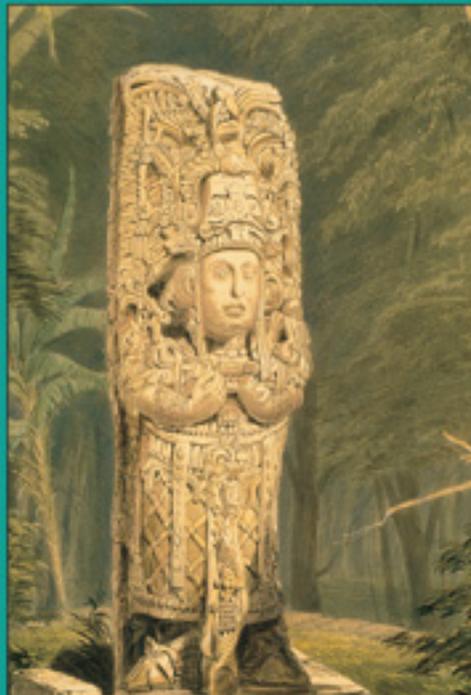


History
UNFOLDING

CIVILIZATIONS OF AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

Africa and the Americas Before the Modern Age

Africa and the Americas had little in common before the modern era brought them into direct contact with one another. What they did have in common was their separation from the huge Eurasian landmass where many other ancient civilizations arose and interacted, however indirectly.

What is remarkable about this is that, at only a slightly later date than in Eurasia, the same sorts of complex social organization began to appear in Africa and the Americas. Resting on a base of growing agricultural productivity, trade, cities, writing, art and architecture developed in Mesoamerica, along the line of the Andes in South America and in many parts of Africa, West Africa in particular. This fact suggests a worldwide evolution of social life arising out of factors that, perhaps, bind together all the members of the human species.

This booklet touches on just a few larger themes in this rich and varied story. It uses 12 visual displays to focus on these themes. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Out of the Eurasian Landmass

The maps and images here present an overview of the civilizations of both regions, and they focus attention on the special challenges faced by people building complex societies in Africa and the Americas.

Africa's Medieval Empires

A look at some of the art and artifacts of African civilizations from Mali and Timbuktu to Great Zimbabwe far to the south.

The Mayan Miracle

The focus here is on the early civilizations of Mesoamerica, the Mayan civilization in particular.

Incas and Aztecs

The Incas and Aztecs were both aggressive and warlike. But they were also impressive builders. The images focus both on their brutal rituals and practices and on their amazing accomplishments.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Civilizations of Africa and the Americas***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand that the earliest civilizations of Africa and the Americas faced special challenges because of their separation from the great Eurasian landmass.

Out of the Eurasian Landmass

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

The more complex societies we call “civilizations” first appeared along major river systems in Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and the Yellow River in China. Aside from specific natural advantages, these river systems had something else in common. All are located in the temperate zones of the huge Eurasian landmass. Egypt is in Africa, it is true, but in the far northeast where it is directly connected to Eurasia and not separated from it by the Sahara Desert. The links between these Eurasian civilizations were indirect. Yet a cross-fertilization of ideas and skills did occur. For Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas, the Sahara and the vast oceans made such cross-fertilization difficult or impossible. Yet in spite of this, complex civilizations did emerge in both places in the past.

Illustration 2

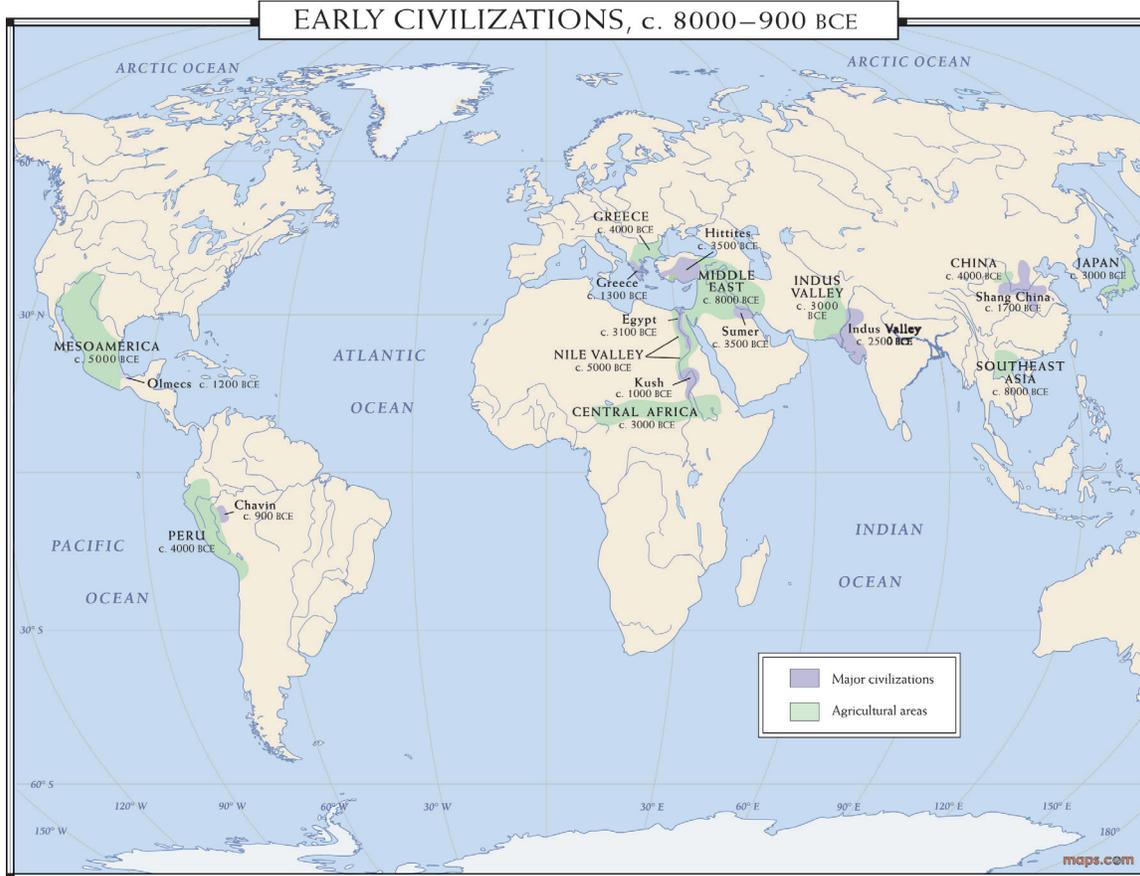
The Sahara did not isolate southern Africa forever. In the upper left here is the world’s largest mud mosque, built in the 14th century. It is not located in the heartlands of Islam in the Middle East. It is in Jenne on the southern edge of the Sahara. Jenne was a key city in ancient Mali, one of several medieval kingdoms that arose in Africa due to growing trade across the desert with Muslim merchants from North Africa and the Middle East. In the Americas meanwhile, encroaching jungles long hid evidence of the ancient civilizations that grew up there long ago, far from the Eurasian landmass. This illustration of a Mayan ruin testifies to the sophistication of those early American civilizations.

Illustration 3

Humanity first evolved on the African continent. And village-based tribes existed there for centuries. But as this map makes clear, more organized kingdoms also developed all over Africa. Some arose long before the time period covered by this map, mainly in the northeast where they were in contact with ancient Egypt. But from the 5th to the 15th centuries CE, many others emerged on the savannahs, vast grasslands just south of the Sahara, as the camel caravan trade with Muslim North Africa steadily expanded. A few kingdoms arose far to the south or along the East African coast. Again, as elsewhere, trade with the outside world was a key factor in this process.

Lesson 1—Out of the Eurasian Landmass

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. The word civilization is generally used for societies larger and more complex than a single village or a group of farming settlements. What generally do you think historians mean when they use the term civilization?
2. As this map shows, many of the earliest civilizations grew up on plains surrounding large rivers. Why do you suppose this was so?
3. Many of the earliest civilizations arose either in or next to the great Eurasian landmass. Can you name some of these civilizations? Why do you think so many of the earliest civilizations arose on that landmass?
4. As you can see, however, civilizations did arise in Africa and the Americas. What geographical and other factors might have made it harder for complex civilizations to arise outside of the Eurasian landmass?

Follow-up Activities

1. As in other places, rivers in Africa were also key geographical features in the rise of larger civilizations. Of particular importance was the Niger River. Learn more about it and the ancient cities that grew up near it or that depended on it in some way. Create a map and use it in a brief talk to the class.
2. **Small-group activity:** One great ancient civilization, Egypt, is somewhat of a link between the ancient Middle East, or West Asia, on the one hand, and Africa on the other. Egypt was also closely connected with two other ancient kingdoms not shown on this map, Nubia and Kush. Learn about all three of these civilizations and their connections to one another. Learn also about Egypt's trade and other ties with civilizations in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean. As a group, decide whether you think Egypt should be seen more as a civilization of the ancient Middle East or a civilization of Africa. Defend your decision in a talk to the class.