and trade, and the Norman Conquest also promised its followers wealth and estates.

Table of the three causes of pre-modern conflict — religious, economic and dynastic — each with a meaning and a real example: the Crusades, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the Norman Conquest of 1066

Figure 5. Three causes of conflict in the pre-modern world.

Religious. In 1095 CE Pope Urban II called on Christians at Clermont to win back Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians, Muslims and Jews. The wars that followed — the *Crusades*, as they were later named — ran for nearly two centuries. Each side believed its cause was right, and each side's faith made the conflict feel worth dying for: that is why religious wars were so hard to end.

Economic. Wealth, land, trade routes and taxes started many wars and revolts. The Italian sea-cities of Venice and Genoa fought each other over trade in the 1300s, and in 1381 a heavy new tax on every person helped drive England's ordinary people to march on London in the Peasants' Revolt.

Dynastic. A *dynasty* is a ruling family that passes power from parent to child; when two people claimed the same throne, war often followed. In 1066 King Edward of England died with no son to follow him. Harold Godwinson took the throne, but William, Duke of Normandy, claimed it too. William won the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066 and became King William I.

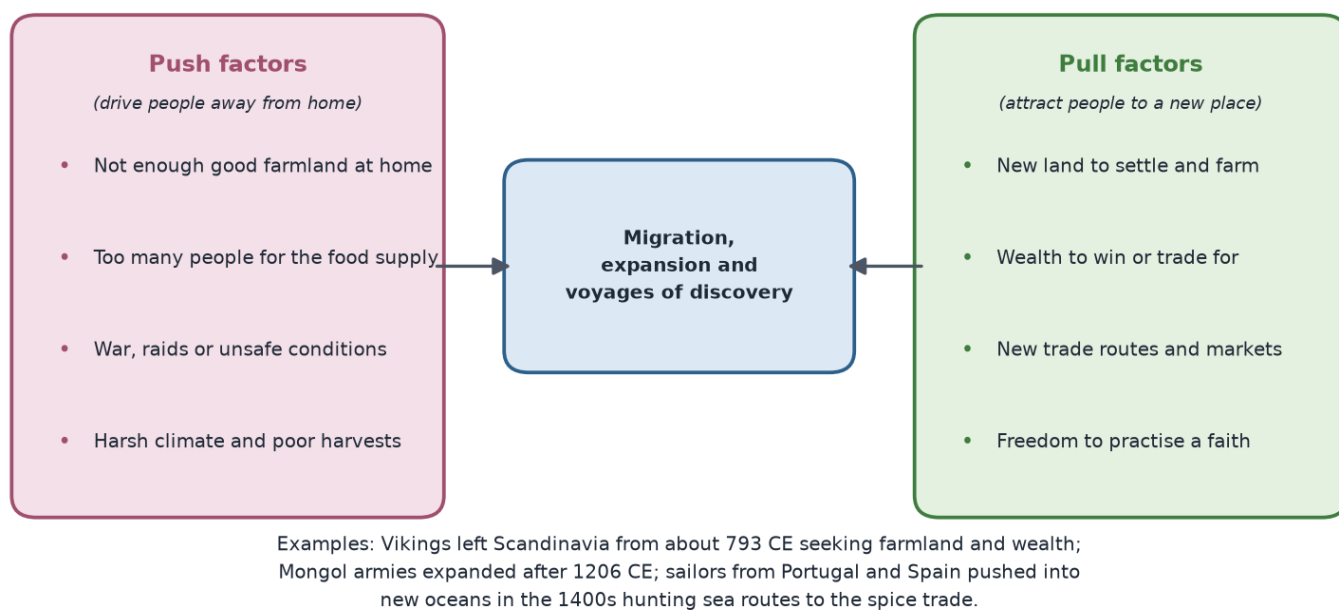
Most real conflicts mixed causes. The Crusades were also about land and trade routes; William's followers also expected rich English estates. Sorting causes into kinds is a tool for thinking: real wars rarely fit just one box.

Sources: Pope Urban II at Clermont (1095) and the Crusades: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Clermont and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades; the Peasants' Revolt (1381) and the tax that helped cause it: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peasants%27_Revolt; Venice's trade rivalry with Genoa: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Venice; the 1066 succession and the Battle of Hastings: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Conquest; accessed 24 August 2026.

5. On the move: migration, expansion and discovery . E04

Why did whole peoples move? Historians use **push factors** (things that drive people away from home) and **pull factors** (things that attract them somewhere new) (Figure 6).

Push and pull factors: why people moved



Push and pull diagram: on the left, push factors such as poor farmland, population pressure, war and harsh climate; on the right, pull factors such as new land, wealth, trade routes and religious freedom; both feed into migration, expansion and voyages of discovery

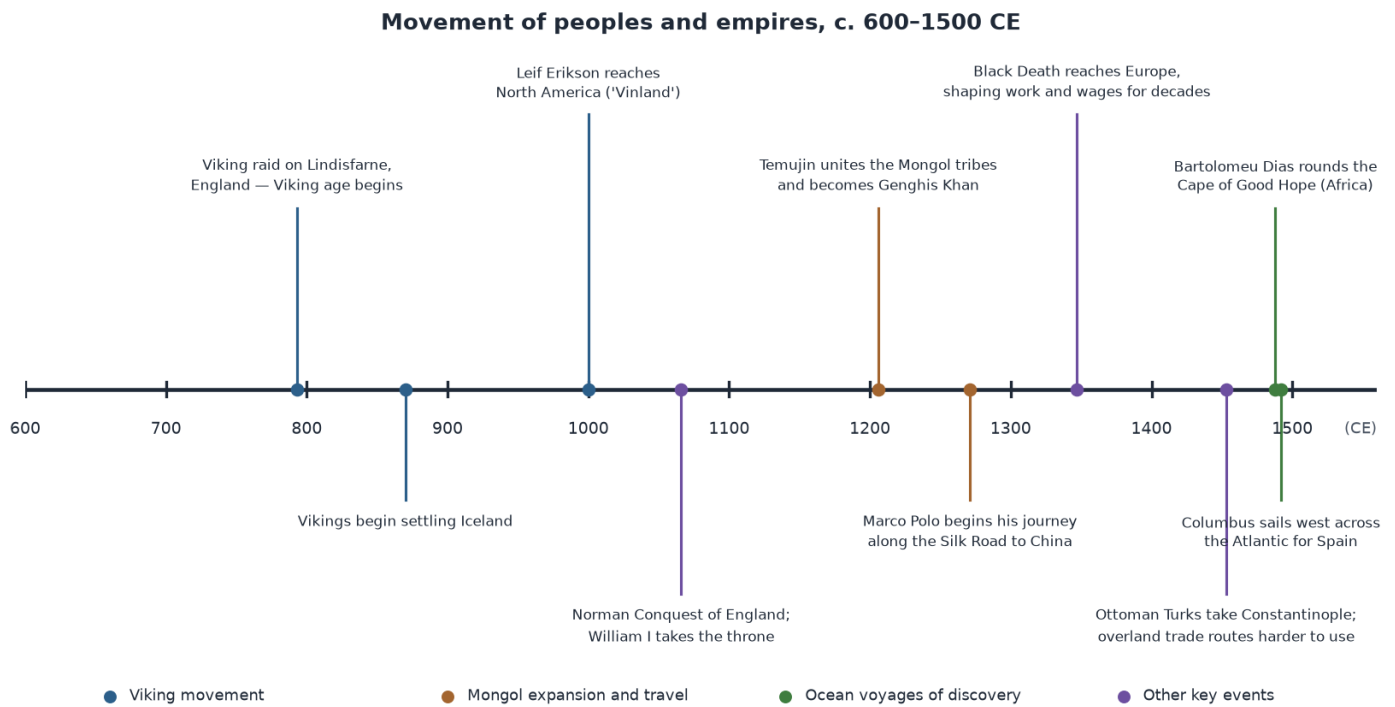
Figure 6. Push and pull factors: why people moved.

The Vikings. From about 793 CE, Norse seafarers left Scandinavia. Pushed by scarce farmland at home and pulled by reports of rich, weakly defended towns, they raided, traded and settled: Iceland from about 870 CE, Greenland from about 985 CE, and — with Leif Erikson around 1000 CE — the coast of North America.

The Mongols. After Temujin united the tribes in 1206 CE and took the title Genghis Khan, Mongol armies expanded across Asia. Pull factors included rich farming cities to tax and trade routes to control; a secure, taxed Silk Road also let traders such as Marco Polo travel its length.

Journeys of discovery. In 1453 CE the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople, and European states that wanted the spice trade began seeking new sea routes. Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic for Spain in 1492, and Vasco da Gama reached India by sea in 1498. Better ships and the magnetic compass — a Chinese invention — made such voyages possible.

Figure 7 places these movements on one timeline.



Timeline from 600 to 1500 CE marking Viking raids and settlement, the Norman Conquest, Genghis Khan's union of the Mongols, Marco Polo's journey, the Black Death, the fall of Constantinople and the first ocean voyages of discovery

Figure 7. Movement of peoples and empires, c. 600–1500 CE.

Sources: Viking raids and settlement, Iceland, Greenland and Leif Erikson: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking_Age and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leif_Erikson; Genghis Khan and Mongol expansion: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan; the fall of Constantinople (1453): en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Constantinople; the voyages of Dias (1488), Columbus (1492) and Vasco da Gama (1498): en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartolomeu_Dias, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Columbus and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasco_da_Gama; accessed 24 August 2026.

6. Legacies: the pre-modern world in your world .E05

A *legacy* is something handed down from the past that still shapes life today. Much of your world was built on pre-modern foundations (Figure 8).

Legacy	Pre-modern origin	Where we see it today
Limits on rulers' power	Magna Carta (1215) forced the English king to accept limits on his power	Parliaments, courts and charters of rights, including Australia's Bill of Rights
Universities	The University of Bologna (1088) and teaching at Oxford from about 1096	Universities with degrees, faculties and graduation ceremonies
Banking and paper money	Italian bankers' bills of exchange; paper money used in Song China and Mongol-ruled China	Banks, banknotes and electronic payments
Faith and holidays	Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism shaped law, art, architecture and festivals	Religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Ramadan in many countries
Technology	Gunpowder, printing and the compass in China; wind and water power in the Islamic world	Printed books, navigation tools and engineering
Architecture	Castles such as Warwick Castle and cathedrals such as Notre Dame	Preserved heritage sites studied and visited today

A legacy is something handed down from the past that still shapes life today.

Table matching six legacies of the pre-modern world — limits on rulers' power, universities, banking and paper money, faith and holidays, technology, and architecture — to their origins and to where they appear today

Figure 8. Legacies of the pre-modern world in the contemporary world.

When English barons forced King John to seal Magna Carta in 1215, they made a simple point with a long future: **the ruler too must obey the law**. Parliaments and charters of rights — including Australia's Westminster system of government — grow from that point. Universities began at Bologna (1088) and Oxford (teaching by about 1096); banks and paper money — first used in Song China and described with wonder by Marco Polo in Mongol-ruled China — became the world's payment systems; the festivals and holidays of the great faith systems still order our calendar; and Chinese inventions such as printing, gunpowder and the compass reshaped every later age.

This overview is the map the rest of the book builds on. Chapter 2 steps back to the ancient societies that came before this period. Chapters 3 and 4 return to two of its societies — medieval Europe and the Mongol world — for a closer look. Chapters 5 and 6 build the historian's skills: asking questions, ordering events in time, and reading sources.

Sources: the universities of Bologna (1088) and Oxford (teaching by about 1096):

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Bologna and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Oxford; paper money in Song and Mongol-ruled China: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banknote; Chinese printing, gunpowder and the compass: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Great_Inventions; the Westminster system: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_system; accessed 24 August 2026. Magna Carta, Warwick Castle, Notre Dame Cathedral and the Silk Road are the curriculum's own named referents and need no source line.

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: classifying features of a pre-modern society (.E01)

Classify each real feature below as **economic** (money, work, trade), **social** (ranks, roles, rights), **religious** (faith systems) or **political** (power and rule).

Working	Comment
(a) The Silk Road carried silk and spices west to Europe.	Goods moving between regions is trade → economic .
(b) A serf could not leave the estate without the lord's leave.	A rule fixing a person's rank and rights → social .
(c) The Church collected a tenth of each year's harvest, the <i>tithe</i> .	A faith system raising its income from the faithful → religious .
(d) William I ordered the Domesday survey to learn who owed him what.	A ruler measuring his power to tax → political .

∴ the four features sort as: economic, social, religious, political.

Worked example 2 — with help: sorting the causes of 1066 (.E03)

Sort the causes of the Norman Conquest of 1066 into the three kinds from Figure 5: **religious, economic, dynastic**.

Working	Comment
King Edward died in January 1066 with no son to follow him, so two rivals claimed the throne.	A fight over who inherits the crown → dynastic .
England was rich — good farms, busy towns, a strong silver coinage — and a conqueror would take it all.	A prize of wealth and land → economic .
The Pope backed William's claim and gave him a blessed banner to carry.	A faith system lending weight to one side → religious .

∴ 1066 carried all three kinds of cause at once — which is why most real conflicts need more than one box.

Practice tasks

Practice with help

Q1. (.E01) Copy the table and, using this section, give one piece of evidence for each feature.

Feature	Evidence from this section
Farming economies	e.g. the Domesday Book (1086) shows most people farming
Growing towns and cities	
Limited division of labour	
Rigid social hierarchy	
Trade	
Faith systems at the centre	

Q2. (.E01) Figure 2 shows four steps in order. (a) Explain in one sentence why step 2 (surplus food) makes step 3 (growing towns) possible. (b) Which step explains why a scribe or a smith could exist without farming?

Q3. (.E02) Look at Figure 3. (a) Which group was the largest? (b) Which group held the most power? (c) Name one group living in medieval Europe that the pyramid does not show.

Q4. (.E02) Use Figure 4. (a) In which society could a man rise in rank by passing examinations? (b) In which society could skill and loyalty raise a person's standing? (c) In which society was a person's rank fixed at birth?

Q5. (.E03) Sort each conflict under **religious, economic** or **dynastic**: (a) two kingdoms war over who inherits a throne; (b) one port city attacks a rival over a spice route; (c) an army marches to seize a city its faith calls holy.

Q6. (.E04) Put each Viking factor from below under **push** or **pull** in a copy of Figure 6: scarce farmland at home; stories of rich, weakly guarded towns overseas; poor harvests; news of empty land in Iceland.

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E01) Explain why historians describe pre-modern economies as agrarian. Use two pieces of evidence from this section.

Q8. (.E02) Choose one society from Figure 4. Describe the role and status of two of its social groups, and explain how their daily lives differed.

Q9. (.E03) Choose one conflict from this section (the Crusades, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, or the Norman Conquest). Explain its causes using at least two of the three cause kinds from Figure 5.

Q10. (.E05) Choose two legacies from Figure 8 that you can see in Australia today. For each, state where it began and how it reaches you now.

Source-based inquiry task

Q11. (.E02, links to the source skills of Chapter 5) Read the adapted source and answer the parts below.

“The human race is divided in three: some pray, some fight, and the rest work. The three are joined together: each serves the others, and while one looks after the other two, all three are one.” — Adalbero, Bishop of Laon, writing to King Robert of the Franks, c. 1025 CE (adapted)

- (a) Which three groups does Adalbero name?
 - (b) Adalbero was a bishop. How might his own place in society shape what he wrote?
 - (c) Name two groups living in medieval Europe that the three-way split leaves out.
 - (d) Is this a primary or a secondary source? Give one reason for your answer. (A *primary source* is one made at the time being studied; a *secondary source* is one made later, using primary sources. Chapter 5 builds these ideas further.)
-

Answers

Q1. Growing towns and cities — Marco Polo’s Hangzhou, one of the largest cities on Earth by about 1300 CE. Limited division of labour — most workers farmed while only a few were smiths, cloth-makers or scribes. Rigid social hierarchy — a serf’s child stayed a serf; rank was fixed at birth. Trade — the Silk Road carried silk and spices between China and Europe. Faith systems at the centre — rulers claimed their right to rule came from God.

Q2. (a) With spare food to sell, not everyone had to farm, so people could gather in towns to trade. (b) Step 4 — specialists and trade expand.

Q3. (a) Peasants. (b) The king (with the lords). (c) Any of: the clergy, women as a group, townspeople, Jews and Muslims.

Q4. (a) Song China. (b) The Mongol Empire. (c) Medieval Europe.

Q5. (a) Dynastic. (b) Economic. (c) Religious.

Q6. Push: scarce farmland at home; poor harvests. Pull: stories of rich, weakly guarded towns overseas; news of empty land in Iceland.

Q7–Q10 — see the model responses below.

Q11. (a) Those who pray (clergy), those who fight (warriors), those who work (farm workers). (b) As a bishop — one of “those who pray” — he gave his own group the first and leading place; a warrior writing might have put fighters first. (c) Any two of: women as a group, townspeople and traders, Jews and Muslims. (d) Primary — written c. 1025 CE by a person living in the society he describes.

Model responses

Q7. An economy is agrarian when its wealth begins with the farm. First, the Domesday Book of 1086 shows most people in England working the land rather than trading or crafting, so food production was the main work of society. Second, Figure 2 shows that towns, specialists and trade all rested on the surplus food farmers grew — without it, none of the rest could exist. Because nearly all wealth began as crops and herds, historians call these economies agrarian.

Q8. In medieval Europe, a lord held a large estate and his own local court: his role was to rule land, keep order and supply knights to the king, and his status was high — he lived in a castle or manor house and owned the land. A peasant’s role was to farm that land and pay the lord in work and goods; the peasant’s status was low, with few rights and little land of their own. Their daily lives therefore differed completely: the lord spent his days on rule, law and war, while the peasant’s year followed the crops, from planting to harvest.

Q9. The Norman Conquest of 1066 had dynastic and economic causes (with a religious thread as well). Dynastic: King Edward died in January 1066 with no son, so Harold Godwinson took the throne while William of Normandy claimed it for himself — two rivals, one crown. Economic: England was a rich prize of farms, towns and silver coinage, and William’s followers expected English estates as their reward. Because a fight over the throne and a rich prize both caused the war, 1066 fits two of the three boxes in Figure 5.

Q10. Two legacies visible in Australia today are (1) limits on rulers’ power, which began when English barons forced King John to seal Magna Carta in 1215 and reach Australia through the Westminster system of parliament and courts, where even the government must obey the law; and (2) universities, which began at Bologna in 1088 and Oxford by about 1096 and reach me now as Australian universities with the same degrees, faculties and graduation ceremonies.

Q11 (extended model). Adalbero names three groups — those who pray, those who fight and those who work — and claims each serves the others. His picture is useful evidence of how a churchman of c. 1025 wanted society to look, ordered and joined. It is less useful as a full census: it leaves out women as a group, the growing townspeople, and the Jews and Muslims of medieval Europe. As a primary source written from inside the society, it tells us both what one powerful man believed and — by its silences — who held the pen.