

The Ancient World

How did the land around ancient civilisations influence them?

The civilisations we will be focusing on are Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, and India. For the Ancient Greeks, they lived in an area with lots of mountains and rocky landscape, which meant that they were very rarely in contact with each other. This led to the founding of independent **city-states** which ran themselves but were still part of Greece. Greece is also surrounded by water on all sides, so to gain access to water, most city-states were founded near the sea. Furthermore, the Greeks chose to grow plants like olive trees and farm animals like goats, sheep, and lamb because they can all survive on mountains and hills. The Romans were based in a much flatter area and were near 2 large rivers. This meant that the Romans were in a perfect farming area and could grow more food than they needed to trade with others in exchange for money. Because of this, they were rich enough to build up their army and grow their city, which made them very powerful. The Egyptians lived in a flat desert, though the Nile River (the second longest river in the world) flowed through the entire country and they were right next to the Red Sea. This meant that every major city was situated near a body of water so that they could farm and provide their cities with water. This also meant that Egypt was easier to invade than other nations, because if you were used to the desert climate then you would be able to march straight to the main cities, so Egypt had to make a strong army. Read the following passages about Ancient China and India's geography.

India and its surrounding countries are so similar in culture and climatic conditions that the region is sometimes called the Indian sub-continent. In ancient times the geography of India was a little different than what it is today. In the northern part of India stand the Himalayan Mountains and the Hindu Kush stand in the North West. The southern region of India is surrounded by three bodies of water. They are the Arabian Sea to the south west; the Indian Ocean on the southern side and to the southeast lay the Bay of Bengal.

In ancient times, India was much more extended to the North West and west (consisting of parts of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan). The Himalayas lay to the north as they are today. In ancient period there were many other rivers besides the present ones. The most important of them was River Saraswati, which is not traceable now. The geography of India is one of great extremes, encompassing desert, mountains, forest, and jungle. All of these environments are susceptible to unpredictable periods of flood, drought, and monsoon.

Although India may bear some of the most extreme geological and climatic features, these difficult conditions were also a great asset to the development of India's early civilizations. The Himalayas provided a great deal of protection from nomadic and military invasions from the north, and other mountain ranges provided similar protection in the west and east. The water ways of the Indus valley provided an excellent source for trade and commerce all through India's history.

China has two major river systems – the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. The early people in China settled mostly along these two rivers. Different settlements were ruled by individual kings. These rivers were essential to the development of ancient Chinese society.

The Yangtze is 6380 kilometres long, making it the third longest river in the world. It floods each year and leaves fertile soil along its banks. The Yangtze was not an easy river to cross, and for this reason there were many times in the history of ancient China where it operated as a political boundary between northern and southern China. The riverbanks were the sites of several battles during the history of ancient China.

The region of the Yangtze became very important to ancient China's economy, especially during the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The development of irrigation systems along the Yangtze made agriculture very stable and productive. Eventually, this region became one of the wealthiest and most developed parts of the country.

The Yellow River is 5464 kilometres long, making it the sixth longest river in the world. The banks along the Yellow River are low. Because of this, settlers in ancient China often saw their homes destroyed year after year during flood season. For this reason, the early people of ancient China called the Yellow River 'the Great Sorrow'. Eventually, however, the people learned techniques to control flooding.

The Yellow River basin is mostly flat, which makes it ideal for growing crops such as millet (a type of grain). Much of the Yangtze basin and surrounds, on the other hand, are better suited to growing rice and tea.

China's natural barriers to the west, south and east helped to protect the ancient Chinese people from invasion and kept them very isolated. The largest ocean on Earth, the Pacific, is to its east. To the south are dense tropical forests of modern-day Burma, Laos and Vietnam. To the west and north-west are huge deserts.

To the south-west is one of ancient China's most impressive physical barriers – the towering Himalayas, which are home to several of the highest mountain peaks in the world. The Himalayas are extremely cold in winter and extremely hot in summer, which in the past made it almost impossible for invaders to cross them and reach China.

Only China's northern border is less protected by geographical features. Over 2000 years ago, work began (and was later continued) to protect much of this frontier with a huge defensive structure – the Great Wall of China (see Source 9.3).

Questions:

1. In your own words, explain how China's geography isolated it from the rest of the world for a long time.

2. In your own words, explain how the Roman Empire managed to grow because of its geographical features.
3. Why were Ancient Greek city-states formed?
4. How is Egypt easy to invade because of its geography? (Talk about climate as well)
5. How did Indian rivers and mountains help civilisation grow?

How did different groups in ancient societies impact law and religion?

As there are 5 different societies to talk about, I will use Ancient Greece as an example, and you can use it as a guide that can apply to other societies. The Ancient Greeks ruled using a system called aristocracy, which means that the highest class (most often kings) would rule the city-states. It also meant that the Greek kings could change laws whenever they wanted (in most cases). Some exceptions, like Athens, had a council to vote on new laws. On the other hand, in places like Sparta, there would be slaves that were often killed on the streets, as their laws said that you needed to kill to become an adult. The city-states all had varying laws but were still part of Greece as a whole. The religion of Ancient Greece actually evolved from the landscape and praying to certain mountains and rivers, but some city-states like Delphi used religion to help boost their strength as there was a holy site in Delphi.

What were the significant beliefs, values and practices of the ancient society?

Since there are 3 different areas to analyse, (warfare, everyday life, and death/funeral customs) I will only analyse Greek warfare and you can use it as a guide for other areas and societies. While there were many Greek city-states, only 3 had a major role and strength in warfare. These were (in order from weakest to strongest) Corinth, Athens, and Sparta. All the other city-states simply followed the powerful city-state closest to them. The reason Corinth was so strong is because of their weapon design. They invented the Corinthian helmet, which is now known as a 'greek helmet'. These helmets allowed for lots of movement and vision while allowing maximum protection. They also designed light but deadly spears that could be thrown much further and harder. Athens was also very strong at war, mainly because of their tactics and their navy. The Athenian boats and warships were light, manoeuvrable, small, and deadly. They would come equipped with small cannons to shoot at enemies and reinforced hulls to ram other ships. This also meant that they could succeed in battle in any body of water, whether it be a sea, lake, or river. They also had genius tactics and generals. One famous general from Athens is called Themistocles, who when outnumbered, would fight his battles in very narrow straits to limit the amount of ships the opposition could attack him with. This meant that it would all come down to skill and ship size and manoeuvrability. The Spartans, however, were by far the strongest when it came to war, because while they didn't have the tactics, the navy, or the weaponry, they had more numbers, more skill, more loyalty, and more dedication. From birth, they were trained as soldiers and were beaten if they showed signs of weakness. If they weren't strong enough to begin as a baby, then they were murdered. They were trained all throughout their childhood, and Spartan laws said that it was good to start street fights and murder slaves. This taught the Spartans to kill, torture, and injure throughout their whole life. This regime meant that the Spartans were far superior to any other city-state in war, even Athens and Corinth.

What was the role of a significant figure in the society?

Again, there are countless figures to choose from, so I will only be using one example from Ancient China – Qin Shi Huangdi. Read the following passages to find out more about Qin Shi Huangdi.

As a child, Qin Shi Huang was known as Ying Zheng. He was born in the state of Qin in north-western China in 259 BCE. At the age of 13 he was formally declared the king of Qin, which at the time was the most powerful of all the Chinese states. As a child, Zheng ruled Qin with the help of a regent (a person who acts as head of state if the true ruler is too young, too ill or missing).

In 238 BCE, at the age of 21, Zheng took power in his own right. During the Warring States period, Zheng used the military strategy and force of his generals and troops, along with espionage and bribery, to ultimately overpower all the other six kingdoms. By the time he had taken control and united these states in 221 BCE, he was 38 years old. The victory unified a country that had been divided by wars between rival kingdoms for 260 years and created a unified empire. In the same year, Ying Zheng declared himself China's first emperor and changed his name to 'Qin Shi Huang', meaning 'first magnificent god of the Qin'.

To strengthen his hold over his new empire, Qin Shi Huang divided the conquered states into 36 prefectures (administrative divisions), each with a governor in charge who answered to him. He forced the nobles who had ruled over the states to live near him at the capital, Xianyang. There he could watch over and control them.

Qin Shi Huang did much to organise, unify and protect the new empire. He was an autocrat (ruler with total power) but a very clever manager. Before Qin Shi Huang, each state had its own code of laws. Qin Shi Huang set up one code for all of China. He also built good roads connecting the provinces to his capital. The code of laws and system of roads helped to keep the empire united. He also planned and began work building the Great Wall of China.

Qin Shi Huang's iron rule

Despite his many positive achievements, Qin Shi Huang was also a very fierce leader who was feared by his people. He took steps to prevent rebellion in his empire. Believing that knowledge about the past was dangerous, as were ideas that encouraged free and independent thinking, he banned the teachings of Confucius. He ordered books and writing that did not support his ideas to be burned. Scholars found reading the works of Confucius were killed or enslaved. About 460 scholars were buried alive for the crime of owning banned books.

Qin Shi Huang also taxed the people heavily and forced them to serve in the army and work on his projects.

Such behaviours eventually angered his people. Qin Shi Huang began to fear he would be killed. Perhaps because of this, he became more isolated and more obsessed with his death. He began to drink substances that he hoped would give him eternal life, such as mercury, which we now know is poisonous.

He died while on a journey during a hot summer in 210 BCE. He was buried in an elaborate tomb, prepared for him during his life. He was 'protected' by an army of over 7000 life-size terracotta soldiers, horses and chariots.

As you can see, this passage goes over everything Qin Shi Huangdi accomplished in his life, what his role in society was, what his impact on society was, his childhood, and his death. You can replicate this structure very similarly, maybe through a poster, a movie, or a presentation.