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# WORLD HISTORY THE **BIG** **ERAS**

**A Compact History of Humankind for  
Teachers and Students**

A Companion to World History for Us All  
A Model Curriculum for World History  
<http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>

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©2012 The Regents, University of California

Published by  
Social Studies School Service  
10200 Jefferson Boulevard, P.O. Box 802  
Culver City, CA 90232-0802  
United States of America

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-56004-764-3

**Product Code: Z213**

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## P R E F A C E

*World History: The Big Eras* is a very short history of the world written to encourage teachers and students to think about the human past on a big scale. It brings together the essays that introduce the nine Big Eras in World History for Us All, a web-based model curriculum for world history available online at <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>. These Big Eras constitute the periodization plan and the basic organizational structure of the World History for Us All curriculum. Many teachers have requested a printed compilation of the Big Era essays to help guide them and their students in exploring historical developments, continuities, and turning points on a larger scale than textbooks or content standards lists offer.

This little book is an interpretive narrative of the human past from the origins of the universe to today. The nine chapters are identical to revised versions of the nine Big Era introductory essays in World History for Us All. Each of these essays is organized in three primary sections: Humans and the Environment, Humans and Other Humans, and Humans and Ideas. These three headings correspond to the thematic component of World History for Us All called the Three Essential Questions. Teachers and students may refer to the website for ways to use the Three Essential Questions in classrooms. The book's Introduction includes text drawn from the "History, Geography, and Time" section of the online model curriculum. The Epilogue corresponds to the section titled "Reflecting on the Past, Thinking about the Future."

Educators may use this book as a companion to World History for Us All online or as an independent resource in any world history course. This book aims to serve both instructors and students in exploring historical vistas on the scale of continents, hemispheres, ocean basins, and the globe as a whole—a perspective that detailed, civilization-by-civilization textbooks usually do not provide. Teachers grappling with coverage of state and district history and social science standards will find this narrative useful in connecting specific content topics to wider historical landscapes. The global approach taken here is also highly compatible with the Advanced Placement World History course, which focuses on "big ideas of continuity and change." Finally, we believe this book offers instructors and students in college and university world history courses a panoramic frame for investigating the past at a variety of scales of time and space.

Each chapter includes optional study questions that may be used for classroom discussions, homework, or essay assignments.

This book and the World History for Us All model curriculum use the secular designations BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) in place of BC and AD. This usage follows the format of the National Standards for History and the Advanced Placement World History course. It in no way alters the conventional Gregorian calendar. We also use BP (Before Present) for historical periods approximately prior to 10,000 BP.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*World History: The Big Eras* is just one of the fruits of the web-based World History for Us All model curriculum project that, since 2001, has involved several dozen teachers, scholars, technology experts, and graphic designers. In one way or another, directly or indirectly, all of these professionals have contributed to the development of this book. We are especially indebted to the educators and scholars who laid the conceptual and intellectual foundations of World History for Us All during three successive summer workshops at San Diego State University:

Simone Arias	Felicia Eppley
Bob Bain	Bill Foreman
Mary Bickley	Donald Johnson
Avi Black	Jean Johnson
Bill Bravman	Ernest O’Roark
Anne Chapman	Ellen Leader Pike
Sharon Cohen	Irene Segade
Susan Douglass	Eileen Wood

We invite readers to refer to the web site (<http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>) for a full listing of project participants.

We would like to thank the Ahmanson Foundation for three generous grants in support of World History for Us All, including funding specifically designated for this book’s development. Other supporters since the project’s inception have included the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Longview Foundation; the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) at the University of California, Los Angeles; and San Diego State University’s President’s Leadership Fund and College of Arts and Letters.

We would like to thank Ingrid de Haas, the project’s content manager, for her sharp editing skills. Marian Olivas, the Program Coordinator of the NCHS, helped guide this book’s final production stages and has otherwise dedicated herself to World History for Us All in numerous ways. This volume has also much benefitted from the advice and collaboration of Gary B. Nash, Director of the NCHS. We thank Anne Chapman, a long-time member of the NCHS team, for developing the chapter study questions. All maps in Chapters 1–9 were designed by Gareth Mann. To see more historical maps by him, visit [www.MapsofWorldHistory.com](http://www.MapsofWorldHistory.com).

Finally, World History for Us All has enjoyed the continuing moral and material support of both the NCHS network of history educators and San Diego State University, especially its History Department.

## INTRODUCTION

# History, Geography, and Time

**T**oday, world history is a basic subject in the social studies curriculum across the United States. K–12 educators generally agree that young Americans graduating from high school should have knowledge of world history, geography, and contemporary affairs. A world history education should include the whole world and not just part of it. The subject is challenging, however, because it embraces humanity in general, not just one nation or cultural tradition, and because the time scope—from the Paleolithic era to the present—is immense.

Getting the whole world into world history does not mean that students must investigate “everything,” and certainly not everything all at once! To make sense of the past, we have to organize the investigation into manageable pieces. We must define specific historical topics, questions, problems, time periods, and themes, then explore them in careful ways. Students, however, should not lose sight of the main subject: the story of how humans have behaved, thought, and interacted across the ages.

In this book, each of the Big Era chapters addresses a time period on the global scale. Each successive Big Era is shorter in time scope than the previous one. For example,



Dual Research Base of  
World History for Us All

Scholarship on  
World History

Scholarship on Teaching  
and Learning History



Big Era One considers the very long epoch of history up to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Big Era Nine, by contrast, focuses on the period from 1945 to the present. This approach is generally compatible with conventional organization of courses, standards, and textbooks. It also mirrors the long-term trend of historical change: human interrelations have become increasingly complex, and the speed of change has continuously accelerated. Consequently, recent Big Eras should encompass shorter time periods than more distant ones if investigation of them is to be coherent and intelligible.

This book and the *World History for Us All* model curriculum generally have a dual research base. One is the exciting research in comparative, interregional, and world-scale history that scholars have undertaken during the past several decades. This scholarship has shown that although nation-states and civilizations are appropriate contexts for studying historical change, other configurations of space and time are valid as well. Patrick Manning has argued that the central aim of world history is to investigate “the interaction of the pieces (be they community, societal, or continental) in human history” and “to assess the experience of the whole of humanity through study of those interactions.”<sup>1</sup> World history also involves searches for answers to questions about the past that may lead the searcher straight across the boundaries of nations, empires, and civilizations. *World History for Us All* has adopted the premise that when teachers and students pose good historical questions, even very big questions, they can explore answers in ways that charge their study with historical meaning and contemporary relevance. As historian David Christian writes:

In a world with nuclear weapons and ecological problems that cross all national borders, we desperately need to see humanity as a whole. Accounts of the past that focus primarily on the divisions between nations, religions, and cultures are beginning to look parochial and anachronistic—even dangerous. So, it is not true that history becomes vacuous at large scales. Familiar objects may vanish, but new and important objects and problems come into view.<sup>2</sup>

The other part of the *World History for Us All* research base is the work that scholars in the United States, Britain, and other countries have done on the ways students learn, interpret, and understand the past. They have been asking, “How do students build meaning from historical information, and how do they connect facts to broader patterns and generalizations?” These writers argue that historical understanding requires learning of both the particular and the general. In fact, the ability to relate specific subject matter



to higher and more sophisticated levels of causation and significance is a fundamental historical thinking skill. Peter Lee has observed:

While understanding something in depth is a necessary part of learning history ... it is not enough. Moving from one in-depth topic to another and illuminating each one in the historical spotlight only begins to develop historical understanding if such topics are set in a wider historical framework ... To provide something students can use and think about, we may need to teach a big picture quite quickly, in a matter of two or three weeks, and keep coming back to it. Such a framework focuses on large-scale patterns of change, encompassing students' in-depth studies so they are not simply isolated topics ... This means students need to acquire a usable framework of the past, a big picture organized by substantive concepts they increasingly understand and can reflect upon.<sup>3</sup>



## SCALES OF SPACE AND TIME

What is the best way to get started teaching and learning world history? In some curriculums and textbooks, the first major topic is the agricultural revolution in the Fertile Crescent in 12,000 BP (Before Present). In others, the first focus is the founding of river valley civilization in Mesopotamia in 6,000 BP. In modern world history courses, the first topic might be the Renaissance in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But what if we start, not at a particular spot on the globe, but with the world as a whole? What if we think of the Earth as a “place” whose inhabitants have a shared history? Events and developments may take place inside continents, regions, civilizations, or nation-states, but those “spaces” remain parts of the globe in all its roundness.

Studying the past in this holistic way means asking questions about events and developments that are relatively broad in space and time. In terms of geographical space, study of the history of a rural community, a town, a city, a nation, an empire, a civilization, the world, or even the universe are all valid. It is not that one geographical scale of history is more important than another. Rather, at different scales we can identify and ask different kinds of interesting historical questions. Where one scholar might research 30 years in the history of a Mexican village to understand economic changes there, another might take on migration patterns in Africa south of the Sahara from 1500 to 2000 CE. A third might explore 3,000 years of global climatic change and its effects on human society. Students of world history may study very specific times and events, but they may also try to understand them better by setting them in larger comparative, regional, and global contexts.

We can push this point even farther. The Earth itself is framed by even larger contexts—the solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, and the universe. As we explore how human beings evolved, acquired mental abilities that no other animal species possessed, and came to populate almost all parts of the world, we should remember that when our species emerged, the Earth had already existed for more than four billion years. Complex processes of physical and biological change had long been underway when our first bipedal ancestors appeared on the scene just seven million years ago.

## LEARNING TO “THINK THE WORLD”

One of the wonders of our era is that for the first time in history, people everywhere in the world can experience the same event almost simultaneously. A spectacular example of this is the world-wide celebrations that greeted the New Year in 2000. The planet revolved through the time zones, midnight struck again and again, and the festivities broke out in rapid, rolling sequence around the planet. Among the first to celebrate were the people of the Kiribati and Marshall Islands, which lie in the South Pacific just west of the International Date Line. From there, the New Year swept on to Sydney, Beijing, New Delhi, Jerusalem, Lagos, London, Caracas, Seattle, and, at last, Honolulu. Those who had the stamina to watch TV long enough could see the entire relay of parties, prayers, and fireworks displays, for twenty-four straight hours. This spectacle was a compelling reminder of the unity of humankind as inhabitants of a single tiny “marble” suspended

in the universe. Also remarkable is that millions of people could consciously witness the world-wide commemoration and reflect upon it in real time.

Electronic marvels invented in the twentieth century enabled men and women to “think the world” in a way that no one could have done in 1000 CE or even in 1900.<sup>4</sup> We live now in what scholars have called a “condition of globality.” Careers, family life, community activities, and even mental health all depend to some degree on our understanding of the astonishing complexities that intertwine all human beings. The ability to “think the world”—its economy, science, technology, politics, and culture—must be a primary aim of all education today. This challenges us to rethink humanity’s history in a more holistic, interconnected way.

Millions of young people around the world spend their typical days—when not looking at a computer screen or talking into a cell phone—congregating with family members, fellow students, friends, or coworkers. But those bonds are only our most special. We are also connected, often unconsciously, to numerous other networks of human relationships that affect the course of daily life. Some of these “communities” may be fleeting (passengers sharing an airplane flying at 30,000 feet), and some may be very large (all members of the Roman Catholic Church). Some of them cut across many generations, such as family trees, or the communities formed by particular religions or nations. No individual anywhere in the world is truly isolated from such complex global relationships, not hunters in the Amazon rainforest, nor peasant girls in high Himalayan valleys.

In fact, most people are continuously affected by events and trends initiated in distant parts of the globe. Supermarkets in Wisconsin raise the price of coffee because of weather conditions in Brazil. An office conference call gets cut off, causing minor panic over a deal closure in Beijing. Or, on a very big scale, house prices in the United States drastically drop, triggering a chain of events that ends in a world recession! Our continuous encounters with the wide, wide world are an aspect of the dizzying pace of

**We live now in what scholars have called a “condition of globality.” Careers, family life, community activities, and even mental health all depend to some degree on our understanding of the astonishing complexities that intertwine all human beings.**



Marmite is a yeast paste loved by British children—but not by Americans.

change, the single most conspicuous feature of contemporary life. Whether in the United States, Italy, Burma, or Swaziland, society is perpetually transforming itself because of the growing complexity of world communication, the flow of goods and financial transactions, and the apparently never-ending birth of new ideas, techniques, and products.

Our culture, that is, our language, institutions, laws, moral codes, and regular

social routines, buffers us to some extent against the gales of change. Shared culture enables people to have some expectation of how others will think and behave. It helps us predict with at least some accuracy the shape of our affairs from one day to the next. In so far as we have a place in a familiar system of cultural values and organizations, we can usually cope quite well with new things or sudden change. When a social group—a family, religious denomination, business community, or nation—confronts something new or foreign, its members try to fit the strange thing into the existing cultural system with a minimum amount of fuss. Or the group may reject it altogether as useless or distasteful. So far, for example, American children have stoutly resisted Marmite, the yeast paste that British children love to spread on bread. And not everyone in the world likes peanut butter. On the whole, social groups do well at using their cultural yardsticks to sift through the new and strange, accepting one item, rejecting another, so that life does not appear to change all that much from one month to the next.

Yet in today's globally interconnected world, the forces of change, ricocheting around the world, are much more encompassing than we generally realize or wish to believe. Global change is not simply a matter of one event there (war in the Middle East) affecting some condition of life here (a rise in the price of gas). Nor is it just that products or ideas spread quickly from one place to another. The most striking feature of global interaction is that a significant development occurring in one place is likely to set off a complex chain reaction, disrupting and rearranging numerous relationships over an extensive area, maybe even around the world.

When did the world get like this? For how long have peoples of the globe been interconnected? Since the Industrial Revolution? Since World War II? Since the invention of the Internet? A better question might be: How far back in time would we have to

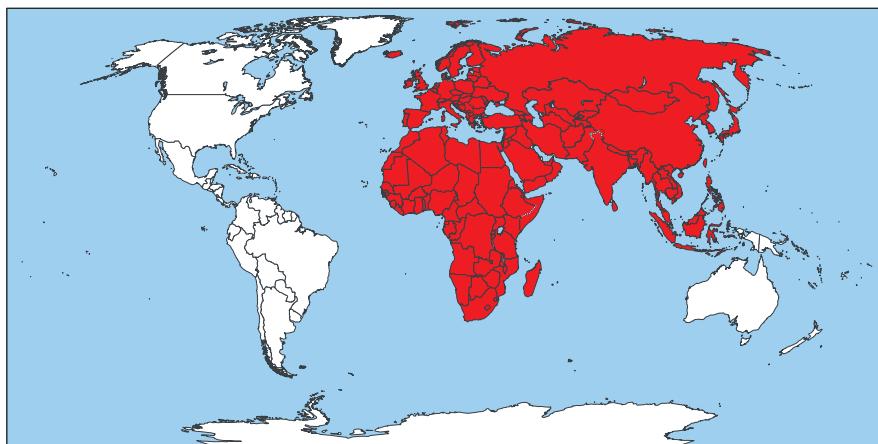


go to find a world divided into a collection of entirely separate, self-contained societies, each moving through time along its own track, unresponsive to developments anywhere else? The answer is that we could cast back two hundred, five thousand, twenty thousand years and still not find such a world of completely atomized societies. Indeed, even the early history of humankind hundreds of thousands of years ago is a story of long-distance migrations of hunting and foraging bands across Africa and Eurasia, a process that involved interaction between one group and another wherever such contact took place.

## SOME IMPORTANT GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS

To “think world history” in a way that makes room for all peoples requires that we see the spherical surface of the planet as the primary place where history happened. Students need, therefore, to have a basic knowledge of what the World History for Us All model curriculum has called Big Geography, that is, the largest-scale features of the earth’s physical and natural environment. These are the patterns of topography, vegetation, climate, and weather that cut across particular nations or cultural groups and that give the world as a whole its distinctive “face.” Attention to Big Geography prepares students to explore particular events, time periods, and regions in a way that encourages making connections between whatever subject matter they are learning and the world-scale context. This book uses some geographical terms that may not be familiar to teachers and students.

### *Afroeurasia*



## INTRODUCTION STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What arguments might you make in support of each of the following two ways of learning history?

- Start with the “big picture” (broad generalizations), and then learn details relevant to it.
- Start with details (facts, dates, specific information) and then use them to build a big picture.

What method do you think the scholars quoted in the Introduction are recommending?

2. What reasons would you give for starting to teach and learn world history with each of the following?

- The beginnings of the universe
- The appearance of Homo sapiens
- The first evidence of writing
- Another period of your own choice

What is implied in the first three choices about how history is defined? Is the choice of where we think history begins important? Why or why not?

3. Explain what you believe it means to be able to “think the world.” How long ago do you believe that people began to be able to “think the world?” What do you believe made “thinking the world” possible?
4. Do you think the geographical concept of Afroeurasia is useful in understanding large-scale events in world history? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think this Introduction emphasizes the importance of studying historical connections and relationships among different peoples and societies? Is a world history approach that investigates one distinct civilization or culture after another an equally valid way of teaching world history? Why or why not?



## CHAPTER 1

# Big Era One

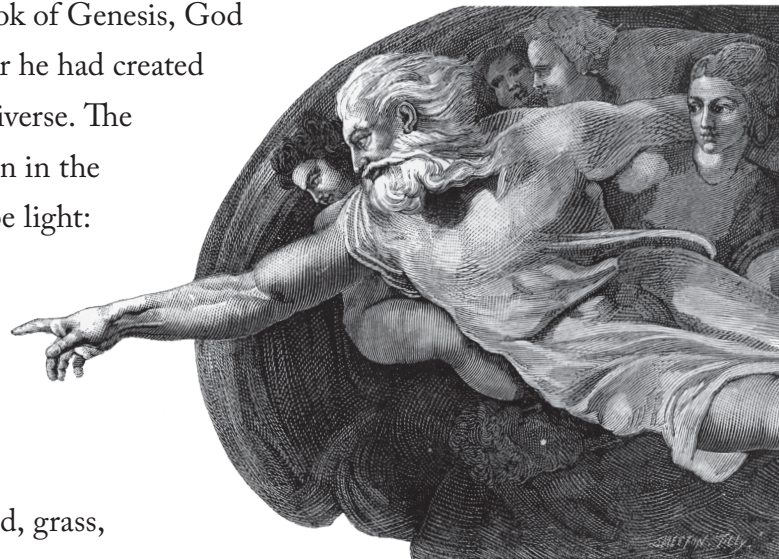
## Humans in the Universe, 13 Billion–200,000 BP

**H**umans are part of a universe that is older and larger than we can begin to imagine. How was this universe created? How was the earth created? How and when were our ancestors created? What is our place in the universe? Are we important, or are we insignificant?

This Big Era sets the stage for human history. It is about the creation of our environment, of the world we live in, its landscapes, its plants and animals. It is also about the evolutionary steps that led to the creation of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Understanding this era is vital if we are to grasp how human history fits into the larger history of our earth and the universe as a whole. This is because our ideas about the universe, the earth, and our own existence as a species affect how we think about ourselves and our history. They help us understand our place in the larger universe of which we are a part. So “creation myths,” stories that help us understand how everything around us came to be, seem to exist in all human societies.

## HUMANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In the story of creation in the Bible’s Book of Genesis, God made human beings. But he did so only after he had created everything else that was to be part of his universe. The creation took seven days. This is how it began in the biblical account: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.”<sup>5</sup> After making day and night, God created the seas, dry land, grass,





This infrared image from NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope shows hundreds of thousands of stars crowded into the swirling core of our spiral Milky Way galaxy.

fruit trees, the sun, the moon, fish, birds, cattle, every kind of “creeping thing,” and, finally, man and woman. Then he rested.

In thinking about this story, notice that God first made the entire physical and natural environment, everything from the stars to green grass, then fashioned human beings and put them into this setting. In the creation story that modern science tells, the environment was also created before humans, but the time scales are very different. According to modern science, humans evolved on a planet that had already existed for over four-and-a-half billion years. The terrestrial environment shaped the creation of our species. Moreover, the environment of the earth was itself the product of the earlier history of the cosmos as a whole. Consequently, in introducing Big Era One we must begin at the beginning, setting the debut of *Homo sapiens* within the largest possible scene in both time and space.