

WORLD HISTORY – Evolution, Periods, Regions

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PART I : The Nature and Evolution of the Field

World History World history has been gaining ground rapidly as a teaching field and, to a more limited extent, a framework for historical scholarship. Gains have been particularly marked in the United States, where world history courses began to expand from the 1980s onward at both college and secondary school level. But significant world history work also occurs in many other countries, with various specific definitions and varying degrees of acceptance. The result is, arguably, one of the most significant changes in historical approach of the past half-century. In many places, the expansion of geographical range is accompanied by a consistent effort to reduce disproportionate attention to the Western experience in favor of more analysis of developments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Priority Topics World history inevitably calls on a capacity to select and prioritize, and the choices involved are often difficult – as a breed, historians dislike leaving things out. Thus world history treatments frequently provoke debate about omissions – many accounts do not deal much, for example, with native North American experience before the arrival of Europeans. A number of world historians have objected to frequent use of the term civilization, partly because it seems to privilege some forms of human organization over others, partly because it may detract from attention to ongoing hunting and gathering and particularly nomadic societies. In other commentary, some historians worry that world history too often downplays the social aspect of the past – in areas like family history, or leisure history – in favor of more mainstream political and cultural topics. Yet some principles of inclusion and exclusion are essential, in such a comprehensive subject area.

Geographical Scope All serious world historians agree, however, on the need for a wide geographical framework. In the United States, the rise of world history teaching has played against an earlier tradition that emphasized Western civilization, and disagreements here linger. In 1994 the United States Senate condemned a new set of world history standards primarily because it did not give sufficient attention to the “achievements” of Western civilization. Debates in countries such as the Netherlands and Australia have also highlighted tensions between a desire for familiar national landmarks in the past, and the new need to have some historical grasp of the world as a whole. World history, rising after a century and a half when history teaching, and considerable scholarship, focused on bolstering the nation-state, inevitably prompts arguments, and many issues, even as the level of basic curriculum, have not been fully resolved. This has not, on the whole, prevented the continued expansion of the field.

Three Basic Approaches: Comparisons There are, arguably, three ways to approach serious world history, and of course they are often combined. First, the development of major and durable societies can be highlighted, linked through comparisons. This approach calls particular attention to the establishment of major cultural and political traditions, as in the emergence of distinctive patterns in China and India during the classical period, or the slightly later formation of an Islamic civilization centered in the Middle East and North Africa. Extensions of influence form a logical follow-up: China’s influence on other parts of East Asia, or the role of Byzantium in extending some features of the classical Mediterranean heritage into other parts of Eastern Europe, or, later still, the complex interactions between Western systems and developments in the Americas from the early modern period onward.

Contacts A second approach centers on contacts, cases where societies with differing traditions interact with each other through trade, missionary activity, migrations, or in some cases warfare. Division of world history into definable periods often centers on alterations in contact systems: for example, the shift from emphasis on Silk Roads trade and the limited exchanges involved, to the more extensive trading patterns of the centuries after 600 CE, centered heavily on the Indian Ocean. The brief Mongolian period, and then the early modern period and the inclusion of the Americas in contact patterns, advance this approach into later chronological eras. Figuring out how contacts occur, what mutual impacts they have and what adjustments they require, can organize a coherent approach to world history as a whole.

Transregional Patterns of Change A third pattern, finally, looks for more sweeping changes that run through a number of different societies, through contacts in part but through larger pressures as well. New challenges from disease and invasion, for example, affected much of Eurasia and North Africa at the end of the classical period, setting the stage for political change and above all for receptivity to new religious influences. More recently industrialization, initially though briefly a Western monopoly, becomes a global force, requiring a variety of adjustments well beyond the economy.

Combinations These three approaches, in some combination, support efforts to convey world history as a coherent (and manageable) subject, for example in textbooks or survey courses. On the whole, and quite appropriately, they emphasize change. Some world historians may like to linger on a particular part of the past – the age of the Silk Roads, or the importance of Spain after the Islamic conquest as a center for fruitful interactions among Islam, Christianity and Judaism. But for the most part world history seeks to highlight the ways in which the present has emerged from transformations in the past – transformations that have required adjustment in civilization traditions, or have altered contact patterns and even generated new contact processes and institutions.

Thematic Approaches As world history has matured as a field, it increasingly presents opportunities not only for recurrent efforts at comprehensive treatment and synthesis, but also for explorations of particular themes in a global historical framework. As Diego Olstein has recently noted, this interest in tracing specific aspects of the human experience – from food patterns to education to childhood—on the large world history canvass “provides historians... with the largest repertoire of contexts to interpret any historical phenomenon or development. “ Presented as world-historical phenomena, examination of key themes allows comparison among major societies but also analysis of the impact of key changes – for example, in contact patterns or widely-shared technologies – that societies in various regions have experienced over time.

This Collection The articles in this encyclopedia capture the increasing interest, and the resultant findings, in the thematic approach, applied to the wide geographical and chronological range of world history. They blend, in this sense, the growing familiarity with the overall world history context with more specialized interests in historical subject matter. They also, hopefully, serve as a basis for further work. Many key subjects have been more fully explored for some major regions or periods than for others. The result is a clear foundation for scholars and students, but also an invitation to develop additional comparisons and more extensive analysis of changes over time. And of course the thematic list itself will grow progressively, as the world history achievement matures further, building on the dynamic trends of the past three decades.

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Discussion

1. Why has the term civilization been questioned in the historical field? Is there utility in its use in teaching world history?
2. What is the difference between world history and global history?
3. How has world history changed to become less Western dominated? What impact has this had on the field? How do scholars on both sides of the debate view the role of the West in teaching world history?
4. How should world history incorporate other fields? For example, how could it incorporate social history? What other fields might this approach work for?
5. When did world history become a significant teaching subject? What are the main explanations for its rise?
6. Is world history in fact a really new field, or does it revive approaches to the past that had been more common before the rise of nationalism?

PART II : World History Periods

Periodization Unless they deal with a single slice of time – as in the detailed efforts of some of the so-called microhistorians – historians characteristically seek to identify change points, in which their particular theme takes on significantly new features. The span of time between change points is a historical period, at least for purposes of that particular topic. Historical periods, in other words, constitute attempts by historians to make changes clearer and more manageable – as opposed to assuming that patterns are unchanging, or that basic changes occur constantly and randomly. Decisions about historical periods, as a result, constitute one of the foundations of historical analysis.

Examples For some topics, periods emerge fairly readily. There is a “Jacksonian period” in American political history, centered around a particular presidency but also capturing a larger process of democratization during the 1820s. Or, quite obviously, there is a revolutionary period in French history (beginning in 1789; there might be some debate about when it really ended) or in 20th-century Russian or Chinese history. Periods in intellectual history often stand out pretty clearly as well: the Enlightenment in Western history, or the Heian period of adaptation of Chinese cultural themes in Japanese history. Major wars also define periods, particularly in modern history.

World History Challenges Not surprisingly, given its large canvass, world history raises some important challenges for periodization – that is, for the effort to present manageable chunks of time defined by significant shifts at beginning and end. Inevitably, even widely-agreed on periods work better for some societies than for others, particularly before modern times: the world did not move to the same drumbeat. The Americas simply do not begin to merge fully with larger world history periodization until after 1492. The early modern period, defined as beginning in 1450 or 1500, does not work as well for Chinese history (the Ming dynasty took hold in the 1380s) as it does for Western, or Russian, or Middle Eastern history. Any global periodization scheme has some rough edges, though arguably these can be handled without disrupting the basic analytical framework.

Major Schemes Not surprisingly as well, there are different periodization schemes available even for the subject as a whole, though disagreements are not always irreconcilable. Work on specific themes will inevitably reflect several possible periodization frameworks, depending on subject matter, so it is important to have some sense of the most common overall markers in advance.

Early Periods Most world history textbooks and survey programs divide along something like the following lines. There is a very long prehistory period, in which human evolution, gradually improving tool use, and migration patterns hold center stage: the period itself can be divided, mainly on grounds of changing technologies (old stone age, new stone age or Neolithic, etc.). The rise of agriculture, beginning around 8000 BCE in some regions, usually introduces a new period. With this new framework, the emergence of more complex societies, sometimes called civilization, with formal governments, some cities, and usually the introduction of writing, marks off yet another period, beginning around 3500 BCE – often called the early or ancient civilization period, with emphasis on developments in the Middle East, Egypt and northeastern Africa, the Indus river valley, and northern China.

Classical to Contemporary The early civilization period gives way to the classical period from 800 or 600 BCE until the fall or decline of the great classical empires between 200 and 600 CE. Major civilizations expanded in this period, to cover larger regions, and developed durable cultural, political and social features (example: the caste system of India). At the same time, though it was not a dominant theme, new trade contacts emerged. The period 500 or 600 CE to about 1450 (sometimes divided in two) emphasizes the spread of major religions, including the rise of Islam, and the emergence of more extensive transregional trade patterns in Asia, Africa and Europe. The Mongolian sub-period, in which interlocking Mongol holdings dominated much of Asia and Eastern Europe, sits at the end of this larger era. With 1450 or 1500 (some debate over best choice here), the early modern period takes shape, featuring the inclusion of the Americans in global exchange; the rise of new overseas but also land-based empires (often called gunpowder empires) in many parts of the world; and the rise of greater Western activity combined, however, with the continued vitality of the major Asian societies and the expansion of Russia. Most conventional histories then mark a new period around 1750, often called the “long 19th century”, dominated by the early stages of the industrial revolution but also, partly because of initial Western control of industrialization, the exercise of greater Western power in the world as a whole including the imperialist scramble in Africa, Oceania and parts of Asia. Finally, most surveys identify a contemporary period, opening early in the 20th century and in some cases with World War I. In this new period, Western dominance gradually recedes, industrialization gradually spreads, and other characteristic changes, like the decline of aristocracy and monarchy, mark a new era politically

and socially as well. Some world histories, however, despair of making the past century coherent, and divide instead into smaller subsets: a period of war and depression, 1914-45, Cold war 1945-1989, and really contemporary thereafter. Again, even in conventional periodization, there are disputes and option

Summary But just for summary: much conventional world history treatment assumes a prehistory or early period; an early civilization period; the classical centuries; some kind of postclassical aftermath up to 1450 or so; the early modern centuries; the long 19th century; and the contemporary.

Larger Options Without totally ignoring these chronological boundaries, however, several world history ventures have tried to take out a more limited set of transitions, which are also seen as more fundamental. Two or three approaches – and again, they can be combined to a degree – emerge here.

Basic Economic Systems One approach sees two basic turning points in the human experience. The first was the transition from a hunting and gathering economy and society to a primarily agricultural one. The transition is messy in the sense that it did not occur at the same time everywhere – China was 2000 years later than the Middle East, Central America 2000 years after that. From initial centers, furthermore, adoption of agriculture spread rather slowly, and of course some places never picked it up at all until essentially modern times. When agriculture did develop, however, it introduced a host of major changes from hunting and gathering patterns, beginning with population structures and relationships to the environment, and extending even to war. The result was an “Agricultural Age” that lasted for several millennia. The second big transition was from agriculture to industrialization. Here the transition is more concentrated: it began in the 18th century, with some prior buildup, and became more fully global in the later 20th century. Obviously the transition is still solidifying, and major regional differences remain. As with agriculture, however, industry introduces a host of wider changes, from family patterns to human residence.

Axial Age A second approach emphasizes a period of change sometimes called the Axial Age (the term was introduced by philosopher Karl Jaspers). This period ran from about 800 to 200 BCE, and focused on the introduction of more elaborate cultural systems particularly in many parts of Asia plus the Mediterranean. Cultural and political developments associated with Confucius, Zoroaster, Buddha, the Greek philosophers, and Hindu thinkers head the list here. The argument is that this new cultural sophistication marked a major change in world history from that point onward, ultimately with strong influences on other regions as well. (Note that this Axial Age overlaps with many of the core definitions of the classical period in the more conventional periodization.)

What Next? A challenge with Axial Age arguments involves identifying what happened next: was there a comparable set of changes at some later point (granting the continued influence, even today, of Axial Age cultures). Some historians have tried to combine emphasis on the Axial Age with later exploration of the emergence and impact of industrialization. This, however, leaves out any particular definition of what some call the “second millennium” – the period between the Axial Age and the early modern origins of industrialization.

The Idea of Convergence A third approach – which may also address this question of incorporating the second millennium between the formation of great traditions and the rise of industry – highlights the importance of the intensification of contacts, initially in Afro-Eurasia, around 1000 CE, give or take a few centuries. The argument here emphasizes a divide between “divergence” and “convergence.” Before 1000 (or so), most regions developed primarily on the basis of separate dynamics, forming cultures and political and social systems without much regard for what was going on elsewhere. Hence, among other things, the pronounced differences among major regional societies (though some similarities emerged as well; the comparisons are now always simple). But thanks to growing trade connections, plus missionary activity and even new travel patterns, from about 1000 CE contacts and mutual influences played a steadily greater role, causing many societies gradually to converge and modifying distinctive regional traditions in the process. Obviously, this convergence process would accelerate further in the Mongol centuries, and further still in the early modern period and beyond (without, however, erasing regional differences). Efforts at more basic periodization, positing a smaller number of key transitions but stressing their transformational impact, can of course be combined to a degree – which would at the same time move closer to the more conventional textbook periodization. Axial Age features might be modified by the later transition toward convergence, which would be modified further by the introduction of globalization – a three- or four-fold division of world history.

Topical Variations Inevitably also, the validity of periodization varies somewhat with topic. The Axial Age arguably has little impact on population structure, but massive implications for religion and science. The emergence of agriculture had only modest initial effects on religion, though it brought huge changes to families and social structure.

Analysis and Debate Periodization, no matter how precise, is the invention of historians, an effort to organize complex reality amid change over time. In dealing with major themes in world history, use of periodization is essential, and several of the schemes currently in use will come into play. At the same time the exploration of themes allows periodization schemes themselves to be tested and ultimately, further refined. There is always room for discussion and exploration of alternatives.

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Discussion

1. What world history periods are most clearly established? Which ones prompt significant debate?
2. What criteria most consistently contribute to defining world history periods!
3. What is meant by the Axial Age?
4. How does periodization of the ancient near east change over time? What historical changes impacted this periodization?
5. What challenges are there in defining an early modern period?
6. When should the modern period begin? What arguments are there for a long 19th century?
7. How does the concept of convergence impact world history periodization?
8. Is periodization essential in historical study? Are there any good alternatives?

PART III : Regions

Regional Constraints Periodization efforts seek to provide some coherence, though also some challenge, regarding developments over time. The second area where world history requires some basic decisions involves world regions. Simply as a matter of manageability, world historians cannot cover every small region (though focusing on precise examples may further understanding). No world history can pretend actively to embrace the 200plus nations that currently exist, some of which themselves present major internal regional differentiation.

Dispersion of Humans Well before the rise of agriculture, human migration had reached almost all parts of the world still currently inhabited. New Zealand and some other Pacific Islands had yet to be touched (but migration had reached Australia); Bermuda was not found until the age of European colonization. But relatively small numbers of people – world population was only about 10 million before the advent of agriculture – were widely dispersed. The development of hundreds of separate languages (however, around a smaller number of stems, like Bantu in Africa or Indo-European in Europe, Persia and India) was a reflection of this process. With time, many larger regions consolidated somewhat (though often without eliminating more local languages), which facilitates regional definitions. But decisions about the definitions and sheer numbers of manageable regions remain difficult. Compounding the problem, in some cases, is change over time: regional boundaries may alter as a result of contacts or other developments.

“Great Traditions” The easiest regions to define in world history – and arguably, the most important – are those that clearly developed characteristic social, political and above all cultural patterns, often initially during the Axial Age or classical period. China, thus, is a region in everybody’s world history book, even though, if time permits, one can note regional differences within China (particularly north and south) and characteristic tensions between border regions and the more central Middle Kingdom. The Indian subcontinent, despite standard internal political divisions in a society that was not usually centralized, is a region, though this is complicated after 1947 with the separation of Pakistan and then Bangladesh. Persia developed strong regional characteristics, though patterns here are more complex because of periodic political conquest by outsiders, like Alexander the Great, and the ultimate majority conversion to Islam. The Mediterranean region, strongly influenced by early Egypt and Middle Eastern states like Phoenicia, formed a reasonably clear entity during the classical period, but it would later split apart with a new regionalization emphasizing Islam (Middle East and North Africa), eastern Europe (initially from the strength of the Byzantine Empire, later strongly affected by the expansion of Russia), and western Europe. Obviously, shared Christianity, though in different specific versions, created ties between western and eastern Europe, so divisions here (including geographic boundaries) are not hard and fast.

Summary Arguably, then, much early world history, though after the emergence of agriculture, focuses on China, the Indian subcontinent, Persia (with somewhat more complex legacies), and the societies that emerged from the Mediterranean zone. Potentially five or six major regional complexes result overall.

Imitations: East Asia Other key regions require attention, and raise more complicated definitional issues: Many other parts of East Asia – Korea, Japan, to a considerable extent Vietnam – would be strongly influenced by Chinese culture and the Chinese economy. They did not merge with China – comparisons within East Asia remain important to the present day – but they form a larger region within which some common analysis is possible.

Southeast Asia Southeast Asia is more complicated, even as the region steadily gained importance in Indian Ocean trade. The region was strongly influenced by India, but also at points by China, later by Islam, and later still by European colonialism. No political or full cultural unification occurred, yet the region may be understood in part by exploring the interaction among diverse influences.

Sub-Saharan Africa Sub-Saharan Africa poses another regional challenge. The area is huge, and internal geographical distinctions help explain historical complexity. This is another region that absorbed external influences – from Egypt in some cases, later from Islam and later still from Europe – and combined them with local forms. The northeastern part of the subcontinent (strongly influenced by trade with the Middle East and Mediterranean), the Indian coastline (where Swahili culture ultimately developed), and West Africa (center of major kingdoms from the late classical period onward) played particularly important roles in world history, but ultimately the whole region comes into play, particularly with European imperialism.

Central Asia Central Asia is a region initially defined by predominant nomadism, the source of many migrations and invasion waves (Indo-Europeans, Huns, Mongols, Turks). It would be affected however by both wider trade and missionary activity, and then gradually brought under more formal state control, particularly with the expansion of Russia.

The Americas The Americas, like Africa, hardly form a coherent region at least until modern times. Two centers of civilization emerged, in central America and the Andes, along with many regions dominated by hunting and gathering and sometimes a certain amount of agriculture. Spanish and Portuguese colonization, mixing with native cultures and, often, imported African slaves, began to form a somewhat coherent Latin American civilization (though with significant internal regional differences based on geography and distinctive population mixes). North America, shaped disproportionately by British interactions with local populations and, again, imported slaves, developed somewhat separately. Both of the American continents, and the Caribbean, are strongly influenced by Western Europe, creating debates – for modern periods – about whether separate designations or an “expansion of the West” framework proves most suitable for analysis and comparison.

The Pacific Australia and Pacific Oceania (particularly, the Polynesian islands including New Zealand) often receive less attention, at least until modern times.

Basic List Even more than in the case of periodization, regional definitions depend on how much detail is manageable – though world historians properly worry that some of their regional choices may be too broad, failing to capture the complexities and internal divisions of actual regional experience. A minimal list for developments after the classical period would probably involve: East Asia; South Asia with attention to the Southeast; Middle East/North Africa; Europe, probably divided somewhat uncomfortably between east and west; sub-Saharan Africa; the Americas. This list, however, would not be entirely comprehensive, and could certainly be replaced by a longer and more detailed set of options.

Comparison Regional definitions invite comparisons. Because of the way regional analysis emerges in world history, the comparison often tends to emphasize differentiations. It is important to remember, however, that the invitation to comparison is in principle neutral on this point: it can logically identify similarities, often unexpected similarities, as well as differences. Further, with growing contacts and mutual influences over time, one might expect similarities, or at least more complicated differentiations, to gain ground. Regional and periodization analysis must ultimately combine.

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Discussion

1. How can Latin America and Africa best be incorporated in world history? What challenges do these regions pose to historians?
2. Should the Indian Ocean be considered a region in world history? How did this region change in the early modern period?
3. Where do southeast Asia and inner Asia fit into world history regions? Should they be treated separately or part of larger regions?
4. What is meant by Pan-Asianism? What areas are included and what connections do they have with one another?
5. How does geography impact the formation of regions?
6. What is the role of culture in defining regions?
7. Overall, what regions are most readily defined in world history and why? What are the key problem cases?